

My partner on the Emergency Communications Response Vehicle (ECRV), Richard McMahon, KB9TOR, and I were deployed to the Red Cross forward headquarters in Montgomery, Alabama, while Hurricane Katrina made its devastating landfall along the Gulf coast. Then we received our instructions. We were to take a case of self-heating meals and a case of water from the supply area and head to Gulfport, Mississippi. A few hours later, as we got close to our destination, we checked our ARRL repeater directory to determine which amateur radio frequencies were usually used in that community. Here are two guys from Chicago driving in an unfamiliar area with no electricity, no telephone service, no cellular service, and not even being able to rely on local landmarks for guidance because Katrina had leveled them just a few hours earlier. Bob Jackson, KC5OAE, answered our call on the radio and provided turn-by-turn guidance to the building from which the Red Cross was operating. Bob was able to do this because, as a licensed amateur radio operator, also known as a "ham radio operator", using only his own radio equipment, an antenna on his truck and the truck's battery, he was able to talk with other operators across the southern part of Mississippi.

To explain, our ECRV is one of nine identical Ford Excursions which is equipped with a satellite dish, 52' mast, satellite television, more than a dozen different types of radios, notebook computers, a communications interoperability system, antennas capable of world-wide communications, and an 8000 watt generator powered by the truck's diesel engine.

The site to which we were assigned was to be a bulk-distribution site where large truckloads of food and supplies were being unloaded and reloaded into smaller Red Cross Emergency Response Vehicles (ERV's), which then delivered the food and supplies to people in the heart of the affected area. Like any organization, this site needed telephone and email capability to order supplies and manage the operation. As our ECRV approached the building under Bob's guidance via ham radio, the Red Cross personnel waved us in and already had a parking place cleared next to the building so we could run our cables directly into the facility. There were still puddles in the parking lot and boards on the windows. As my ECRV partner began to establish satellite communications with Red Cross national headquarters and raised the satellite television dish, I ran data and coax cables into the facility through a side door. I also setup wireless networking equipment, unpacked a few notebook computers, distributed voice-over-IP telephones, and located a television. We ran extension cords from the ECRV to power our networking equipment, and within about an hour of arriving, a few dozen Red Cross personnel were able to make phone calls, begin sending and receiving e-mail for supplies and logistics, and were able to see for the first time on network television the hurricane which had passed through their community. By the way, while we were setting up the high-tech equipment, Bob kept providing essential communications from his radio and his pickup truck. But that was only the beginning.

With essential communications in place for the Red Cross operation, it was time to plan for communications with the rest of the affected area. And that meant using amateur radio. For the rest of week that I was in Gulfport, Richard and I used a combination of handheld and mobile ham radios to stay in contact with the Emergency Operations Centers (EOC) in Hancock, Harrison, and Jackson counties. Amateur radio operators took turns working virtually around-the-clock for weeks passing emergency and logistical radio traffic between EOC's, local agencies, and our operation. Because ham radio was being used so extensively for communications, it would sometimes take fifteen minutes or more for a break in traffic so we could transmit a message requesting supplies or assistance. When the airwaves would go silent, it was usually followed a few minutes later by an explanation that there had been a problem with a generator or other piece of equipment, and that a ham had found a few spare parts from his or her toolbox, fixed the problem, and restored radio service.

Messages of all types were passed. The space from which the Red Cross was operating was generously made available to us by the regional EMS provider. After a day or two I realized that a ham radio operator was receiving EMS calls for help via ham radio and passing the messages across the aisle to a dispatcher. With the Red Cross operation stable, having worked in the fire service for a few years, and being a licensed ham, I asked him if he'd like some relief. He introduced me to the dispatchers and then walked away to get some much needed and deserved rest. This rotation continued for the rest of the week. Richard, the fellow in the dispatch area, and I helped cover each other's radio traffic when one of us stepped away for a break. In fact, there was so much ham radio traffic that my crewmate and I took turns listening to the radio so we wouldn't miss important messages. Once, an EOC, knowing that we could make telephone calls via our satellite connection, called via radio and asked us to locate an important person from a local commercial facility that was vital to the region. At other times we passed radio traffic regarding missing persons, requests for ambulances and police assistance, and called for more supplies.

Additional ham radio operators began to arrive a few days into the operation. These folks arrived prepared to be self-sufficient with food, water, tents, generators, fuel, and lots of radios. They were ready to provide emergency communications where needed. One evening when it was no longer possible to bring diesel fuel to our ECRV, we had to shutdown and go get it from a local facility that was open to emergency vehicles only. Of course, once we shutdown the ECRV, the Red Cross operation had no communications. Our new ham radio friends who had just arrived stayed and maintained radio contact with the ECRV while it left for a couple of hours. As days and weeks passed, operators were in service at shelters, field kitchens, other bulk distribution sites, and wherever needed.

I deployed again about three weeks later for Hurricane Rita, this time with an ECRV in Jasper, Texas, supporting communications, computers, and other types of response technology for a field kitchen operated by a partnership between the American Red Cross and the Southern Baptist Convention. Once again, ham radio operators were there to support the operation. They worked around-the-clock using their own equipment, tents, and campers.

I earned my amateur radio license less than two months before being deployed for Hurricane Katrina. I am humbled by the selfless service demonstrated by the amateur radio operators I met in Gulfport, southern Mississippi, and Alabama. Although I know most of these people only by their call-signs, I feel as if they are my friends.

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