



# Raleigh Fire Department Newsletter



Volume 5, Issue 3

Special Edition

## Tornado Strikes Capitol City

On the afternoon of Saturday, April 16, a tornado struck the city of Raleigh. Its path started near Tryon and Lake Wheeler roads, continued northeast through downtown and east Raleigh, and then along a parallel path east of Highway 401. It destroyed 146 structures and heavily damaged 719 others. Four people were killed.

For the Raleigh Fire Department, the severe weather brought one of their busiest days in years. Calls for downed trees and damaged power lines had already been received during the thunderstorms that preceded the tornado, beginning about 2:45 p.m.

The damage from the twister quickly escalated the volume of calls. Firefighters began responding to a wider and more severe range of emergencies: trees on buildings, people trapped in their homes, collapsed structures, and gas leaks. Fires were largely averted, though the danger was ever-present.



To augment their resources, the fire department called in off-duty members. Two additional engines and another ladder company were placed in service. Call-back personnel also provided staffing for additional Battalion Chief units, aides for command functions, and extra personnel for search and rescue activities at damage sites.

By 8:00 a.m. the next morning, the Raleigh Fire Department had answered over 180 calls. These are some of those stories. ❖

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Tornado coverage.

## Woman Rescued in House



At 4:27 p.m., Engine 13 was near South Wilmington Street when they heard Rescue 2 dispatched to a code blue on that street. "We took the call and then I tried to get on the radio and cancel them," says Capt. Richard Siebel. "But I couldn't get out and that was a good thing."

Instead of a code blue, Engine 13 arrived to find an injured woman trapped beneath a tree in her bathroom. With Rescue 2 still en route, they started working to access the victim.

"We cut into the house on one side," recalls Capt. Siebel. "And then began pulling the debris out by hand."

The critically injured patient was carried on a backboard around the block to a waiting EMS unit. The ambulance couldn't get closer, due to blocked roads. Engine 13 had parked on the upper section of Wilmington Street, also due to blocked roads.



*Photo by FF Ricky Herring*

Siebel praises the work of Lt. Roy Byrd and Firefighters Ricky Herring and Amber Wiggs from Engine 13, and Lt. Jason Ramsey and Firefighter Paul Guidry from Rescue 2. "In all my years in the fire service [and] given the circumstances," says Siebel, "this was the swiftest and most impressive extrications I have been part of." ■

*All photos are by Mike Legeros unless otherwise noted.*

*See more at [www.raleighfirenews.org](http://www.raleighfirenews.org).*

## Damage on Saunders Street



At Station 1 on Dawson Street, the effects of the extreme weather could be seen outside. "The tower cranes on Martin Street were spinning around," recalls Capt. Dennis Tart of Ladder 4, as the tornado passed downtown.

Ladder 4 and Engine 1 were the first fire units to encounter the extensive damage along South Saunders Street, when they responded to a building collapse farther south on Granite Avenue. "I had to weave around tents and building tops," recalls Lt. Stephen Holloman, who was driving Engine 1.

Ladder 4 was quickly cleared from Granite Avenue and returned to South Saunders Street. Battalion 3 arrived about a minute later. Engine 1 also returned after its call.

Command was established and firefighters began going building-to-building to check occupants. "We found a woman in labor in a house beside the Caraleigh furniture store," recalls Tart.

There were numerous hazards, including natural gas leaks and downed power poles. "There were power lines everywhere," recalls Battalion Chief David Whitley, "and people were walking right over them."

In addition to requesting police to stop traffic, Chief Whitley called for another engine and more EMS units. He also established a staging location a few blocks north, in a convention center parking lot at South and Dawson Streets.

About 30 minutes later, with the area secure, the command post and the units relocated to the staging location. ❖

## Fatalities in Stony Brook

Engine 7 was the first fire unit to arrive at Stony Brook Mobile Home Park in northeast Raleigh. They were met at the street by a resident whose children were trapped in a home.

Fallen trees prevented vehicle access, so Capt. Anthony Tant and Firefighter John Pender took their chainsaw and started walking. Tant was unprepared for the amount of damage they found. "Complete devastation," he recalls.

Arriving at a mobile home with a 36-inch diameter tree through the structure, they found a Wake County EMS paramedic already inside. She had confirmed that the three children underneath the tree perished. A fourth child was removed and transported, but later died.

The firefighters responded to another damaged mobile home, to assist EMS with an injured person trapped inside. After carrying the patient to a waiting ambulance near the street, they began cutting trees to improve access for other incoming emergency units.



With the arrival of Ladder 2, the two companies conducted a complete check of the trailer park. They found no other people trapped.

