

WHEN ANDREW HAMMERED HOMESTEAD



Twenty-five years ago this month, Hurricane Andrew leveled Homestead Air Force Base.

By Gideon Grudo, Digital Platforms Editor



Four days before Hurricane Andrew struck Florida in 1992, Air Reserve Technician TSgt. Eugene Ritaldato took a trip from his home south of Miami to Naples, Fla., with his wife and friends.

After eating a steak dinner and catching Clint Eastwood's "Unforgiven" at a movie theater, the two couples headed back to their hotel rooms. There, watching the news, they realized the hurricane they hoped would nudge up north was instead headed directly toward them.

Ritaldato, 32 at the time and a weapons standardization supervisor with Homestead Air Force Base's 482nd Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, called his friend. Recounting the conversation recently with *Air Force Magazine*, he said he asked his friend, "Are you watching this? ... We better get back home."

At Homestead on Sunday—the day before impact—Ritaldato helped secure government property, such as vehicles and equipment, against the storm. "The last thing I saw was a sign saying we had to evacuate," Ritaldato remembers. After that, he went home to his wife, packed their belongings, and they left their residence, located just north of the base.

That Monday, Aug. 24, 1992, the Category 5 hurricane struck the United States. Its winds slashed through Homestead Air Force Base. This was the same base Air Force brass considered a service "jewel," according to John DeMilly, Homestead city's mayor at the time. He was quoted in a 1993 *Los Angeles Times* article.

The air base was all but destroyed by Hurricane Andrew, leaving it a "ghost town," reported Mike Clary in the newspaper story. "Windows are smashed out, insulation drips from shattered ceilings, and the eerie evidence of former



Previous pages: Hurricane Andrew destroyed hangars and aircraft at Homestead Air Force Base. A satellite image shows the Category 5 hurricane approaching Florida on Aug. 23, 1992. /1/ With winds exceeding 140 mph, the storm damaged the control tower and operations building. The base's host unit at the time was the 31st Fighter Wing. /2/ Debris surrounds an AC-130. /3/ The base was closed for days because of the destruction. /4/ Eugene Ritaldato, then an Air Reserve Technician at Homestead, took this photo of a wrecked supply building. "There was debris all over the flight line. One jet had a nose ripped off the front of it," he recalled recently. "The hangars were peeled away. Every single facility was damaged, either moderately or completely destroyed." /5/ A photo by Ritaldato shows how powerful winds drove an object through a palm tree.



lives—including clothing, furniture, medicines, and breakfast cereals—sits moldering in the heat and humidity,” Clary wrote. The damage was record breaking, with Andrew being the costliest hurricane in US history until Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005.

The National Hurricane Center said the storm cost the country nearly \$25 billion in 1992 dollars. Twenty-six died as a direct result of the hurricane.

USAF sent 85 people to “comb through the rubble” at the 3,300-acre base to “determine how much damage had been done,” reported *The New York Times*.

“The house was destroyed,” said Ritaldato, who spent days after the hurricane basically camping out in what was left of his off-base residence. His 1989 white Pontiac Grand Am was pushed up against the front of his house. “My neighbor’s car somehow got some air under it and flew toward my bedroom, crashing into the front window.”

The rest of the neighborhood was demolished, Ritaldato said. “We lost just about everything we owned. When they say it’s like a bomb going off, it is. Everything is stripped bare. Everything is wiped out.”

The base fared no better. “A lot of the hangars were flattened. Ritaldato said. “One of them looked like someone just stepped on it.”

USAF said some mission essential commanders and support personnel stayed on base, but the majority of personnel and aircraft left. The base was completely closed for four days after the storm and reopened for official business only on Aug. 28, 1992.

