zero bias – a CQ editorial

BY RICH MOSESON,* W2VU

Off With Their Heads!

As I'm writing this in mid-September, the blame game is in full swing over who's responsible for what went wrong in relief efforts in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. FEMA Director Michael Brown has just resigned, after being relieved of command over his agency's operations in the Gulf coast region; President Bush has just said he'd take full responsibility for everything, and *Time* magazine has more than a dozen pages devoted to what its cover calls "System Failure."

From where I sit, 1500 miles away, it seems that there's more than enough blame to go around, shared equally by local, state and federal agencies and officials. But finger-pointing rarely brings about improvements and I think the media's and the government's time would be better spent focusing on how to make things work better next time (we all know there will be a next time, we just don't know when or where) than on trying to figure out who should be fired and who can be sued.

Finding a Silver Lining

Fortunately, for all the people pointing fingers and blaming someone else, there are just as many people pointing out things that went right, and good things that have come out of this very bad situation. It's been most pronounced among people directly affected by the storm. Dr. Roberto Dabdoub, KB5AVY, in his riveting first-person report ("But You ARE Helping Us, Roberto", p. 18), writes about his daughter using a small boat to rescue people, and a ham who told him, "… my house is under water, everything lost, so I decided to stay at the Jefferson Amateur Radio Club to try to help some." Roberto himself lost his home but focuses on the fact that his repeater system stayed on the air and was used to help people.

Don Wilbanks, AE5DW, a New Orleans radio announcer and volunteer anchor for "Amateur Radio Newsline," with whom I had dinner in Huntsville just a month ago, put a personal postscript on the September 9th "Newsline" program, noting that he was in a hotel in Little Rock and didn't know if he still had a house to go home to. But he refused to get caught up in feeling sorry for himself.

"Instead of dwelling on how bad it us for us and what we've lost, I would like to talk a bit about what we have gained," Wilbanks wrote. "We've met and have been helped by so many wonderful people here in central Arkansas ... The churches have gone all out to support us here and in cities all over this great country. Last night we ate dinner at the Cornerstone Bible Fellowship Church in North Little Rock. You should have seen the organization they had there. There were relief information packets available, the food was incredible, there were clothes and other supplies donated for any who needed it, lots of toys for the kids, and the people were so friendly ... If only the government relief organizations were run like this. This church will continue to do this every Tuesday night until there aren't any more people to help."

Communities all over the country are taking in and taking care of many of the estimated one million people displaced by this storm, but church dinners don't make headlines the way looting and shooting do. It's the same with ham radio. Communication systems that fail make bigger news than ones that work. For example, I didn't know until this week that the first report of a breached levee in New Orleans came via amateur radio. Hams from all over have been pitching in, as have many ham manufacturers, who have donated gear to help outfit teams of hams the ARRL has been assembling to send into the areas that still have no communication.

There have been a number of excellent stories about ham radio making their way into the mainstream media. Even *Time* magazine, in its assessment of what went wrong, mentioned that, "…in Texas, ham operators have a place at the table in the emergency bunker in Austin along with the high-tech communications experts." Forgetting the question of whether or not we're high-tech, the clear message is that we get messages through when the "high tech" systems fail.

Much of the credit for this coverage, by the way, needs to go to the Herculean efforts of ARRL Media and Public Relations Manager Allen Pitts, W1AGP, who not only handled a never-ending stream of phone calls and interviews, but even went to Alabama for three days to see first-hand and document what the hams there were doing. In addition, hundreds of public relations volunteers got word out in their communities of local activities and tie-ins to the relief effort. Congratulations to you all for helping to tell our story.

Learning Our Lessons

One bit of interesting timing, for me, was that I was in the process of finishing up the ARRL's Level 1 Emergency Communications course when Katrina struck. Overall, it's a very good course and I recommend it to anyone involved in emergency communications or considering getting involved. One of its few weak points, however, is that it appears to be about 10 years behind the times in certain respects, with a big focus on packet radio and on formatting and transmitting ARRL radiograms via the National Traffic System. But in all the reports I've heard about ham radio activity in Katrina, I've seen very little mention of NTS and absolutely no mention of packet. On the other hand, the ARRL, with the help of AB2M, set up a centralized volunteer registration database on its website, similar to the one AB2M set up on his own website after 9/11. The course made virtually no mention of using the internet as a tool for organizing disaster response, or the growing use of internet-linked repeater networks (such as Echolink and IRLP) in emergency communications. Perhaps these topics are covered in the higher level courses, which focus more on *managing* emergency communications networks and organizations.

One chapter that's completely new to many hams today is how to deal with an influx of evacuees/refugees *into* otherwise unaffected areas. Hams in the U.S. haven't had to deal with this situation since the end of the Vietnam War some 30 years ago, and it's no longer part of standard emergency communications training. I hope that the ARRL's course will be regularly updated to reflect changes in the demands placed on us and in the way hams respond to emergencies and disasters.

My discussion of the ARRL EmComm course would be incomplete if I didn't mention a crucial aspect of its structure - the use of online "mentors," real people experienced in the subject area, who guide the students through the course, review the activities, and offer advice and encouragement. My mentor was David Ellenberg, WA2KWP, who did a great job of keeping me on track and keeping me plugging on, even when I was tempted (more than once) to say "I just don't have time for this." Thank you, David.

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