

Military teams assist flood relief effort

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A number of Army and Royal Air Force personnel along with an RAF Chinook heavy lift helicopter have been helping the emergency services with the flood relief effort in the north of England.



An 18 Squadron Chinook helicopter, from RAF Odiham in Hampshire, helps to lift around 150 tonnes of aggregate near the village of Almholme in a bid to reinforce and support the banks of the River Don
[Picture: MOD]

In Bentley, just north of Doncaster, the Environment Agency identified a weak point on the River Don. An 18 Squadron Chinook helicopter, from RAF Odiham in Hampshire, was immediately called in to help lift around 150 tonnes of aggregate near the village of Almholme in a bid to reinforce and support the banks of the River Don.

Throughout the evening of Wednesday 27 June 2007 the helicopter made several trips, carrying the bags as an under-slung load. They continued with the lifting this morning, Thursday 28 June 2007.

Flight Lieutenant Stu Gerrard, 28, Officer Commanding the Mobile Air Operations team at RAF Benson, has been helping to coordinate the RAF assistance in Doncaster:

"We've been supporting the Environment Agency's operation," explained Flt Lt Gerrard. "What we're doing is lifting around 150 bags of aggregate to try and reinforce the river and prevent it from overflowing.



A digger helps move some of the aggregate at Alholme [Picture: MOD]

"We've been working with numerous different organisations, including the police and the fire service. We've taken the lead on how to get the bags where they need to get to. The danger of lifting these loads all makes for a challenging and tricky operation.

"This is unique in terms of the specific role we're carrying out here but in terms of flying and preparing loads, it's what we train for. It's more the equipment we're using and the multi agency working that is different to what we're used to. But it is good to know our unique skills are being used."

This week's floods, which were most severe in Yorkshire, Lincolnshire and the Midlands, have already claimed four lives. On Monday 25 June 2007 RAF Search and Rescue helicopters worked through the evening to rescue more than 100 people stranded in Hull and Sheffield.

Flt Lt Gerrard has followed the events of the last few days with interest, particularly the assistance provided by his RAF search and rescue colleagues:



Help is at hand; soldiers from The Defence School of Transport (DST) at Leconfield help evacuate an elderly lady in the Humber area [Picture: MOD]

"We had no idea we would get called in," he said. "I obviously knew that if there was a real need then we might get called upon to help because we hold a very short notice standby to do this sort of thing, 365 days a year, so we are always available if needed."

Sergeant Paul Waterhouse, from 18 Squadron at RAF Odiham, has been helping to liaise with the numerous agencies involved in the flood relief effort to make it all possible:

"Everything has gone very smoothly so far," he said. "It's been difficult getting everything together, the logistics side of it in particular. but it's great for us to be involved and it's good for the civilian population that we can carry out this role when required."

Meanwhile four assault boats and their four-man Army crews deployed from 38 Engineer Regiment in Ripon to an electricity substation at Thorpe Marsh near Doncaster. They used their boats to cross the flood water surrounding the substation and then reinforced the flood protection with sandbags on key buildings.



Soldiers from The Defence School of Transport help with the flood relief effort
[Picture: MOD]

They have also been transporting members of the South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Services, with their pumping equipment, and National Grid personnel as well as shuttling the 45-gallon drums of diesel that fuel the substation's emergency generators:

"Only two boats have been on the water at a time but everyone has got their feet wet during this task today," explained Captain John Kirkman, who headed the team.

"The substation is surrounded by a floodwater lake and we have placed about 150 sandbags to help protect certain parts. We have been pleased to be able to support the Fire and Rescue Service and National Grid at this time."

Personnel from The Defence School of Transport (DST) at Normandy Barracks, Leconfield in East Yorkshire have also been in the thick of the flood relief effort throughout the Humber Area, mainly in and around Hull. Filling and distributing sandbags is just one of the many tasks they have undertaken.



An elderly man is lifted to safety [Picture: MOD]

The soldiers have also helped deliver hot food to the civilian police as well helping to rescue those who were trapped in their homes and, in one instance, helping to rescue disabled pensioners from sheltered accommodation in Cottingham, near Hull. Normandy Barracks itself didn't escape the rising waters, with many soldiers having to spend time baling ourselves out.

DST spokesman Captain Terry O'Hagan said:

"I'm very proud of the work that our chaps did. They just got on with it, cheerfully and uncomplainingly. The civilian population were most appreciative and provided us with copious amounts of tea, sticky buns, sandwiches and soup – which was very touching considering their circumstances."

So far the DST soldiers have filled 9000 sandbags for local authorities, filled and delivered a further 2400 throughout the area, ground loaded 1000 more

and have 600 sandbags loaded on trucks ready to move at short notice should the situation worsen.