

Amateur radio provides communication

By Jamie Gentry

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When disaster strikes, many forms of communication become useless.

In a hurricane, cell-phone towers can be toppled. Power can be knocked out, and phone lines can be broken. Nearly every form of communicating across distance can be lost, and that was exactly what happened to Puerto Rico when Hurricane Maria struck in September 2017.

But messages from the island kept coming. During and immediately following the storm, the only way to make contact was through amateur radio, said Steve VanDenAkker.

He is a member of the Emerald Coast Amateur Radio Association (ECARA) and the Santa Rosa County Amateur Radio Emergency Service (SRC ARES.) He has been tinkering with amateur radio for more than 30 years, and he said he remembered the communication difficulties in Northwest Florida that followed Hurricane Ivan, similar to those caused by Maria.

"A lot of what we provide is what they call 'ground truth information,' which is related to the National Weather Service or, in the event of a hurricane, to the National Hurricane Center down in Miami," he said. "That way they have contact with people who are actually there on the ground. They know exactly what is going on because satellites and radar can only tell you so much."

In the event of a weather-related disaster, SRC ARES would work alongside first responders and the Emergency Operations Center to maintain contact with other counties, the statewide emergency hub and with teams working in the field.

Being prepared for that level of disaster was part



Amateur radio operator Jim Dunbar uses a Morse code system to make contact with other radio operators. He is known to be able to send as many as 3,500 words a minute in Morse code.

of the reason the ECARA teamed up with SRC ARES and the county's Emergency Management department to host Amateur Radio Field Day on Navarre Beach.

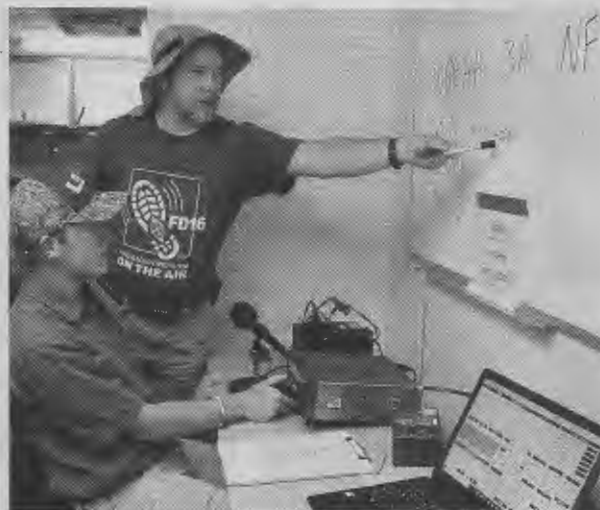
Local HAM radio operators showed off their stuff Saturday during the annual Amateur Radio Field Day.

A handful of operators set up their antennas, using tents and the Santa Rosa County Emergency Management Mobile Command Center on Navarre Beach, and started contacting other operators across North America. The continent-wide event started at 1 p.m. and lasted 24 hours.

During the event the Navarre HAMS made contact with Quebec, western New York, Rhode Island and many other places.

VanDenAkker said he has previously made contact with someone in New Zealand.

Inside the mobile command center, it was largely quiet except for the staticky



Nate Holland gets a lesson in how to score "points" during Amateur Radio Field Day on the voice HAM radio using the Emerald Coast Amateur Radio Association call sign, "Whiskey Eight Echo Hotel Hotel."

chatter coming from the radio. Operators incrementally adjusted the dials back and forth, listening for a clear signal from elsewhere. Occasionally, one of the operators pushed one of dozens of buttons on the radio's face.

When a clear voice crackled through with a call sign,

another operator activated the mic to answer back with "Whiskey Eight Echo Hotel Hotel," identifying themselves.

They got silence.

They tried again.

"Whiskey Eight Echo Hotel Hotel."

Still the distant signaler

lifeline in disaster



Photos by Jamie Gentry
operators across the U.S. Dunbar

only repeated his call sign, not having heard the Navarre broadcaster. They tried again.

"Whiskey Eight Echo Hotel Hotel."

This time the signal got through. In a quick coded response, the broadcaster let the Navarre operators know he was working alone and operating out of Rhode Island. The ECARA team scored a "point" for making contact.

VanDenAkker said the Field Day was less about the competition and more about practicing. In an emergency, all the teams need to make contact is a battery, a radio and an antenna, giving them unique flexibility.

One of the event's participants was Navarre local Patrick Hogan. Hogan said he has seen firsthand the value of amateur radio while working with the Florida One Disaster Medical Assistance Program in Puerto Rico.

As Hogan was helping to

provide emergency medical care two weeks after Maria devastated the island, he ran into another amateur radio operator. Even after the radios were no longer needed for basic emergency communication, they were still assisting in recovery.

"What they were doing was relaying information from the field back to the States, not necessarily to big central caches. It was more to say 'hey, my name is Maria and Jose and this is our family and if you could just tell them we are okay,'" Hogan said. "If the little family has no way of communicating, there is no way to get that up there to the States... They provided that connectivity."

The Field Day was also about enjoyment and public outreach, VanDenAkker said.

Amateur operator Nate Holland stopped by to participate on the radios. Holland was visiting Navarre from Louisiana, and he got his amateur radio license in November. He said he loves the devices.

"I have always been interested in technology, and what is really appealing to me about amateur radio is that everything you do is independent of any infrastructure," he said. "With a cell phone, if you want to make a call there has to be towers. With internet chat rooms, there has to be internet. But with an analog radio; there just has to be someone on the other end that can hear you."

VanDenAkker said while the radios provide a needed service in an emergency, they are also an enjoyable hobby.

"A lot of us are really geeks at heart. Amateur radio lets us use that and expand on it... Basically you are only limited by what your interests are and how much money you have," he said. "My favorite part is getting on there and seeing how far my signal will go."