

Ham radio operators are all ears when emergency calls

Glenn Hassenpflug, Special to the Record Searchlight

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In a post-Hurricane Katrina, post-9/11 world, the nation's security may depend on a network of old men who listen.

Men like Ray Tooker, 75, who built crystal-set radios as a kid, then took that savvy into the Korean War and later used it to service communications at Nike missile sites in the San Francisco Bay area. He did it all with radio.

In his 37-year career with a telephone company, Tooker was never part of a telephone crew. Today, retired to a Cottonwood farm, he continues to prefer radio -- two-way amateur "ham" radio -- to the telephone.

"I have friends in Southern California, Nevada, Colorado. I even talk to this local bunch around here," he said, referring to the several hundred other radio buffs in the area. "I leave the receiver on."

Why not the telephone? "The telephone doesn't talk to you all day," he said.

While other north state residents scurry between map points with cell phones to their ears, Tooker talks hands-free with a two-way radio in his car and another radio with both high-frequency (HF) and very high-frequency (VHF) reach in his truck.

"I listen."

Listening in with Tooker are 35 other ham radio operators who together make up the Shasta-Tehama Amateur Radio Emergency Service (STARES). They are the north state's own minutemen for a postmodern world in which high-tech might not always be enough protection.

Al Peña, 47, of Redding, president of the organization, helped revive the local emergency radio infrastructure after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks demonstrated the value of local amateur radio. It was demonstrated again just before Hurricane Katrina.

"Even now, with the modern communications, when the chips are down - when you pull the cell phone out of your pocket and the thing is dead and the radio tower for the city goes down - sometimes we're the only thing left," Tooker said.

Stanford Smith, 77, of Redding, another organizer, says the genius of radio is its simplicity.

"Cell phones are out, overloaded immediately. Landlines are out. One of the great things about amateur radio to the Red Cross is, immediately, you can go to wherever

shelters are set up," he said. There, most radio equipment can run off a 12-volt battery recharged with solar panels or generators.

Simple, too, is ham radio operators' lingo.

"We don't use 10 code," Peña said. "We don't use '10-4' or 'Roger.' We'll say, 'See you later.' We're not supposed to be using 10 codes, the family-friendly service that amateur radio is."

"The fun service with a serious side," Smith added.

A "welfare check" means a check on a family member's welfare - and ham operators are helpful as family go-betweens in an emergency, even when standard emergency channels remain open.

The guts of the equipment look like two car radios set on a desktop, near a console holding a computer monitor and a keyboard, in an otherwise empty back room in a chilly warehouse in the BloodSource North State building on Park Marina Drive in Redding. That - plus a few small portable units - is it.

But wait, one of the radios, a so-called packet radio, permits keyboard-to-keyboard communication on the computer. Isn't that called "e-mail"?

"Packet radio was e-mail for years before people even had a thought of doing that," Smith points out.

To participate in STARES, you don't have to be a techie, although many of the members have an electronics or military background. Morse code is no longer a requirement. A license, obtainable on completion of a free class (offered periodically by STARES), gets interested individuals started. A class this winter won licenses for 16 area residents; four are expected to become emergency operators. Still, Smith says, the group has only enough members now to staff a single shift in an emergency.

"I don't think we'll be confident till we have three times as many."

To participate fully, members are encouraged to buy their own equipment, because as volunteers, operators traditionally have used private equipment in public emergencies. A VHF unit costs between \$500 and \$700; a HF unit starts at \$1,200 and can run as high as \$10,000. A \$20,000 communications trailer, on order with financial help from Shasta and Tehama counties, is expected to ease members' financial strain and add to the group's serviceability.

STARES - accredited by the American Radio Relay League - partners with public and private health, emergency, fire and humanitarian agencies. In addition to the radio room at BloodSource, the group has a station at the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection and sends portable units to fires.

Members responded to the Manton fire in 2005 and spent two weeks at the French and Bear fires in 2004, Peña said. STARES has also been called to Plumas and Butte counties.

All its work is not grim. Members keep people in touch during fun events such as bike and horse rides and relay races. And they can reach out, if nothing more, to each other. They are always listening.

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