

# Local rescuers undertake Opal

By Jeff Zeleny  
Senior Reporter

A stiff 30 mph wind blew Wednesday night as Lincoln rescue workers packed emergency gear onto trucks, preparing to tackle much stronger winds stirred by Hurricane Opal.

In the corner of the Air Park fire station, a 13-inch television set showed satellite images of the hurricane's driving rains and 144 mph winds as it moved across the Florida panhandle.

The 62-member search-and-rescue team will travel by bus to Camp Shelby in Hattiesburg, Miss. The Nebraska group will be dispatched to the storm's disaster area after they arrive Thursday afternoon.

"I have mixed emotions right now," said Doug Wyatt, the director of Eastern Ambulance. "We get a bus ride to think about all the things we will encounter."

The Federal Emergency Management Agency called on the Lincoln

rescuers about noon Wednesday to assist in the wake of Opal's destruction.

The Nebraska Urban Search and Rescue Team, which was formed by FEMA about three years ago, is made up of medics from Eastern, rescuers from the Lincoln Fire Department and structural engineers from the city of Lincoln. The group, which is one of 25 across the country, has never been deployed.

Generators, chain saws, cement crushers, listening devices and sheets of plywood were loaded onto two semi-trucks parked outside the fire station west of the Lincoln Municipal Airport.

After the heavy equipment was loaded, workers dressed in fluorescent yellow T-shirts and camouflage pants passed 3-gallon jugs of bottled water along an assembly line into the trucks. The water supply — enough for 14 days — was packed into the trucks with boxes of shredded wheat,

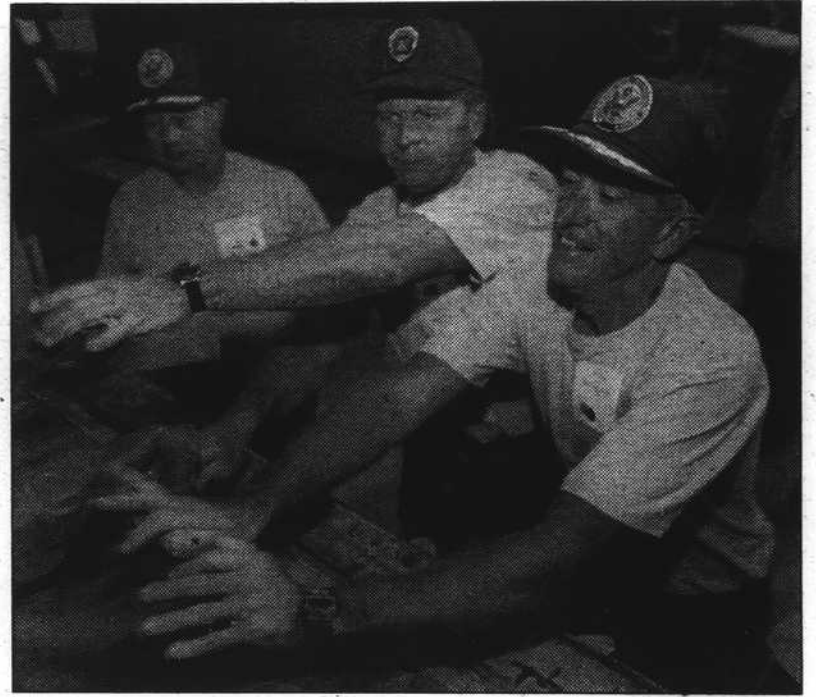
hot cocoa mix, canned soup and styrofoam plates.

As the rescuers frantically worked, they said they were nervous, excited and scared.

"All of those emotions are appropriate," said Lincoln Deputy Fire Chief Dean Staberg. "There's some apprehension, but we are going to keep our guard up and make sure our rescuers don't become part of the catastrophe."

The team spent \$250,000 in about six hours Wednesday purchasing supplies for the rescue mission, said Lincoln Fire Chief Mike Merwick. FEMA reimburses the city for its expenses and training.

Shortly after 9 p.m., two chartered buses packed with burly firefighters and paramedics pulled out of the fire station. A few family members stayed behind and watched and read the message painted on the back windows of the buses: "Discover Nebraska, the Good Life."



Members of a rescue group made of Lincoln emergency crews load supplies onto a truck headed for disaster areas in Mississippi. Travis Heying/DN

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