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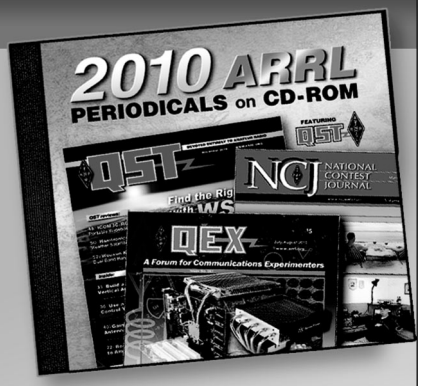

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"It Seems to Us"

A Change of Perspective

"Every once in a while an event happens that forces our perspective on things to change. When it comes to Amateur Radio and emergency communication issues the first two events that come to mind are 9/11 and hurricane Katrina. But other events large and small can have quite an impact on us."

I have been involved with Amateur Radio emergency communications for over two decades and have worn many different hats to many different events; disasters natural and manmade, in the field and in emergency operations centers. Each experience has had its own valuable lessons.

In April I was invited to speak at a homeland security conference at the University of Mississippi; the topic "Amateur Radio and Homeland Security." During the week on the Ole Miss campus, the southeast was hit by a massive tornado outbreak. Twice, while on campus, sirens sounded and cover had to be taken due to tornadoes in the immediate area. The area worst hit by these storms was Alabama. The National Weather Service estimates the storm produced 305 tornadoes and 326 fatalities (236 in Alabama alone). One of the hardest hit cities was Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

On the Saturday following the Tuscaloosa tornado contact was made with the Alabama Section Manager and Alabama Section Emergency Coordinator. They reported how Amateur Radio was helping with the response and that they still needed assistance with additional operators and equipment. Being only a couple hours away by car I decided to pay a short visit to the amateurs assisting and see what else might be needed.

The damage and devastation in Tuscaloosa was beyond description. Neighborhoods and shopping areas looked as though a bomb had gone off. Responders on scene came from every possible level: federal, state, local and NGOs. People were searching, not only for material items that may have survived but for family and friends. Many were still missing even days after the storm.

Among those helping with the recovery effort were local Amateur Radio operators, the Tuscaloosa Amateur Radio Club in particular. They were helping with communications as well as search and rescue. Many were directly impacted by the storm. They came together to help one another and their community; for that they deserve great thanks. Similar scenes were occurring throughout Alabama and the Southeast as Amateur Radio clubs, ARES groups, and individuals assisted their neighbors and communities. MFJ also provided assistance with 440 MHz Yagis that were needed to set up radio links between sites in Tuscaloosa.

This leads me to another observation from my time there. Since hurricane Katrina more effort has been made to harden communications systems, both commercial and Amateur Radio. We have put great effort into repeater systems and networks that depend on Internet connectivity; in other words systems dependent on infrastructure. What happens when the infrastructure is down? The value of Amateur Radio is clearly seen in such times. Without the need of Internet, cellular or landlines we can still provide communications via UHF, VHF and HF. This was the case in Tuscaloosa. Sites were linked together locally via UHF simplex. HF nets were active passing health and welfare traffic and connecting impacted areas around the state.

At times we can forget that we too may be the victims of disaster. Natural, and even manmade, disasters know no boundaries or jurisdictions and show no bias on who they impact. Likewise, for Amateur Radio operators, disasters do not care if you have DXCC, built a transceiver from a kit, finished first in the world in CQWW, or prefer QRP over QRO. Disasters can impact anyone.

Observing the devastation in Tuscaloosa I recalled a valuable lesson learned during hurricane Gustav. While assisting an emergency operations center in Louisiana it became apparent that such a disaster could affect my home just as easily as it did those I was assisting. No matter where we live we are not immune from disaster.

During events such as this amateurs may reach out to other amateurs for assistance. When we receive that call it is a time to act and help our fellow amateur. It is not the time to let politics come into play, look for glory and recognition, show off our latest toys or take charge. It is not a time to let the walls that we create get in the way. You know these walls: "I'm just into" DXing, or contesting, or ragchewing, or…well fill in the blank. It is a time to humbly ask "How may I help? What do you need?"

We must remember that no matter what our interest is in Amateur Radio, we may one day find ourselves being impacted by disaster and making that call for help.

Mike Corey, W5MPC
ARRL Emergency Preparedness Manager