

‘It Made Me Proud to be a VFW Member’

VFW Department of Florida had a heroic response in aftermath of Hurricane Ian

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When Hurricane Ian ravaged parts of Florida in late September, VFW’s Department of Florida relied on its Emergency Response and Recovery team to channel adequate disaster relief in a hurry.

With extensive experience since being formed in 2018 by Don Pearsall following Hurricane Michael, a Category 5 storm that ripped through the Caribbean and parts of Florida, the Emergency Response and Recovery team began preparations as soon as Ian made landfall.

“What we did was deploy our team right away,” said Pearsall, director of the Emergency Response Team, as well as coordinator for VFW’s Southern Conference Disaster Management board. “We have seven field coordinators in charge of Districts across the state, and we heard from those in areas near Sarasota and Ft. Myers to see what the community needed.”

Backed by the VFW Department of Florida’s disaster relief fund, and given the go-ahead by both Commander Ronald Mills and Adjutant Eugene Perrino after receiving reports on the damages, Pearsall and his 15-man Emergency Response Team deployed within 15 minutes.

Pearsall split the team into two trailers filled with supplies and food destined for Sarasota and Ft. Myers Beach, respectively, hoping to set up control points at each location in a matter of hours.

“We rolled in the day after the storm, and it was heartbreaking to see,” said Pearsall, a life member of the Department of Florida who deployed to Ft. Myers Beach himself. “

Supplied by the Department of Florida, the Emergency Response Team distributed more than 1,800 cases of water, 900 MRE meals, a trailer-full of canned foods and hundreds of other cleaning supplies that included 800 gallons of bleach.

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From aiding firefighters and first responders to veterans and residents in dire need of a hand up, Pearsall acknowledged that supplies and basic human necessities would not unburden them of the heartache unfolding.

But among the rubble and destruction left behind, the example set by local veterans made his chest swell.

“I felt very sorry for the people down there because losing their homes and everything else is just demoralizing,” Pearsall said. “But seeing our local volunteer VFW members there cope with losing everything they had, while still showing up every day to help, is something that I can’t explain except to say that it made me proud to be a VFW member.”