

# First North Florida Conference on Amateur Emergency Communications

by Gordon Gibby KX4Z

Fifty one volunteers attended a lightning-paced 10-hr-day Symposium on Amateur Radio Emergency Communications held in Gainesville, Saturday Feb. 24<sup>th</sup>, on the campus of Santa Fe College. The conference was jointly sponsored by **Alachua County ARES** and **Santa Fe Amateur Radio Society**.

The day moved *fast*. Here's an overview: Talks started with the topic of "Leadership" lead by Vann Chesney AC4QS, then moved to a candid review of the ARRL Puerto Rico disaster response from been-there-done-that volunteer Joe Bassett W1WCN. Q&A revealed an entirely different strategy might have provided high speed connectivity throughout the island, had the real situation been more apparent earlier. (Lesson: lack of communications dramatically reduced situational awareness!) Hands-on work in split break-out sessions then dived into the practical aspects of building VHF and HF antennas and making WINLINK connections. Multiple HF antennas were created and hosted aloft only 5-10 minutes apart and several VHF antennas were cut and tuned on the spot. After lunch, the room emptied for a suspense-filled deployment as two separate teams battling almost a dozen tasks, and completed with exhortations to hold training classes for new Technicians, Generals and Extra Class licensees. For most, the deployment was the eye-opener....

Reviews of the conference by attendees were almost uniformly ecstatic, with an average score of 4.67 out of 5, and only a few suggestions for improvements next year.

## Hands-on Skill Sessions

An early-morning slingshot provided a multi-band window-line fed non-resonant antenna for long distance comms. But it was next replaced by participants creating an 80-meter emergency antenna....which was then cut apart to make an off-center-fed multi-band Windom. Homemade baluns were everywhere. Lampwire became ad-hoc VHF antennas. Anyone who had never cranked a generator, DID!--and a \$50 MPPT controller kept a deep-cycle marine battery charged from a 30V 250W panel, providing discussion of the differences between PWM and MPPT controllers. Eight different speakers from multiple counties poured out knowledge, and all participants received copies of a 90-page bound text written by the Symposium lecturers.

## Pre-Conference

But it started even before Saturday: Pre-conference preparation included daily emails in the week before the conference, loading a new piece of ham radio software with each new email as registrants gained emergency communications skills and assets. Leveraging those successes, PSK31, MT63, NBEMS, WINLINK VHF and WINLINK HF were wafting through the ether on Saturday, and a full WINLINK VHF/HF server gateway go-box was in operation, one of only a couple hundred world-wide. **After the conference challenges** demonstrated that 30 participants were at least up to "beginner" WINLINK status, able to receive and reply to emails in that system, if allowed to use TELNET. Approximately 14 participants were still unable to establish a WINLINK account – some of



these simply don't have windows-type computers.

At lunchtime Paul Drothler, the regional director of the SHARES federal disaster backup communications system, explained how hams could assist local hospitals and authorities on federal nets, wide-open frequencies, and digital data systems.

### **Goal: Full Scale Exercises**

All of the experiences and lectures were funneled directly toward **encouraging leaders to carry out full scale exercises back in their home communities**, and to manage those using the national Incident Command System used by fire, police, military and corporate entities.

So naturally, the course climaxed with a sudden dimming of the lights, failure of the projection system, and hurried distribution of ICS-201 briefing documents from the local EOC, detailing a right-then unfolding emergency. The room was quickly split into two Comm Units, serving the Incident Commander and Logistics Chief. They were in charge of response to the developing catastrophe which had mysteriously damaged radios and communications gear all over town, apparently cutting Gainesville off from the rest of the world. With TV and radio silent, no one knew exactly what was going on—or how other cities were faring-- other than the sounds of thousands of traffic accidents. The two teams formed sub-units and headed out to two bases, the Incident Command Post, and the separate Logistics Base on the other side of campus --- minus several of their cars determined to be inexplicably immobilized. Fielding a Command Net came next, despite a non-responsive primary local voice repeater --- and then a problem as Team 2 chose a different frequency! With local broadcast radio and TV all out of commission, one team worked on creating assets for the EOC to use to broadcast information over 160-meter frequencies amenable to many citizens' AM transistor radios. There was concern about rumors and civil instability. With law enforcement's trunked radio-comms down, another sub-unit was tasked with creating an emergency repeater on the fly to bring up law enforcement Interoperability Channel NC1. Another group worked to create a separate EOC broadcast outlet that could be picked up by citizens' National Weather Service monitoring receivers. Other sub-units attempted to reach state ARES nets, and the State EOC to gain more information about whatever was going on --- as a ham radioing in from the local power station reported massive fire and generator shutdown, and another at a hospital reported in with an urgent need for power generation capacity. For almost two hours, the two teams worked furiously to accomplish all the tasks assigned to them by Emergency Management in this simulated catastrophe---the exact cause of which wasn't at all clear until the next speaker's talk to the reassembled group.

