

Task force on way to aid rescue

By JOHN LeBAS
Eagle Staff Writer

The federal government on Tuesday activated Texas Task Force 1, a highly trained urban search-and-rescue team based in College Station, to assist in recovery efforts in terrorism-ravaged New York City.

Sixty-two members of the task force, created in 1997 in response to the Oklahoma City bombing, were scheduled to arrive Wednesday at the site of the nation's worst-ever terrorist attack and are charged with finding survivors believed buried under the collapsed buildings of the World Trade Center.

"We feel fully equipped," said task force leader Tim Gallagher, speaking at Brayton Fire Training Field as rescuers dressed and packed their gear.

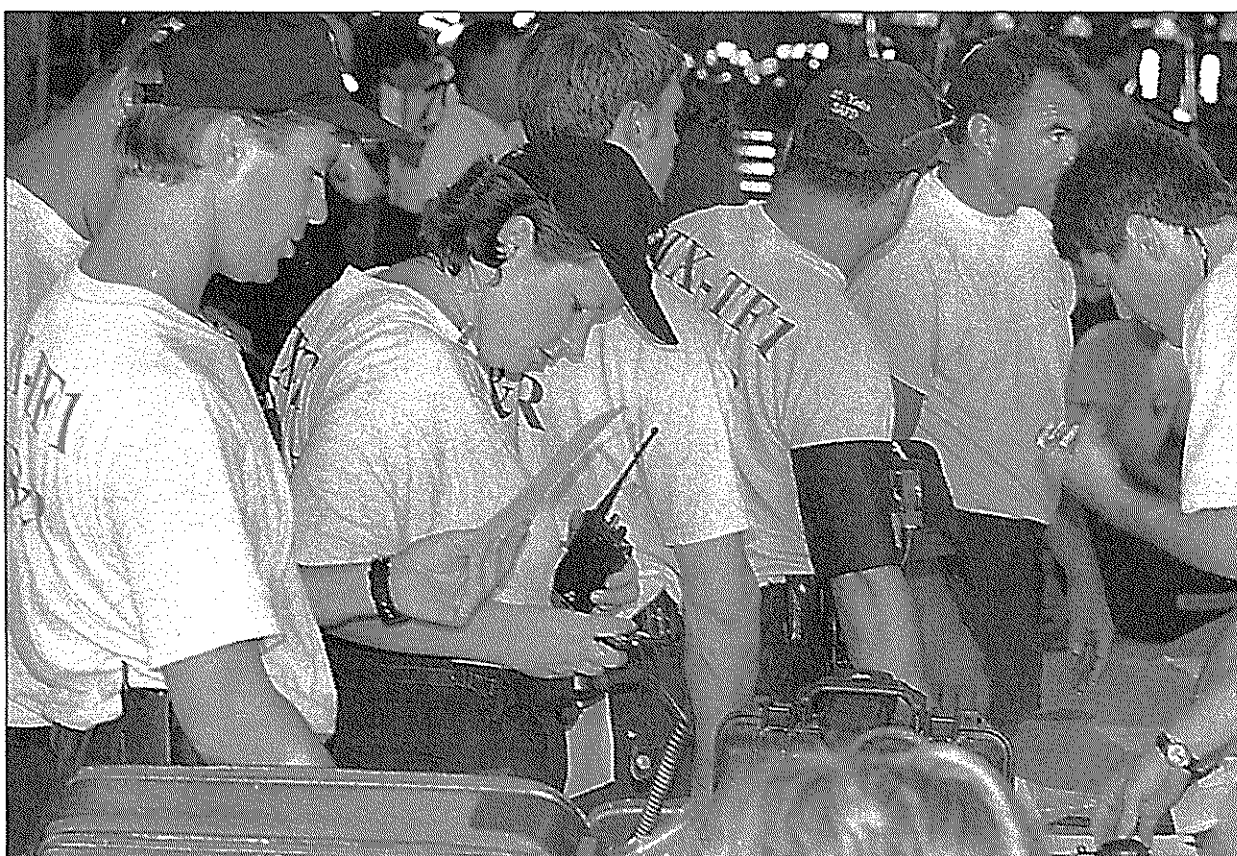
Texas Task Force 1 will join crews already on the scene and four other search-and-rescue teams en route from throughout the country. Armed with search dogs, structural expertise and medical training, the task force could work up to 10 days amid the rubble, officials said.

Most of the task force members are emergency personnel; all live within a four-hour radius of College Station. Nine are Brazos County residents. The rescuers said hurried goodbyes to loved ones Tuesday before converging at Texas A&M University.

Gallagher said the knowledge that hundreds of New York City firefighters and police officers are feared to be among the victims will add to the expected emotional strain.

"That will have an effect on the psyche of our rescuers," he said. "We told them to put that aside."

The task force is operated by the Texas Engineering Extension Service, a member of the Texas A&M University System. Extension Director Kem Bennett said the federal government told him early Tuesday to ready one of the task force's three teams for dis-



Eagle photo/Patric Schneider

Members of Texas Task Force 1 get checked in at Brayton Training Center late Tuesday afternoon. The crew

will join those already on the scene in New York and four other teams en route from throughout the country.

patch. The team was originally assigned to the Pentagon, but the government decided later in the day that more rescuers were needed in New York, Bennett said.

It is the first time Texas Task Force 1 has been dispatched to the site of a terrorist attack. It is also the first deployment by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which this year added the task force to its network of 28 search-and-rescue teams.

The task force has previously responded to the scenes of natural disasters. Rescuers went to Houston when it was flooded this summer during Tropical Storm Allison and Fort Worth after a twister ripped through downtown last year. They also were dispatched when the Texas A&M Bonfire fell in 1999, crushing some victims under thousands of logs.

Its members are handpicked from thousands of applicants and prepare specifically to enter damaged areas to find and treat survivors. Some are hazardous-materials specialists; others are weapons experts; still others bring structural expertise to the

team.

"With the tools and training we have, we can dismantle any structure in the world today," Gallagher said.

Team members were scheduled to haul to New York some 50,000 pounds of equipment, with which they will establish a rescue camp that is self-sustaining for up to 72 hours.

The team will work in 12-hour shifts, spending a maximum of 10 days at the scene.

If the task force is still needed after that period, one of the other two teams will be rotated into service.

Team officials said they remain hopeful of finding survivors under the rubble of the World Trade Center, despite the horrific plane crashes and collapses.

"Even three or four days after a collapse, you can still find a lot of victims," said assistant team leader Tony Tortorice, a Houston firefighter.

The safety of the rescuers will remain a priority, Tortorice said. Each will undergo psychological debriefing after the mission.

The terrorist attacks came as task force members from Texas and across the country were in

class at "Disaster City," a state-of-the-art training facility near the Brayton field. Training was halted as the stunned rescuers listened to news reports of planes slamming into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and a rural area of Pennsylvania.

Several members of the New Jersey task force training in College Station were stranded when commercial air travel was suspended. They were to leave with the Texas rescuers to New York, where they are expected to regroup with their teams already at the attack site.

A member of the Virginia Beach task force in town for training classes also went to New York with the Texas contingent, officials said.

Bryan Assistant Fire Chief Mike Donoho said the team will rely on its skills to help it perform in the disaster, which is unlike anything ever encountered by most of the members.

"This is what we train for," said Donoho as the team readied for departure. "This is the big one."

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