

# LINE OF SIGHT

A Message from the Editor

## Emergency Communications: Amateur Radio's Evolving Involvement

During these past few months we have witnessed the use of our hobby as backbone communications in the aftermath of disastrous hurricanes. Amateur radio operators from all over the country have been pressed into duty in a variety of communications services.

Two such examples are described starting on page 6, where Mark Conklin, N7XYO, reports on Oklahoma amateur radio operators' involvement, both in rescue operations and in being the backbone communications for the Camp Gruber evacuation site. For the latter, amateur radio operations became critical at the Camp Gruber site, as the following quote illustrates:

Shortly before 10 AM Sunday, Steve Palladino, an Emergency Management Officer for the Oklahoma Department of Emergency Management, arrived in the incident command. Oklahoma has spent millions of dollars on equipment that would allow interoperability of communications. When I asked Palladino if the interoperability communications trailer (known as ECHO 1) was coming, Steve told me that it was "out of pocket," which is what happened to many of the "first in" resources from some agencies in our area. "Out of pocket" means that they were deployed to the major disaster in the Gulf region. Palladino and I spent a few minutes covering where we had or would have operators. He said, "You guys are great. Thanks for jumping in to help." I asked him how long he would expect to need amateur radio. Palladino replied, "for the duration."

As Mark illustrates, a specific number of hams strategically placed within the evacuation center replaced a multimillion-dollar communications van. Plus, no doubt they provided more flexibility in handling the interoperability needs at the site.

### The Baseline

In many respects, amateur radio emergency communications can look to the Oklahoma City Murrah building bombing as a baseline for measuring the assistance we can and have rendered over the years. Before the bombing, many times our involvement with various government and non-government organizations (NGOs) was by happenstance. Lack of experience in working with hams led to reluctance to use us, and in some cases outright

mistrust of us and our intentions. These reactions were not unfounded, as sometimes we hams invited ourselves into the disaster communications situation without prior approval from or awareness of those government and NGO operators on the scene. Even with prior approval, sometimes those on the scene were reluctant to cooperate with us or use us.

Considering the latter, but for some serendipity such might have been the case in my emergency operations from the Oklahoma City Police Department mobile EOC van in the aftermath of the Murrah building bombing. When I arrived downtown, I was instructed by the emergency net control operator to report to the van and join the amateur radio operator already on board. While walking over to the van, I wondered how I was to explain to the police officers my being assigned to their van. My concerns were eliminated when Stan Van Nort, N5JFQ, greeted me at the door and invited me inside. Stan was one of the police officers operating the police radios, and his approval of my entrance set the other police officers at ease with my presence. After finding the location of the ham station, I immediately went to work with the other amateur radio operator, supplying information to the police as to the locations of the various NGOs inside the disaster perimeter.

### The Aftermath

In the aftermath of the Murrah building bombing, we amateur radio operators who worked that disaster held a debriefing meeting a few weeks later at the Green Country Hamfest. One of the issues we discussed was what it was like to be so intricately involved with several government and NGO agencies at the same time. The problems of interoperability and even the various organizations' lack of knowledge of who was doing what inside the perimeter were among the topics we covered. Another issue discussed was the uselessness of cell phones in the immediate aftermath of the bombing. For us, it was very productive, and several of us later found out that many of the lessons we learned were implemented by the amateurs who responded to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

In the ensuing weeks and months following the disaster one item we noticed was that while the Salvation Army championed our involvement (both during and in the aftermath

debriefings), there was still much skepticism by other NGOs, as well as the various government agencies involved in the disaster and its aftermath. Sadly, it was during the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks when more and more government agencies and NGOs recognized—and even come to rely upon—our communications skills. Even so, widespread recognition was slow in coming.

Thanks to the huge education and lobbying efforts by the ARRL, we received the well-earned recognition and backing from the Department of Homeland Security. Now, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita have become our proving grounds. As Mark illustrates in his article, for the most part hams were and are responding very well. Even so, there continue to be a few instances of Lone-Ranger-type responses by hams who are not trained or prepared for emergencies. Such responses continue to hamper our increasingly positive image, which we should never stop presenting to the rest of the world.

We will have lots to learn from the many debriefings that will occur in the aftermath of these disasters. One item already being discussed is the problem of lack of interoperable communications between various responders to the disasters. What Mark tells us by way of his article is that interoperability of communications continues to be a major problem for emergency responders—and no doubt will continue to be problematic for quite some time to come.

The question for us hams is: Will we continue to be equipped to fill the void? I believe we can be. Furthermore, articles such as Mark's in *CQ VHF* can and will play a role in our emergency communications education. Therefore, I will be looking for these types of stories, as well as how-to articles related to emergency communications, for future issues of this magazine. I am especially interested in articles that describe the various creative ways in which the VHF-plus frequencies have been and can be utilized for emergency communications. Therefore, if you have a unique story to tell that will be of benefit to your fellow emergency-response amateur radio operators, please contact me with your story idea and we will give consideration to publishing it.

Until the next issue...

73 de Joe, N6CL