

In off-the-grid Egypt, NC, not even helicopters can get close enough to deliver relief

BY JULIA COIN
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Egypt, North Carolina, doesn't show up on most maps.

Less than 800 people lived there before the floods of Helene rushed roads and widened rivers on Friday. How many survived? Unknown.

On Wednesday, five people could be spotted from a helicopter lowering toward the township's tin-roofed volunteer fire department. A shoulder-width hole was sawed out of the top.

"Oh, so that's how the firefighter got out," said pilot Gary Heavin, who hovered above the cracked, cliffed road now caked with orange paste — a mixture of mountain dirt and water.

"This is a job only helicopters can do," Heavin said. But his black chopper with a United States of



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Helicopters owned by volunteer pilots with Operation Airdrop wait at the Hickory Regional Airport on Sept. 30 for pilots to fly supplies to people cut off by Helene's flooding in western North Carolina.

America seal stickered on couldn't do this job.

The ravished lanes below — the only border between total ruin and semi-salvageable devastation — were too narrow to land on. The closest field was too sloped, the next clearing too far away.

Heavin pulls up. None of the five people flag down

his helicopter that's holding three others — an N.C. fire marshal, a friend and a Charlotte Observer reporter. He assumes the people visible down below have what they need to survive, for now.

He flies south, to Burnsville, to drop the supplies stacked in his "bird," as he and everyone else flying

supplies west out of Hickory via Operation Airdrop call their copters.

Everyone is ready to pivot.

"The mission is to do whatever needs to be done," says Sam Parks, Heavin's friend from Statesville.

BRINGING PEOPLE OUT OF FLOODED AREAS

The day before, they rescued a woman with Stage 4 cancer and looked for two kids. The kids were gone, possibly dead somewhere beneath branches and sludge, he said.

In Burnsville, Gordon Higgins, a volunteer firefighter of nearly 30 years, waves the chopper into a field adjacent to powerlines. Heavin unloads some of the 300 Starlinks flown in by Ivanka Trump hours before.

And the water in the back will go to the 50 rescued from Pensacola, N.C., — a town next door, where

Hurricane Helene's remnants pushed houses into rivers, says volunteer Kayti Ledford.

"It's just horrible in Florida, too," she said. "But at least there it's flat. Here, there's no quick rebuild. The landscape isn't just changed. It's gone."

Heavin, the founder of Curves fitness franchise from Waco, Texas, volunteered to fly with Operation Airdrop, a nonprofit that drops supplies and leads rescues to help those stranded in disasters.

He and most of the other 50 volunteer pilots at Hickory Regional Airport were ready to rebel against a no-fly order as President Joe Biden descended into Asheville on Wednesday.

The Federal Aviation Administration issued a temporary flight restriction Wednesday afternoon over the area, with some exceptions. Matt McSwain, the

nonprofit's Hickory organizer, said he wouldn't abide by it. He wasn't going to stop pulling people out of the rubble for one person to visit it, he said.

A U.S. official told The Charlotte Observer flights coordinated with the North Carolina Emergency Operations Center or that otherwise make it known they intend to deliver aid could proceed without any delay. But the restrictions could have affected other types of aircraft that were "freelancing," the official said.

Heavin lifted off 10 minutes into the modified no-fly order, spotting military helicopters not showing up on his radar. Minutes after he lifted off, his radio went down; no one could hear him trying to get approval to touch down.

He called the tower on his cell, an unlit cigar between his bottom lip and the phone's microphone. They told him to land anyway, and the 73-year-old woman and her dog stepped out and into nurses hands.

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Biltmore Estate closed until further notice. A look at the damage there after Helene

BY CHYNA BLACKMON
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Following the catastrophic flooding of Hurricane Helene, several Western North Carolina homes and businesses were damaged or destroyed, including one of the state's biggest tourism sites: Biltmore Estate.

Like many other sites around the mountains, much of its destruction is

still being assessed so the property will remain **closed until further notice**. According to the Biltmore website, it could be **closed to guests until at least October 15**.

"Like all of this region, the damage varies by location across our 8,000-acre property. In forested areas, which is a large portion of the estate, wind damage is extensive to grounds and some structures. Crews have been

working tirelessly to clear roads so we can begin repairs," the Biltmore's latest update on Oct. 3 said.

HOW BAD WAS HELENE STORM DAMAGE AT BILTMORE?

Biltmore House, Conservatory, winery, gardens, and the property's hotels had very little to no impact, the team said, with most damage to other elements of the estate.

"The entrance to Biltmore, located in **Biltmore Village**, and other low-lying areas of the property, such as our farm, experienced **significant flooding and damage to buildings**. We are assessing structures and roadways in these areas," the

team said.

"We sadly **lost a few of our animals during the storm**, but the vast majority are safe and accounted for thanks to our dedicated agriculture and equestrian teams. As with all of our neighbors who experienced the effects of Helene, we are working on our plans for a swift recovery and look forward to welcoming our guests to this region as soon as it is safe to do so."

Located in the state's largest mountain town, the 8,000-acre Asheville estate with 250 rooms is the largest privately owned home in the country and one of North Carolina's most popular tourist destinations.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE TICKETS TO VISIT BILTMORE?

As the Biltmore remains closed to guests, including Biltmore Annual Passholders, Vanderbilt Wine Club members, and Sporting Clay Club members, the team is working to accommodate those with previous plans to visit during this time.

According to the Biltmore website, those with **daytime tickets** are welcome to reschedule a visit for another day once the estate has safely reopened or request refund online. For those who booked **overnight stays** at the estate between Sept. 27-Oct. 15, reservations have been automatically canceled and a 12-month

credit will be distributed.

"We are heartbroken for our friends, family, and neighbors across this region who have been devastated by this storm," Biltmore's website says. "To our first responders, utility workers, and community volunteers, we are eternally grateful for your endless care and courage. We will all work together to recover from this unprecedented disaster."

You can find more information and updates on the status of Biltmore's closure, cancellations and refunds online at biltmore.com/weather-update.

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