They also smelled gas everywhere they walked. Though Ladder 2 was turning off gas meters where they could find them, the danger didn't abate until the supply to the entire neighborhood was shut off.

Engine 16 and Engine 22 also arrived and the four companies performed a more thorough home-to-home search. They were aided by EMS, police, and later arriving USAR teams. Spray paint was used to mark each structure as it was searched.



Raleigh Police Department officers guarded the bodies of the victims until the evening, when Ladder 2 and call back-staffed Ladder 111 returned to assist in recovery.

Recalls Ladder 2 Capt. Duffy Deyo, "it was tough for all of us." He later requested a critical stress debriefing, to help them and the other companies with their experience.

Capt. Deyo also praises the work of the police officers, and the tree company that helped to prevent additional damage to the structure or the victims. "They were real professionals," he notes. ■



## Command Perspective

On the morning of April 16, Acting Division Chief Barry Spain was already thinking about the weather. He sent an e-mail to all stations, advising of the day's severe weather forecast and requesting that all apparatus be fueled, all chainsaws and cutting equipment checked, and any additional needs be communicated.

After the tornado touched down and the first damage was being reported, the picture seemed grim. Engine 3 hit by a tree; Station 7 struck by a tornado; Extensive commercial and residential damage on South Saunders Street; More touchdowns reported in the Stony Brook and Valley Stream areas.



*Fire department operations command at Station 8*

The scope was citywide and Chief Spain reacted in anticipation of heavy casualties. "We had reports of damage at Ray Price [Harley Davidson], and I knew they had a ride that day. So I expected the worse," he says.

Within that first 15 minutes, NC USAR Task Force 8 was activated, a call back was initiated for off-duty "C" platoon, and area command was established.

Operations command staff initiated area command for the entire city, with each of the four Battalion Chiefs directing the actions of their stations.

Engine, ladder, and rescue companies were instructed to communicate directly with their Battalion Chief using a dedicated radio channel. Each Battalion Chief then communicated their needs to the Division Chief.

Many units had difficulty transmitting on their radios for much of the day and early evening. The severe weather's impact was countywide and increased traffic caused "busy signals" that delayed direct communication until the city/county radio system could process the call.

The operations command center was in the basement of Station 8, which is the office location of the Division

Chief and Battalion 3. Chief Spain was joined by off-duty Division Chief Brad Harvey.

Asst. Chief of Operations Frank Warner arrived, and assumed the role of communicating with Asst. Chief of Prevention and Fire Marshal Rusty Styons at the City-County Emergency Operations Center (EOC). To minimize radio traffic, communication with the EOC was conducted using e-mail. Asst. Chief of Training Danny Poole, meanwhile, was assisting at the USAR command post downtown.



*Area commander Battalion 3 at Station 8*

Two firefighters from "C" platoon were also present, assisting with documentation and communication. Other assignments for the 46 called-back members included:

- Two engine companies placed in service with reserve apparatus, and sent downtown.
- Ladder company placed in service with reserve apparatus, and sent north.
- Fifth Battalion Chief to respond to calls, and to allow the other four to remain at their stations as area commanders.
- Battalion 3 returned to service, as Battalion Chief David Whitley was leading USAR command.
- One aide to each Battalion Chief.
- Personnel in small vehicles, to conduct site surveys around the city and report damage.
- Remaining personnel reported to Station 1. They provided a fourth person for three-man companies, and were utilized for USAR operations on South Saunders Street.

Area command concluded and call-back personnel were released at 11:00 p.m. Chief Spain, however, never went to bed. "In my 22 years," he notes, "this was the first time I left work wearing the same clothes that I had worn to work the day before." ■

## Engine 3 Hit by Tree



*Photo by Firefighter Michelle Whitaker*

One of the reserve engines, a 1997 Pierce Saber, was struck by a tree on Dennis Avenue. Operating as Engine 3, the unit had responded to a tree on a power line.

The three-person crew was sitting inside and awaiting the arrival of the power company when a tree slammed across the top of the cab about 3:25 p.m.

Neither Capt. Bill Parker nor firefighters Jerry Jeffries or Michelle Whitaker were injured. They remained inside the engine, in case the tree had pulled a power line onto or near the apparatus.

Engine 12 immediately responded to assist. They assessed if personnel could safely exit, and cut some limbs that were blocking the doors of the engine.

By the time Engine 3 returned to exchange equipment with their replacement apparatus, Jaime Powell and Randall Cooper from Support Services had arrived and were cutting the tree away.

