Sea Services Feel More Prepared After Complicated 2017 Hurricane Season

NATIONAL HARBOR, Md. – What has been described as a complicated hurricane season brought new challenges for the maritime forces in 2017. With hurricanes hitting Texas and Florida in back-to-back months, it was the first year on record that two category four storms made landfall in mainland United States.

On top of that, islands such the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico were hit hard by Hurricane Maria, causing massive wind damage and power outages.

While taxing at first, sea service leaders at the Hurricane Update Panel at the Sea-Air-Space Exposition April 11, said they were pleased with their combined efforts to help the affected areas during the time of crisis and feel more prepared for the expected above-average 2018 hurricane season.

The panelists collectively had years of storm relief experience but even that wasn't enough to fully prepare for the four major hurricanes in 2017.

Maj. Gen. Pat Murphy, director of the National Guard Bureau Joint Staff, led the National Guard's response efforts for Hurricane Sandy when it hit the Northeast in 2012. But not even Sandy could compare to Hurricane Harvey, Irma and Maria individually, let alone collectively.

"Hurricane Sandy was originally referred to as 'Super Storm Sandy,'" Murphy joked, "but since the summer of 2017, I've not heard it called 'super' anymore. Because it really paled in comparison to what happened in 2017. I would categorize Sandy as a different type of event and not to the magnitude of the

past summer’s events.”

Handling the historic meteorological events quickly became a joint command effort once Hurricane Irma and Maria left, according to Rear Adm. Jeffery Hughes, former commander, Expeditionary Strike Group.

“Relationships are absolutely critical,” Hughes said. “At no point in my near 30-year career have I ever placed a higher premium on relationships, because it drives that unity of effort.”

Hughes also was reassured that they had full control on when and where they were allowed to respond.

“At no point did I ever not have the authorities to allow me to respond immediately,” he said. “At no point was I waiting to say, ‘I would really like to do something, but I’m waiting to be told that I could.’ We had the authorities in place, and we had the unity of effort throughout the entire response team, from the federal and territorial level, to allow us to go in and save lives.”

However, the response effort didn’t go as smoothly as anticipated, at first. Most of the relief-related issues stemmed from Hurricane Maria’s damage to the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico. The sea services successfully sent the needed resources to the islands, but the lack of power and the situation of the islands slowed down the distribution process.

Of course, lack of power wasn’t the only challenge for the relief effort. Murphy later pointed out the limited capability of Puerto Rico’s resources also made delivering equipment in a timely fashion difficult.