**Participants were ecstatic! This was a simulation never to be forgotten** – Panhandle ARES members and others who'd driven for hours, bringing all their best gear, were shaking their heads, “We weren't prepared for THAT!” Everyone agreed THIS kind of training would draw great interest back home.

### **Full List of Speakers**

Vann Chesney AC4QS

Joe Bassett W1WCN

Scott Roberts KK4ECR

Art Grant KM4YGH

Gordon Gibby KX4Z NCS521

Susan Halbert KG4VWI

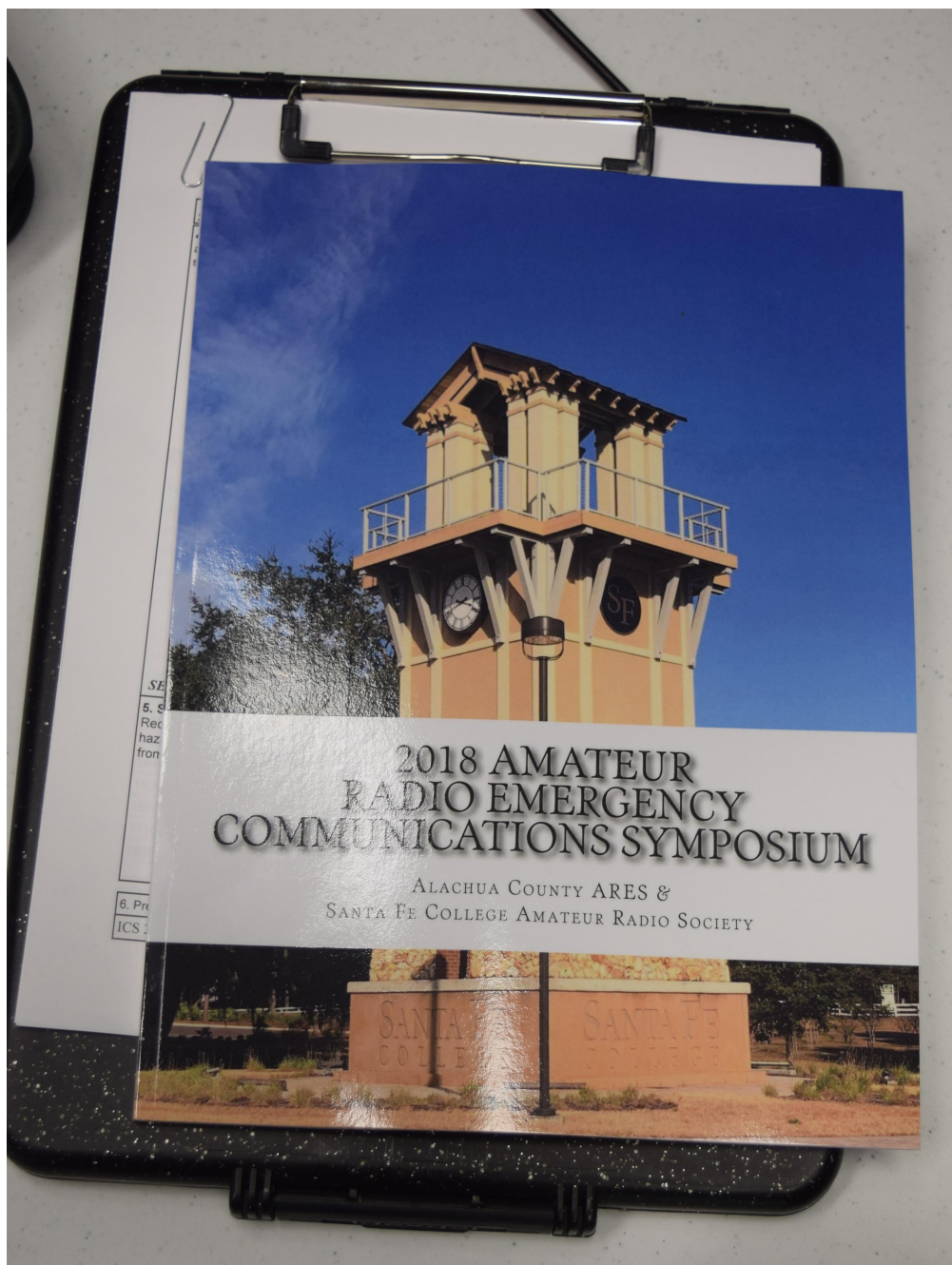


Jeff Capehart W4UFL  
Dave Welker W2SRP



Art & Cindy in their “deployment exhibit”









*Some of the Survivors*