The reserve engine was towed from the scene that night. It suffered extensive damage to the cab, and will be sent to the factory for repairs. ❖

## Damage at Station 7

One of the heavily damaged areas of the city was North King Charles Road. At nearby Fire Station 7, Capt. Anthony Tant and Firefighters Ivan Johnson and Josh Pender saw the tornado form in front of the station.

"We were on the apron and the clouds were looking weird," says Tant. "The sky was blue and then it changed and Ivan said 'looks like a funnel cloud.'"

As the funnel formed and the wind and rain started, Rescue 2 came around the corner from Glascock Street.

Lt. Jason Ramsey was driving and experienced an instant change in the weather a block away as they passed Milburnie Road on Raleigh Boulevard.

Firefighter Paul Guidry, also aboard, recalls "it hit as we were backing into the station. I could see trees snapping off in the rear view mirror. It looked like we were in a vacuum of wind and rain."

And then it was over. "The whole thing lasted thirty seconds," Ramsey remembers.

Capt. Tant reported the touchdown on the radio, and noted that the station lost power. They began working to open the bay door in front of Engine 7.

Cars had pulled onto the apron, including one pushed by the wind and nearly striking the station. Several families had come seeking shelter.

After getting the bay door open, the firefighters began clearing debris from the apron and the street. "The rain was very heavy," recalls Tant as they worked outside. They didn't stay at the station long, however. Both units were soon dispatched to calls. Engine 7 didn't return to quarters until 1:00 a.m.



*Fire Station 7 on Glascock Street*

Damage to the station included small trees against the building, the roof of the boathouse, and each of the firefighter's personal vehicles. Most of the trees on the property were also damaged.

Other damage to fire department facilities included the doors at Fire Station 3 on East Street, and both the smokehouse roof and vehicle shelters at the Keeter Training Center off South Wilmington Street.

Some fire stations lost power until their back-up generators started. Half of the fire stations also lost network access to the department's records management system. This was due to an Internet service failure downtown. ■



## Photo Gallery



Firefighter Walter Warner (left) and Capt. Dennis Tart (right) from Ladder 4 on South Saunders Street.



Rehab and medical monitoring at Stony Brook Mobile Home Park was conducted by Wake County EMS. Shown is their Major Operations Support Unit Truck 1, which was also the location of medical command.



Engine 25 was dispatched to Pritchard Court for a building collapse. Finding only moderate damage, they were directed to the next street, Serendipity Drive. They found many damaged homes, including this one, photographed the next day. Two dogs were reported missing. The crew carefully searched the debris, and found both of the dogs, though only one had survived.



Task Force 8 equipment and other units staged in a convention center parking lot at the southeast corner of South and Dawson streets.



Task Force 8 members and Engine 2 personnel perform wide-area searches along South Saunders Street. The firefighter in the foreground is carrying a device to detect live electrical current.



Food service was delivered to the USAR command post early in the evening, and was provided by Barry's Cafe in Cary.

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## Getting From the Church on Time

Firefighter Dan Carlson (E20B) was getting married during the storm. His church at Tryon and Jones Franklin roads had lost power and Carlson, a volunteer with nearby Swift Creek Fire Department, watched as one truck left the station, then another, and then another. "It was like taking a vacation day," he says, "when everything breaks loose while you're gone."

Transportation for Dan and his new wife Dawn was provided by Asst. Fire Marshal Tim Henshaw and his 1973 Mack pumper. The ride into



Photo by Lee Wilson

Raleigh took a little longer, due to a road closure. Arriving at the Sheraton for the reception, they discovered that the hotel's power was also out. ❖

## Logistics at Station 1

After leaving the Sheraton, Henshaw headed to Station 1. He parked his engine on the apron and began working as a logistics officer for the many companies and personnel who were coming and going.

Call-back members were arriving, and he assigned them to engines and ladders that needed a fourth person. He remembers a reserve engine arriving, staffed with all Captains. Inside, he had all firefighters on the couch. "I told them to mix it up," says Henshaw.

Eight engines and three ladders were working downtown. "They'd pull onto the apron," he recalls, "and I'd run out and hand them their next call on a sheet of paper." And they got dirty. Engine 1 and 13 were so dark, he says, "they looked like coal trucks!"

Henshaw also tried to find food and water for the busy units. "I raided the snack drawer at Station 1 and handed crackers out." He recalls the station was clear of extra personnel by 7:00 p.m. He left about midnight. ❖

## Helping Others

Lt. Andy Meier (L1C) and Lt. Alan Wortham (E16B) were among the firefighters, paramedics, and other public safety workers helping paramedic Allison Miller and her parents after both of their homes on North King Charles Road were severely damaged by the tornado. Volunteers spent two



Photo from Lt. A. Meier

days helping to secure and clear their property, as the Millers prepared to move into temporary housing.

