

Amateur Radio Standing in the Breach!

**By
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Following the death and destruction of the most costly natural disaster that America has endured, there were many breaches left in systems that the people of the gulf region depend on for comfort and survival each day. One of the most necessary is reliable communications. This is supported by hard-wired phone service, cell phones, public service radio, the Internet and others. Following the landfall of Hurricane Katrina, huge areas of Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana had large breaches in their communications. Phone and power lines were down, cell systems were often overwhelmed by the sheer number of those seeking to place calls. Even where phone service was in tact, it was difficult to get a call in or out.



Hattiesburg Red Cross Office

The ARRL and the ham community were asked to assist in closing this breach with reliable communications for served agencies. The hams in the effected area stepped into this role almost immediately after the storm passed their locations. Local hams throughout the region began to man EOCs, Red Cross Chapters, shelters and other vital locations. These hams were climbing towers to install new antennas; moving whole repeater systems to allow better coverage to isolated areas and lending support to the hams from the outside world that were rushing to their area to assist.

At this point I had received an e-mail call-up, on September 3rd, from David Patton, NN1N of the ARRL to proceed to Montgomery. I contacted the Virginia Section Assistant SEC, Ron Sokol, K4KHZ and he assisted in arranging car-pooling to the disaster. Henry Wyatt, K4YCR and Dan Brown, N8YSZ and I left Virginia on Monday, September 5th.

and drove first to Montgomery AL and received our assignment from Greg Sarrrat, WOZK, the Alabama Section Manager. That same evening we proceeded on to Hattiesburg MS to begin our 10 day term of service.



Gulfport MS

Upon our arrival we discovered that the Red Cross was still operating by generator power but the large shelter known as the Forrest Multi-Purpose building had commercial power. This shelter at times was housing nearly 1000 people that had lost their homes in the storm. Henry, K4YCR set up a VHF and had UHF communications from this shelter. I set up at the Red Cross Chapter located on Hutchinson Street in Hattiesburg, MS. We had HF, VHF and UHF communications from this location. Dan Brown, N8YSZ assisted at the chapter office for a couple of days prior to his departure. Henry Wyatt, K4YCR and I began to seek for ways to better support the relief effort in the Pine Belt of MS. We began to request additional hams from Montgomery to ride as “shadows” on the eight feeding vehicles (ERVs) that were being dispatched by the Red Cross from the Southern Baptist feeding kitchens. We also set up communications in other critical areas such as kitchens and other Red Cross locations. These newly arriving hams helped not only with communications but assisted in loading and serving the “Clamshell Meals” and MREs (Meals Ready to Eat) from the Red Cross ERVs (Emergency Response Vehicles). From there we were requested to provide communications to the various Red Cross Client Assistance (Family Services) throughout a nine county region. Our ERVs and Client Assistance Centers were spread over a 50-mile radius but VHF provided excellent coverage over this area due to the foresight of local hams that had placed an extensive linking system together prior to the disaster. This repeater system was anchored by 3 broad-coverage two-meter repeaters that were linked and located where antennas could be installed on towers at 300 and 400 feet above ground. Following Katrina leaving the area the local repeater group moved a repeater about 40 miles south of Hattiesburg and placed it on a 900 foot tower. This provided VHF coverage all the way to the Gulf of Mexico.

We averaged passing between 100 and 200 tactical messages per day with some of these being 3rd party traffic between both medical and Red Cross personnel. Day after day Red Cross and other key people were passing our operating position and thanking us and telling us “they would have real trouble doing without us.”

One of our operators Grier Garrich III, KC5FJZ, while traveling to the disaster was just north of New Orleans when he stopped to investigate what a group of people was looking at on the side of the road. They said they heard someone groaning. They discovered a woman under a bridge that appeared to have been car-jacked, beaten and thrown from the bridge. The rescuers were trying to call on a cell phone for help but had no reception. Grier got on a two-meter rig and passed a message to the sheriff’s department and they dispatched a helicopter and airlifted the victim from the scene. When all other communications fails, amateur radio is there to save the day. Grier assisted in saving this woman’s life prior to arriving to assist us in the Hattiesburg area.

There was a real feeling of contributing to the recovery of these communities but I think that all the hams I served with agree that we received far more than what we gave.

Let me say “Thank You” to the ARRL for providing the outstanding training that we received in the EC-001, 002 and 003 courses. I have experience in working disasters for thirty years but the course was invaluable in preparing for this event.

Thanks also to the team of hams that served by our side in supporting the recovery in the aftermath of Katrina. I want to especially thank those that continue to serve in the Hattiesburg area of MS after our departure. Hams serving the Hattiesburg area that answered the call from the ARRL are; Matthew Welch, KB1LCS, G. Dave Foster Jr. W3IGT, Jimmie Shelton, KT4FQ, Richard Green, KR7L, Darryl Ponder, K0GV, Stephen Bonine, KB9X, J.D. Creed Jr., WB4AWM, Bryon (Paul) Veal N0AH, Adam Poor, KC8HCE, Grier L. Garrich III KC5FJZ, Affred L. Lindsey, W5ALL, Jack Dellinger, N3BQB, Allan Paul, KC2GZY, John D. Small W9FHA, Mat Marcus, KV2N, Wayne Burgess, W9YYZ Fred Lassiter, N4OJT, Henry Wyatt, K4YCR, Paul Pescitelli, K4UJ, Matthew Pepper, KB1EXM, Terry Taylor, N7BDL, Ann Taylor, N7EDC, Dan Brown, N8YSZ, Ken Harris, VE3MNY, Glen Sage, W4GHS, Doc Morris, W5TMM. Many hams that live in or around Hattiesburg served prior to our arrival and continued to serve after our departure. Only the hams dispatched from outside the area are listed here.