The 482nd Maintenance Squadron and the 482nd Fighter Wing, Homestead’s largest tenant, took their F-16A and B



/1/ The hurricane’s winds left 50 percent of base housing without roofs and 90 percent of house windows broken. Trees were stripped and flattened. /2/ Lt. Col. Fred VanValkenburg of the 308th Fighter Squadron and his family survey their damaged quarters. /3/ The base chapel had its roof torn off. /4/ Maj. Wanda Velez Bustos photographs her destroyed home. /5/ A billeting office van landed atop a car. /6/ What remains of a 307th Fighter Squadron F-16. Six F-16s undergoing maintenance were left behind when the 31st FW evacuated its jets to other bases. The 31st FW commander and 17 support personnel weathered the storm in place. Today, the wing is located at Aviano AB, Italy.





/1/ Florida Air Guardsmen from the 202nd RED HORSE Civil Engineering Squadron repair the roof on a foster-child care facility. After the storm passed, one of the largest cleanup and salvage operations in the peacetime history of the military began. /2/ An emergency hospital was set up in a damaged hangar. /3/ A makeshift building served as the Army and Air Force Exchange Service laundry facility. /4/ A temporary base exchange in a trailer truck opened for business. /5/ Sgt. Cindy Zimmerman and A1C Candice Kotch serve up a hot lunch in the base exchange parking lot during the cleanup operation. The National Weather Service called Hurricane Andrew the most expensive natural disaster in Florida's history.

model aircraft and relocated to Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio, until April 1993. Although Andrew destroyed Homestead's air traffic control tower, a mobile control tower was set up and the base began receiving relief supplies for both the Air Force facility and the surrounding communities.

Despite finding a way initially to brave the reality of post-Andrew destruction, the Ritaldatos would soon leave the Homestead area again. Three days after impact, Ritaldato's wife told him she was pregnant. They often joke that at the same time the hurricane was born in the Atlantic, their daughter Gina was conceived. After 10 days, they grabbed all their belongings, got in the car, and headed north to Broward County.

By early September, though, when President George H. W. Bush visited the base, 23,500 military personnel, in addition to the airmen stationed there, were helping with everything from security to rebuilding the base.

Initially, DOD dropped more than \$100 million in new construction and infrastructure improvements on Homestead. Unusable buildings were razed and base infrastructure was repaired. The three top priorities in fixing the place up were reconstructing an Air National Guard hangar, the air traffic control tower, and maintenance hangars. Within years the base would also add new facilities, including a wing headquarters and buildings to house vehicle maintenance, communications, medical, and security units.

While airmen were reinventing lives and rebuilding homes, Homestead Air Force Base was on the 1993 Base Closure and Realignment Commission's base closings list. But a coalition of civilian, state, and federal leaders fought the closing. After May 1993 hearings, the list was finalized and

sent to President Bill Clinton. Homestead was no longer on it.

In April 1993, the 482nd Fighter Wing relocated to MacDill AFB, Fla., for one year.

Homestead Air Force Base was officially redesignated as an Air Reserve Base on March 31, 1994, and got back the 482nd.

Hurricane Andrew wasn't the first storm to cause trouble for Homestead.

On Sept. 15, 1945, precisely three years after the base was established, a hurricane carrying winds measuring 145 mph tore through, leaving it in ruins until 1955, when a cleanup was completed and the base reactivated.

"When people have gone through something like this, you only do it once," Ritaldato said, explaining he'd leave immediately if he heard anything like that was coming for him again. "With a hurricane, it lasts for hours—and you're talking about hours of sheer terror and devastation and that can be very psychologically damaging—it can really tear your mind up."

Today, Ritaldato is a GS-12, working at the base as a weapons safety manager. Most of the buildings on Homestead have either been rebuilt or renovated to meet Dade County's several-times-updated building code, according to Ritaldato, and some of them may stand up to a hurricane of Andrew's magnitude. But the hangars won't. "They would fare the same," he said.

The 482nd flies Air Force Reserve F-16Cs and states its goal as: "Ensure trained, qualified airmen ready to support the joint fight."

In early 2017, some 200 of Homestead's Total Force airmen were deployed to Southwest Asia where they are battling ISIS through Operation Inherent Resolve.

Photos: TSgt. Rose Reynolds; MSgt. James Ferguson; Sgt. Kevin Thomas (3-4); MSgt. Don Wetterman

