

‘When all else fails’: Ham radio operators prepare for emergencies during 2012 Field Day

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Times-Mirror Staff
Photo/Michelle Stevens
Gene May of the Loudoun Amateur Radio Group writes down the call sign of another amateur "ham" radio operator for a 24-hour contest called Ham Radio Field Day in Lovettsville June 24. Over the weekend about 60 hams at Park View High School and in Lovettsville spoke to operators in Spain, Romania, Hawaii and across the continental United States.

Voices and static mingled on the airwaves as amateur radio operators baked in the heat Saturday. "QR-Zed." "Kilo Echo Four, Oscar Kilo Yankee." "Oscar Kilo Yankee?" With contact established, the Lovettsville radio operator repeats the full call sign to the voice that originates from a Canadian boat.

The operator made contact as part of Field Day, a 24-hour contest where thousands of amateur radio operators, called "hams," practice communicating off the grid with other hams in the United States and Canada. Around 60 hams in Loudoun County participated in two Field Day events, one at Park View High School in Sterling and the other in Lovettsville.

On Field Day, each amateur radio club attempts to earn points by making contacts and logging "call signs" – the unique letter and number code the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) licenses to each ham radio operator.

The Loudoun Amateur Radio Group (LARG) in Lovettsville made nearly 4,500 contacts, and the Sterling Park Amateur Radio Club made around 2,000 contacts as radio operators worked in shifts through Saturday night into Sunday afternoon. The groups' more unusual contacts included a 737 pilot over Utah and a ham in Puerto Rico.

Using ham radio satellites, a signal from Loudoun County can reach a radius of more than 1,000 miles. The hallmark achievement: making contact with the International Space Station, where many of the astronauts are also ham radio operators.

In an era of Facebook, cell phones and Skype, ham radio is a little-known form of communication. Yet hams pride themselves on being the first to contact the outside world after a large-scale natural disaster that knocks out the Internet and cell phone towers. Field Day allows hams to practice setting up their stations on solar, generator, and battery power. The National Association for Amateur Radio proudly asserts that amateur radio gets the message through "when all else fails."

Ham radio attracts a fiercely loyal following, with around 700,000 operators across the country and 3 million around the world.

"Everyone's experience getting into ham radio is different," said Chris P., a ham who

participated in the LARG Field Day event. (He requested his last name be withheld because he works for the federal government.)

Chris is proud to carry his great-grandfather's call sign, though he says interest in ham radio "skipped two generations" in his family. He first became a ham in high school, when he got his license through the Boy Scouts.

When he was deployed overseas during the 1990s, he would travel to a Military Auxiliary Radio Service (MARS) station to call home. The MARS operator would radio a ham in his hometown and ask him to connect Chris to his family via telephone: "This was before the days of video chat, and you'd call up for about five minutes and say, 'Hey, Mom, guess where I am?'"

Several years ago, he decided to get re-certified as a ham operator, and he's been involved ever since.

Through the course of a year, hams participate in a variety of events, from launching and chasing weather balloons to volunteering as trained weather spotters for the National Weather Service's Skywarn.

Hams provide vital information to Skywarn because they're able to communicate directly from the ground, said LARG Field Day Chairman Gary Quinn: "When a ham operator can look out the window and call the weather service and say, 'Yes that's a tornado,' it validates their data."

When a disaster strikes, Quinn said, "We know before the general public. We're the ones pushing out the information."



Jay Ives receives a response from a ham radio operator in Western Pennsylvania during the 2012 Ham Radio Field Day in Lovettsville. Times-Mirror Staff Photo/Michelle Stevens