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Amateur radio operators help residents communicate

By Rick Cousins

Contributor

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GALVESTON — One elderly lady endured Hurricane Ike's wrath. She was sitting in her modest home located near the San Luis hotel — alone in the dark. Her husband was hundreds of miles away in Utah, worried and unable to reach her as landline and cell phone links went offline one by one. Ike ruthlessly destroyed telephone lines and damaged numerous cell towers, and left many others without operating power. The result: a nearly complete communications blackout rarely experienced by 21st century America.

Who could she call? It turned about that her neighbors, Kevin and Sharon Briscoe, solved her problem in just three minutes. Thanks to their "secret identities" as amateur radio operators with the call signs KE5CDE and KE5CFF, respectively.

Despite Hurricane Ike javelining with a tree through their porch roof, 7 inches of water in their garage, and a complete lack of power, gas or phones, the Briscoes were ready and eager to help.

"It's very important to be able to do what we can do, especially after an emergency," Sharon Briscoe explained over the roar of a generator and the crackle of long-distance radio chatter in the background. "The first thing we did was to communicate with our own daughter, who is stationed in Alabama in the military, and let her know we were OK. Then we helped our elderly neighbor. Kevin was sitting in his truck talking on the radio to an operator in California when she asked what we could do. In three minutes, she heard her husband's voice over the airwaves and began 'bawling' with relief."

The hams used a simple, proven technology known as a phone patch to link the distant husband to his shaken wife with a combination of radio and phone links. During the disaster and afterward, from shelters and Points of Distribution, messages were also sent by radio-e-mail and other digital methods as well as by voice.

The Briscoes didn't stop with their neighborhood, but extended their support to the entire affected island.

"We also helped out with the logistics for the POD at the airport. They did not have communication between the airport, Academy and the Moody Center when the state help arrived, so they solicited the assistance of local amateur radio operators," Briscoe explained. "It's been an on-going effort to make sure that each site has what it needs."

Joe Wileman, aka AA5OP, was one of many hams who stayed to provide communications coverage during Ike.

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“When the storm hit, phone service was lost and many entities were plunged into total communications blackout. Galveston lost cell and landline phone service and the Bolivar peninsula was cut off from any communication,” Wileman said. “Amateur radio operators began to pick up the slack relaying messages for a multitude of services including the Corps of Engineers, Highway Patrol and Texas National Guard.”

Equipment and life-saving materials were requested and vital information relayed by ham operators, Wileman added. Though in some cases the last link was a “sneaker net” since the messages had to be printed out and then hand-delivered to authorities during and just after landfall.

The application of ham radio to emergency communications is not a new development. Amateur radio organizations have formal agreements with Homeland Security, the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, as well as support to all the U.S. Armed Services. Locally, the Galveston County Emergency Communication Group provides a roster of 60 volunteer operators under a charter from county government. GCECG hams rode out the storm in the county’s Emergency Operations Center providing support to more than a dozen state, local and federal agencies.

The time invested comes at no cost to those helped. Federal law forbids any compensation for amateur efforts.

As for Briscoe, he is not ready to claim the title of hero.

“We had the help of everyone from Canada to the Caribbean on our network,” he said.

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On the Web


Sites where licensed amateurs can volunteer:

- www.arrl.org
- www.gcecg.org
- <http://tidelands.org>


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