

Tennessee association first to use drone in disaster relief

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MORRISTOWN, Tenn. (BP)—When a teenage girl went missing in the east Tennessee mountains while walking her dogs, emergency responder Brandon Ramsey was able to do in 10 minutes what searchers on the ground couldn't in more than two hours.

Ramsey was pouring concrete on a construction job when he and other volunteer members of Bean Station Fire and Rescue got the call. Fascinated with drones since he was a boy, the 18-year-old is aware of the advantage that accompanies a view from above.

On that day, the thermal camera on his DJI Matrice 219 V2 quickly located the teenager who had wandered about a half-mile from the trail.

Ramsey, a member of Pleasant Hill Baptist Church in Rogersville, Tenn., also serves as the primary drone pilot for Nolachucky Baptist Association disaster relief. That role is the first of its kind in Southern Baptist disaster relief, national director Sam Porter said. With the advantages it brings, though, he hopes that doesn't remain the case for long.

Useful tool in damage assessment

"It is a tremendous help to be able to fly up and hover over disaster sites to see all sides of any kind of debris," he said. "This allows the teams to know how to strategize, how best to assist the homeowners and to help the teams know what equipment is needed to respond."

Thus far, the drone has been used to help locate those missing or deceased

after natural disasters such as tornadoes, floods and hurricanes. It was instrumental in locating the source of flooding in Waverly, Tenn., as Ramsey guided it to a remote railroad bridge where debris had collected and effectively created a dam.

Its most immediate benefit, though, is giving responders an idea of what they're about to encounter.

"We've used it as an assessor," Ramsey said. "It lets us see what kind of damage there is and helps us get a picture of where we're to begin."

Porter agreed. "It actually is also a safety issue letting volunteers assess the entire area without having to walk through dangerous debris," he said.

The association is developing a swift-water rescue team that will work in tandem with the drone. That decision, director David Hawkins said, came after observing the need for such a response following hurricanes or flooding.

Busy with debris removal

Perhaps the busiest part of the association's recent disaster relief work has come from debris removal.

After retiring, disaster relief leader Dale Moles retained several trucks and other equipment from his company that he now uses in disaster relief. The equipment first was used eight years ago to clear out homes charred by forest fires in Colorado, and the Nolachucky Association was called to do the same thing in 2016 after devastating fires in Gatlinburg, Tenn. Most recently, they hauled away debris and wreckage from tornadoes in northwest Tennessee.

But the association's biggest presence, literally, is the 150,000-square-foot warehouse serving as home for the appropriately named God's Warehouse

Ministries. In addition to Baptist Builders and the drone and swift-water rescue ministry, it is the home base for a food bank, community services and a ministry that sends monthly humanitarian aid to Israel.

Owen manages it all, but “it manages me mostly,” he said. “As we have been faithful, God has been faithful to add to us. He always provides.”

God’s Warehouse Ministries began with a benefactor who wished to remain anonymous but provided all the funding. After he died, the family wanted to continue funding the ministry.

Moles, who is Ramsey’s grandfather, also oversees the drone and swift-water rescue efforts. Both are instrument-rated aircraft pilots, with Ramsey soon to be a commercial-rated pilot. Moles is the association’s backup drone pilot. Both he and his grandson are fully licensed for unmanned aircraft systems operations.