The devastating winter storm that hit Kentucky in late January charted new territory in many ways. With more than 750,000 homes without electricity, residents faced the largest power outage in the state’s history. Because of power failure and other damage, tens of thousands were also without water. More than 100 counties and nearly 80 cities declared emergencies, and at least 30 people lost their lives statewide. The response that followed also broke new ground.

According to an announcement from Gov. Steve Beshear, the storm prompted the largest marshaling of state and federal resources in the history of the commonwealth in response to a natural disaster. A memorandum of understanding with the National Guard for the last four years was intended to prepare for the possibility of a devastating earthquake along the New Madrid fault line in extreme western Kentucky, and annual exercises with the Guard were a part of that preparation.

As it turned out, the ice storm’s damage was similar to an earthquake’s consequences that the storm has been dubbed the New Madrid Ice Quake of 2009, and Civil Air Patrol members were ready to work in collaboration with the Guard. “We’ve exercised what we would do in case this happened,” Nester said.

“Our involvement in the mission started shortly after the ice storm ended,” said Maj. Bob Koob,
Kentucky Wing incident commander. Civil Air Patrol was initially requested to fly over 22 counties to survey for damage and take photos.

“I immediately realized this was beyond our local capabilities,” Koob said. So he asked for assistance from the Indiana, Illinois and Ohio wings. “They immediately responded with aircraft and ground teams,” he said.

More than 100 Civil Air Patrol members from the four wings spent six days assisting in the storm response. The participants included 16 cadets; the rest were senior members. Altogether, their efforts included 91 air sorties, as well as 52 ground sorties, with an overall total of 9,600 man-hours. “That includes all the members who were involved for the six days,” Koob said.

“All in all, we had 18 aircraft,” Koob said — seven provided by Kentucky, six by Illinois, three by Indiana and two by Ohio. The flights themselves totaled a little over 200 flying hours and were conducted for two purposes: to facilitate communication and to survey for damage.

With communications completely down, Koob said, the Guard members had no way of contacting each other. To overcome that obstacle, Civil Air Patrol pilots flew one of the Guard’s repeaters in the air at 10,000 feet. Repeaters take a radio signal that has a limited range and extend the range of the communication.

“We were up there pretty much through the daylight hours,” Koob said. Pilots flew a morning shift, then swapped either aircraft or crew for an afternoon shift.

During reconnaissance flights, CAP members saw downed power lines, toppled cell phone towers, damaged buildings and barns and impassable roadways and highways. They documented the damage with more than 400 high-resolution digital photos.

“We were in search of and looking for anything in regard to damage caused by ice,” Nester said. “Hundreds of trees were snapped off. We could see power lines lying across trees and power poles on the ground.”

Each county took about three to four hours to survey. As each photograph was captured, an observer on the flight also recorded a description of the damage, GPS coordinates and the orientation and altitude of the plane at the time. Photos were then brought down to the ground and transmitted via the Internet or loaded on compact disc and delivered to the Guard.

“They were ecstatic about the quality,” Koob said.

Nester added, “They began to develop a mosaic of these photographs. You could see almost the flight line of the plane. The power companies began to see where the ice had been heaviest.”

“They really have been very helpful to us,” said Col. Bill Price of the Kentucky National Guard. “Just the ability to provide live pictures of the damaged area is very helpful.”

As damage is assessed, Price said, “that helps us understand what we need to do for our response.” Then, as Guard officials prepare to send out a large number of forces, the live imagery enables them to judge the capability needed to handle what has happened.

“The Guard is being credited with saving lives but that wouldn’t be possible without the assistance of the Civil Air Patrol,” he said. “The Civil Air Patrol has a
direct impact on our ability to respond.”

Six ground teams were also involved with the effort, assisting the National Guard by going house to house making checks on people who, in many cases, hadn’t had power for eight to 10 days.

“We had personnel in at least three counties in Kentucky doing that,” said Capt. Stephen Bishop, ground branch director for the Kentucky Wing.

The CAP ground teams’ role was basically gathering and providing information. If anyone needed something, that information was passed back to the National Guard so supplies could be provided to them.

Cadets were among those participating in the wellness checks.

“This was my first mission in my entire experience with Civil Air Patrol,” said Cadet Staff Sgt. Cory Baumer, who spent three days assisting in the recovery. “Everyone we ran into was polite,” he said. “They were so happy to see us.”

The one wellness check that stands out for him and others occurred at a home on a dead-end lane in a rural area where they met an 86-year-old woman who is legally blind.

“When we knocked on the door the first time, there was no answer,” said Cadet Master Sgt. Colin Burke, who was a part of the same ground team. Members of the team did a walkaround, finding dogs in the backyard with no water, then moved on to check on another house. When they returned a second time, she answered the door.

“She just started crying and said, ‘Thank you so much for being here,’” Burke said.

“She was pretty shaken up because when she woke up there was no power in the house, and she was cold,” he added. The Guard contacted her son in Louisville, and he made arrangements to come get her that night.

In the meantime, the ground team spent several hours at her home doing small chores, including lighting a fire in her fireplace. “We fed the dogs, fed the cats, fed her birds,” Burke said.

“That was what made the trip worth it for me,” Baumer said. ▲