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Calling All HAMs

From: Gord VE3GIH

The annual Tour for Kids will be raising money with a bike ride from Aug. 10 to 13 inclusive. Amateur radio operators who would like to volunteer for mobile or checkpoint duty should contact VE3GIH Gord Hewit ghewit@sympatico.ca

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Katrina Article in Delta's SKY Magazine

From: Timothy Harper in Delta's SKY Magazine from

Website: http://www.delta-sky.com/2006_02/RolePlaying/index.html on March 2, 2006 (February issue)

It was the fourth night after Hurricane Katrina, and something like a thousand patients, doctors and staff were trapped at Medical Center Louisiana in downtown New Orleans, surrounded by floodwaters. Outside, reports were grim. People were drowning in their attics. Inside the hospital, there was no running water, no power, no phones and no Internet. Cell phones didn't work. Each day the authorities said evacuations were about to begin, but nothing happened.

The staff thought they'd seen everything the disaster could bring. Then, in the middle of the night, a pregnant woman dragged herself out of the foul, dark water surrounding the center's Charity Hospital, having managed to swim several blocks from her home, where she had been trapped. She was in labor and the pain was intensifying. By flashlight, doctors quickly determined that she needed a Caesarean section. But with no running water, no electricity, and no way to clean her up or to sterilize instruments, surgery was out of the question. The doctors conferred, and then sent Tim Butcher, at that time Charity's emergency operations director, upstairs to a conference room where a 5-foot-3-inch, middle-aged jazz musician, known for his cigarette-rasped voice and salty language, was sleeping on an air mattress. "Richard, wake up," Butcher said. "We need you."

Richard Webb, who happens to be legally blind, is one of the nations more than 660,000 licensed amateur radio operators. (They're nicknamed "hams" for reasons that are unclear.) As an amateur radio operator and a member of the Mobile Maritime Network, Webb regularly relays messages from small boats, occasionally participates in small-vessel rescue operations and helps with tracking hurricanes.

Pitching in and helping is a long tradition among hams, particularly in times of emergency. In fact, the Federal Communications Commission's regulatory charge to amateur radio operators urges them to enhance communication, "particularly with respect to providing emergency communications." Whether it's an earthquake or a forest fire, a blizzard or a hurricane, when usual communication systems go down, ham radio operators are up, ready to connect the scene of disaster with the outside world. As the series of recent emergencies and other natural disasters so amply illustrates, hams are often the sole means of communication from disaster sites. Within minutes of the first impact in the World Trade Center attack on September 11, 2001—which put the radio and phone towers atop the building out of commission—ham radio operators set up an emergency network that authorities used to coordinate rescue operations.

When the phone lines are down and "wireless" takes on a whole new meaning, when cell phone and PDA networks fail and batteries go dead, when the lights go out, authorities fall back on this seemingly antiquated but always reliable form of

communication. Amateur radio becomes quite literally a lifeline.

“Most communications systems are all going through some common choke-point,” says Allen Pitts, media and public relations manager of the American Radio Relay League. Whether it’s a telephone switchboard, an Internet relay or a radio tower, “knock out that choke-point, and the whole system fails,” he says.

Rather than relying on a network, each ham operator has a complete, self-contained transmitting and receiving station. “There is no choke-point,” says Pitts. “They are like ants at a picnic. You can knock out some, many or even most of them, and they still get to the food. Each one is a mobile, independent unit working in cooperation for a common goal.”

Understandably, many government agencies and hospitals have enlisted amateur radio operators to be on call for emergencies. When the two hospitals making up New Orleans’ Medical Center—University and Charity hospitals—decided to set up their station two years ago, they looked around for volunteers to run it. Richard Webb and his wife, Kathleen Anderson, who is also a ham, raised their hands. They set up the station and tested it every week or so.

The night before Katrina hit, Webb pushed Anderson—she uses a wheelchair—to their van and she drove them to the hospital from their small home in suburban Slidell, Louisiana. Pretty much every other vehicle they encountered during that 30-mile trip was heading out of, not into, downtown New Orleans. At the hospital, this unlikely A-Team—a blind man and a woman in a wheelchair—set up their antennas and gasoline-fired generators, got on the air, tracked the approaching storm and rode it out.

Like much of New Orleans, the hospital suffered relatively little damage from Katrina directly. Then the levees broke. Soon the hospital was isolated, an island surrounded by water 10 feet deep in places. (And, yes, when the power went out, a hospital staffer did offer Webb a flashlight. “Thanks,” he said, “but I don’t need it.”)

Webb and Anderson kept communications going 20 hours a day, relaying messages to and from the state command center in Baton Rouge. They passed along the hospital staff’s requests for food, drinkable water, medicine, bedding, cleaning supplies and more. Authorities repeatedly told Webb that rescuers were coming to evacuate the hospital—later that day, in a few hours, the next day—but day after day, nobody showed up. Coast Guard boats delivered supplies, and took out a handful of patients who needed critical care, including babies in incubators.

Webb and Anderson listened in on the emergency networks and heard how other hams, including many who drove in from all over the country, were a vital part of numerous rescues. In hundreds of cases, people trapped by floodwaters in homes or on rooftops tried calling 911 on their cell phones. The calls wouldn’t go through. So they called relatives in other parts of the country, sometimes a thousand miles away, and the relatives in turn dialed 911. Their local emergency dispatchers then would pass along messages to ham radio operators who contacted rescuers in New Orleans: There are three people trapped in an attic at this address . . . five on the roof of this building . . . 15 on an overpass at this intersection.