Meier had turned his Trailblazer into a rescue truck, with all of his tools and gear ready to load. "I even had my 24-foot ladder for the roof," he notes.

He adds that they also assisted Allison's neighbor, a State Trooper, and the widow of retired Capt. James Atkinson, who lives on the corner. "We helped her and cleaned her yard out."

Senior Firefighter Derek Liles (E3B) lives on Jane Lane and saw trees down as far as he could see after the storm passed. He immediately began going house-to-house, to check on his neighbors for safety and emergency needs.

"I jumped over trees, ducked under branches, and stepped inside houses as I went down the street" says Liles. As people began arriving with saws, gas, and manpower, he and others helped cut a pathway down their street, and up driveways. They finished about nightfall.

Deputy Fire Marshal Phillip King was returning to Sanford at the time of the storm. He and his family sought shelter under an overpass at the Highway 64/64 bypass split as the radio warned nearby communities to take shelter. "When we pulled away," he recalls, "there were some 20 cars parked there."

His neighborhood off Highway 42 was without power and King, a camper, spent the next few days cooking for everyone. He stayed home from work to help. King also opened up his church on Sunday, riding his ATV as regular roads were impassable. "It was the first time I'd ridden a four-wheeler to church when it wasn't snowing" he notes. ❖

## Appreciation

The Raleigh Fire Department was assisted in their response to the tornado by many agencies and individuals: emergency medical responders, law enforcement officers and officials, county fire services and county fire departments, emergency management agencies, city and county officials, city public utilities workers, power and gas company workers, disaster relief agencies, and the many Raleigh citizens who helped firefighters help others that day. Thank you everyone. ■



# Task Force 8 Activated

North Carolina Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) Task Force 8 is comprised of personnel and equipment from Raleigh, Durham, Chapel Hill, and Cary fire departments and Wake County EMS. They can be requested to respond anywhere in the state, but on April 16, they were needed at home.



“We received three requests that day, from Sanford, Harnett County, and Craven County,” says Battalion Chief and Task Force Leader Frank McLaurin. “But we had to decline. We were needed here.”

Task Force 8 was requested within 15 minutes of the tornado’s passing. Incoming members first met at the Keeter Training Center and drivers began deploying the tractor-drawn USAR trucks and other special units to a staging and subsequent command location at the corner of South and Dawson Streets.

Over the next several hours, USAR teams conducted wide-area searches of homes and businesses in the area of South Saunders Street and Maywood Avenue. USAR teams were also sent to Stony Brook Mobile Home Park, to assist with searching those structures.



“We’re trained for a variety of search and rescue functions, from removing victims from buildings to conducting wide-area searches of urban areas,” says McLaurin.

Raleigh’s engine, ladder, and rescue companies were able to conduct rescue activities with their own personnel and equipment, he notes. Needed from Task Force 8 that day were rapid but comprehensive searches of affected areas.

The State Highway Patrol helicopter was utilized for late-day assessment and photographs of damage sites in the city. Capt. Michael Ezzell took digital photos that

were later delivered to the EOC.

Operations ended at 9:30 p.m. A planning meeting at Station 8 followed about an hour later, to determine the next day’s USAR activities.



Operations resumed the following morning. USAR command was relocated to the Keeter Training Center, and the USAR teams were used to conduct wide-area searches at five damage sites:

- South Saunders Street
- Stony Brook Mobile Home Park
- North King Charles Road
- Cardinal Grove subdivision
- Serendipity Drive.

After nearly 12 hours of operation, the last team returned at 9:00 p.m. The 26 members searched 3.56 square miles and traversed every street. The number of structures with addresses in those areas totaled 5,382.

