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OFF THE GRID

Amateur radio provides defense

BY MAUREEN NEVIN DUFFY • CORRESPONDENT • MAY 4, 2008

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Jeff Harshman (N2LXM), an amateur radio operator and member of the Ocean Monmouth Amateur Radio Club (OMARC), still recalls the photo a colleague brought back from Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina.

A man seated on a plastic milk crate faced a desk composed of two other plastic crates that held a high frequency (HF) radio. Off to one side, a long wire ran up a palm tree — the antenna. Another wire ran to a car with its hood up. It was connected to the car's battery — the power line. In a circle around the man stood anxious-looking men — the little town's mayor, council members, fire chief and chief of police.

In the absence of conventional communications, this man on the milk crate was the community's last link to civilization.

Since amateur radios can operate "off the grid" (on DC current), FEMA recognizes them as its civil equivalent in times of disaster, says Harshman. Few people know that hospitals, police stations and other emergency units in towns across the country have small facilities set aside for amateur radio operators, where they are a welcome aid for transferring data in times of emergency.

April 26 was Marconi Day at OMARC's tiny headquarters at the InfoAge Project Diana Site at Camp Evans in Wall. Visitors got to try "sending" messages in Morse code and hear International Marconi Day-authorized sites all over the world making contact. To be authorized, sites have to have a direct connection to Marconi, as in Marconi slept once on the ship, says Larry Shields, another OMARC member. Denis O'Brien, an OMARC member who originally learned Morse code at sea, was at the controls when we arrived at 6:30 a.m. IMD stations were signing into the OMARC IMD, which is N2MO, in dots and dars (dashes to us) from France, Turkey — all over.

O'Brien also belongs to FIST, an organization dedicated to preserving the Morse code. FIST, which isn't an acronym, refers to the subtle variations senders reveal through things like emphasis or tempo — similar to an accent. "Nice fist" might mean you don't slur your words.

"Just remember," says Harshman, "when the power goes off, the phone goes off and the Internet goes down, I can still work the world by amateur radio."

Even the space shuttle carries the equipment into space as backup. Harshman adds that when your ISP goes down, so does your WiFi connection. So don't count on that.

OMARC meets at 9 a.m. on the second Saturday of the month at the Project Diana Site. Although the camp's historic buildings are under the custody of The InfoAge Learning Museum, also located at Camp Evans, as InfoAge members OMARC has taken over the maintenance of the Diana site plus one building (No. 9163). They have restored seven of the eight buildings entrusted to them, using their skills as painters and carpenters, and always eagerly welcome new volunteers.

OMARC's next major event, jokingly called "Field Day," takes place at the end of June. It consists of a 24-hour Simulated Emergency Exercise. In August, the group will operate from the Sandy Hook Lighthouse for International Lighthouse/Lightship Weekend. Visit www.omarc.org

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