A word about all this relaying. While most of today’s sophisticated communications equipment uses horizon-to- horizon, line-of-sight radio frequencies, ham radio must rely on lower frequencies for long-distance transmission. “Low-frequency waves do an interesting thing,” says Pitts. “They ricochet. These waves bounce off the ionosphere, 60 miles over your head.” Depending on atmospheric conditions, some days you can communicate more clearly with another ham operator in Kenya than with your buddy across town. “By using different frequencies, directions and means, ham operators learn the art form of getting them to bounce where they want them to go,” Pitts says.

Webb took one call from a teenager who had a brand-new license with no kind of emergency training. He was in a school building with a number of other people, and nobody knew they were there. Two babies needed formula, and an elderly man needed a respirator. Webb relayed the call, and the group was rescued.

As the week wore on—the storm hit on a Monday night—more and more people began stopping by Webb’s radio room, the only link to the outside world. When he could, he sent out word from hospital staffers and patients to their families: I’m at the hospital, I’m OK, I hope to be evacuated soon, I’ll call you when I can. Hams who received the messages in other parts of the country telephoned or e-mailed the families.

A number of people tried to pay Webb for sending out their messages. “Sorry, can’t take it,” he’d growl. “Not allowed. I’m strictly a volunteer.”

Sometimes during lulls between radio transmissions he pulled out his guitar. Small crowds gathered, welcoming the diversion. Webb became a rare source of light and calm in the darkness and confusion of a disaster scene.

The night the woman in labor swam to the hospital, Tim Butcher shook Richard Webb awake and told him that she needed a helicopter. “We have a two-hour window to get her out of here,” Butcher said. Otherwise the mother would probably die, and the baby might, too. Webb ran to his radio, broke in on the network, and tried to relay a message to anyone.

On this evening, the first ham that Webb could reach was a fellow member of the Mobile Maritime Network in Texas. The Texas ham contacted a Network member in Cleveland—who was also an auxiliary Coast Guard officer. The Cleveland ham contacted his superior officers, and within a short time the patient was being airlifted to another hospital, where she had a C-section. At last report both mother and baby were doing well.

Webb saved one life that night, Butcher says, maybe two. And no one knows how many other people at the hospital might have died if Webb and his radio had not been there. Butcher’s sure of one thing: “Richard is a real hero.”

Timothy Harper is a journalist, author and editorial/publishing consultant based at www.timharper.com.

Hamming It Up The American Radio Relay League is the United States’ largest organization of amateur radio operators. Its Web site (www.arrl.org) is a good resource for those interested in this hobby and related volunteer opportunities.

Illustration by Thomas Kuhlenbeck Home Search Feedback Reader Reward Portrait The Source Shuttle Sheet Delta Air Lines Advertising

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It’s that time of year again:

Here’s a friendly reminder to make sure that your RAC membership number is on file with the Club Membership secretary. This information is needed for determining the annual insurance dues the Club has to pay. As you all know the percentage of RAC members has a bearing on the Club insurance premium.

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From The Chair in the Shack:

Spring is here so abandon those antenna ideas, everyone knows it won't be cold enough to get them right.

Actually, we all realize that the reverse is true. So here we are either deciding on what to put up or change and who will help with the project., One of the nice things about a club is the availability of friends who can and will help. Hams never give up on having opinions on antennas so get them over to criticize your new one as they help install it. Then, with any luck, you can show them it does work.

Now is also a good time to find others in the club who like contesting and to help with logging and maybe some operating during the many contests coming up. You may not think that you are a real contester until the bug bites in someone else's shack. While I'm not a contester, I tasted the thrills of hauling in the contacts in Field Day and for a while at Camp X. Nothing beats real contesting though. Give it a try.

With HF privileges never so close for all, we'll be expecting to see lots of you working HF either in your own shacks or cars or from friends' shacks. I can think of very little that beats a longish rag-chew with a new friend on 17m (where contesting is forbidden, by the way). If evening is your time, try looking for a very small 160m antenna. They don't radiate huge signals but you will be surprised who might hear you and chat. Do hurry before summer, though, because summer storms make 160 pretty noisy some nights.

Between you and your good friends in the club there is lots to do out there so get cracking.

73 de Pete

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It seems that I’m the only one who is mourning the passing of winter. I really miss the cold days and nights, the crisp air and the crunch of snow under foot. I would like to see 4 or 5 foot high snow banks along the roadside. At least in a pinch it’s softer than sidewalks, trees or hydro poles should you need somewhere to point your car. AND there’s something to be said for that first lung full of outside air in the morning. It’s also a really go reason to stay inside and log a couple more QSOs. Our fellow HAMs in southern Europe are amazed that we exist the in temperatures and weather that has become synonymous with Canada. The fact that we had thunder and lightening last month is a cause for concern. A more experienced Ham was telling me how you could leave your antennas connected in the winter. I guess I should be thankful my shack is still in it’s boxes while I finish up to workshop.

Your humble scribe
Ken
VE3RMK

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Durham Radio Donates $500.00 to The Red Cross

Durham Radio VP Alma Carcasole presents George Daniels with the donation cheque.

As part of our ongoing efforts to support both charities and our community, Durham Radio recently donated $500.00 to The Red Cross. Our local Red Cross Fund Coordinator told us that people donated like never before to help the Tsunami and Hurricane Katrina victims. Unfortunately this means that some local branches of the Red Cross may suffer a shortfall of funds needed for local programs. We urge everyone to donate to your local Red Cross. See www.redcross.ca for details.

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