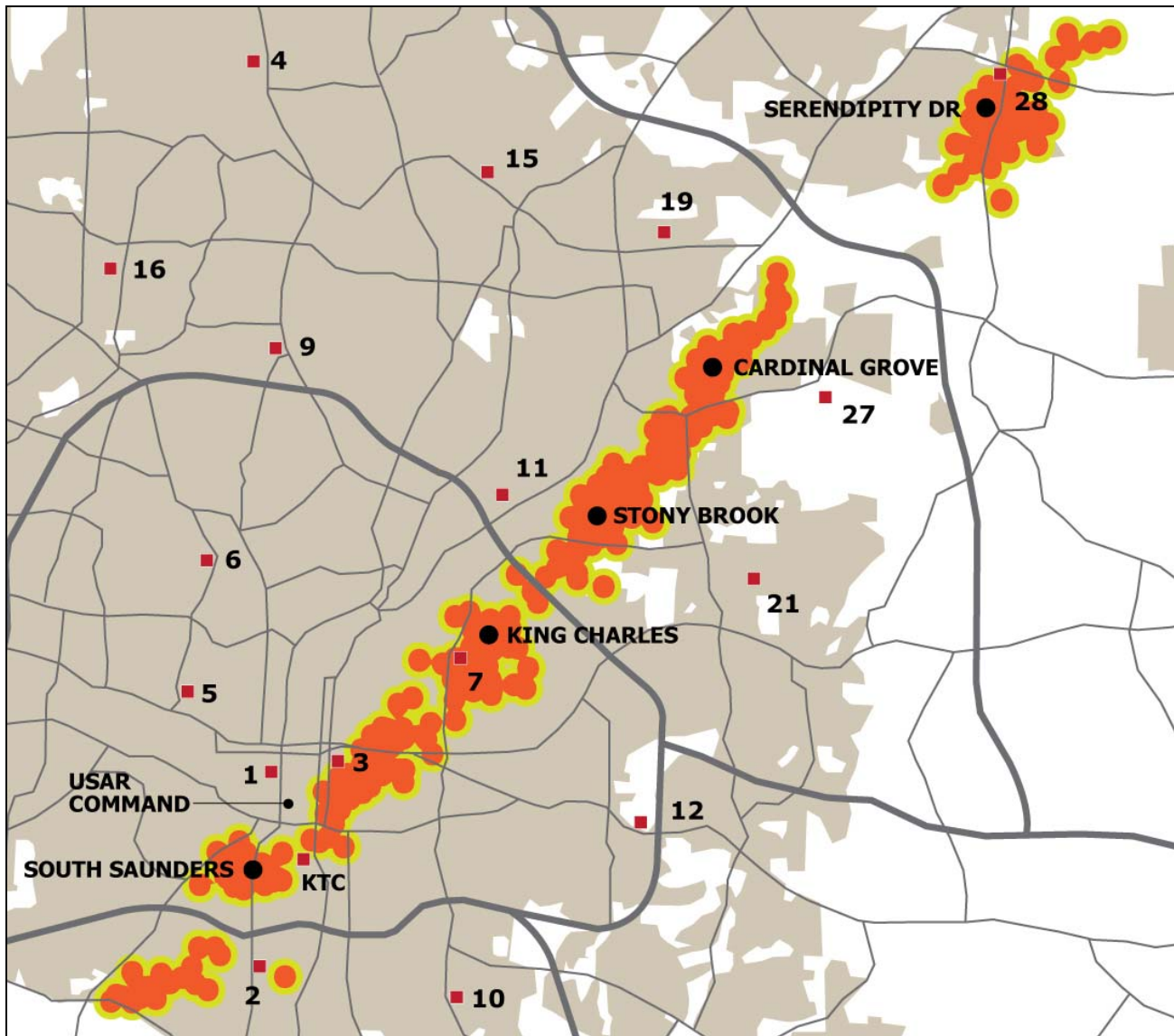
USAR teams were again utilized on Tuesday, April 19, at Stony Brook Mobile Home Park.

With residents wanting to remove items from 25 condemned trailers, two-person teams were assigned one per family. They monitored safety and building integrity while families removed items from the buildings.

Task Force 8 members returned to the mobile home park on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. Their presence was significantly smaller, with just two or three team members each day. ■

## ABOUT THIS NEWSLETTER

THIS NEWSLETTER IS A QUARTERLY PUBLICATION FOR PERSONNEL, RETIREES, AND CITIZENS. THE EDITOR IS HISTORIAN MIKE LEGEROS. FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT [rfdnews@legeros.com](mailto:rfdnews@legeros.com). FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE RALEIGH FIRE DEPARTMENT, VISIT THE WEB SITE [www.raleigh-nc.org/fire](http://www.raleigh-nc.org/fire). ❖



FireNews.net Editor-in-Chief Jeff Harkey created this map, showing clusters of damage sites. Also labeled are fire station and training center locations, the USAR command post, and five sites where USAR activities were conducted.

City inspectors subsequently assessed the damage and released this summary information:

- Over \$115 million damage to residential and commercial structures.
- 138 houses and eight businesses destroyed.
- 2,269 homes and businesses damaged.



*Photo by Gary Knight/CCBI.*

Many remember the night of November 28, 1988, when a tornado plowed through northwest Raleigh. The 1:00 a.m. storm struck with virtually no warning, killing two and injuring 102 others. Townridge Square Shopping Center on Highway 70 shown above served as command post and staging area for the hundreds of responders. It was also the site of a flattened KMart store, where an employee was trapped for more than two hours. ■