

# SATERN Shines Brightly

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The SOS came by e-mail from a coastal city in south China: “They are still stranded! They still stay in house... Please send rescuer there to save them.”

The Chinese sender’s plea, on behalf of relatives trapped in New Orleans, reached The Salvation Army on Monday, September 5.

Overnight, it was forwarded to a Navy MARS coordinator in Massachusetts, Joseph Fratto, NNN0JUN/N1RLO. Joe relayed it onward to the Army MARS Gateway Station AAA9USA at Ft. Huachuca, Arizona. From there, Grant Hays, AAR9OI/WB6OTS, passed it to the initial MARS contact in New Orleans, a Special Forces unit from the Utah National Guard.

As Hams who are experienced in traffic handling know, this is literally the way it goes. Messages travel circuitous routes and even take various modes, but eventually they arrive at the proper place, ending up in the hands of the right person. But what’s unusual about this story is how the message passed seamlessly from one organization to another. “Interoperability” is the byword these days, and it isn’t limited just to quasi-military Amateur Radio services.

SATERN (Salvation Army Team Emergency Radio Service) came into being about 20 years ago. Its original purpose was to support the disaster services efforts of The Salvation Army. The Salvation Army is an international organization, and maintaining a 20-meter net was a natural fit. SATERN members tuned-up five days a week on 14.265 MHz and exchanged information about local conditions and chewed any available rag.

As a volunteer auxiliary to The Salvation Army’s Emergency Disaster Services program, SATERN members typically have accompanied “canteens” to sites of local emergencies. In Chicago, for example, these mobile kitchens are deployed whenever there’s a multi-alarm fire, providing nourishment to firefighters and other emergency personnel. Before the days of cell phones, SATERN members would go along to provide communications between the canteens and headquarters, and often would “shadow” the incident commander and other key personnel. These functions are still needed, as understanding grows that cell circuits quickly become overloaded or fail altogether in such situations.

Local meetings and national training seminars in the early years emphasized all manner of technical and practical skills. Sessions on antenna-building went beyond the typical do-it-yourself copper cactus J-pole. Sessions on net protocol assumed everyone present knew not to say “over and out” and emphasized keeping cool under chaotic conditions. Canteen communicators were taught basic principles of sanitation and food handling so they could help feed the people when the radios weren’t crackling.

*“...SATERN members do get involved.”*

And this, perhaps, has been one of the biggest differences between SATERN volunteers and other groups providing emergency communications. SATERN volunteers expect to go beyond simply passing messages between Point A and Point B; they expect to become actively involved. And whether it’s actually on the disaster scene or at a remote location handling communications, SATERN members do get involved.

By October 1998, SATERN’s expertise was widely recognized. As Hurricane Mitch bore down on Central America, the SATERN health-and-welfare net mobilized as usual on 14.265 MHz. But something unprecedented happened, for the first time ever, the FCC declared the frequency “protected” for the duration of the emergency. The frequency was to be used only for hurricane-related traffic, under the control of SATERN.



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K9YA Telegraph

The training and preparation paid off. SATERN was no longer a parochial radio club. Its members were respected for their skills and their dedication in the face of disaster.

With Hurricane Katrina, SATERN's involvement reached new heights. For the first time, SATERN had an active role deploying individuals to the field. In fact, the communication needs were so great in the early days of the Katrina response that the net did not even handle health-and-welfare transmissions, formerly the mainstay of such nets. Using a system established years ago by Quent Nelson, WA4BZY, inquiries were shunted from HF to the Internet; replies were made via the Internet and telephones. Katrina pushed this system to the limit.

SATERN has long cooperated with other organizations such as ARES, RACES, VOAD and REACT. Now, SATERN is also part of the SHARES (Shared Resources) radio network, a collection of government, military and Military Affiliate Radio System (MARS) radio stations. Explaining the importance of this affiliation, Major Patrick McPherson, WW9E, National Director for SATERN, remarked, "SATERN continues to help with emergency communications to and from the impact area devastated by Katrina and has received more than 60,000 requests for assistance. The addition of the SHARES Network will bring an opportunity for The Salvation Army to talk on federal frequencies to agencies about the task of helping in the disaster and bring additional support to the task before us."

*"The training and preparation paid off."*



Indeed, as it unfolded, the Katrina disaster provided an outstanding example of spontaneous interoperability among the three MARS organizations and SATERN. The dramatic query from China typifies this new relationship.

SATERN's McPherson designated Fratto, in the Boston suburb of Waltham, to coordinate the interface between MARS and SATERN. The Salvation Army had already teamed up with global IT firm Computer Sciences Corp. to develop a massive database for handling the tens of thousands of requests for survivor information that were flooding into the on-going health-and-welfare list. The SHARES link further expanded the capability.



Ed Manley, W4AGA

Significantly, it was the communications know-how of Hams rather than their radio equipment that provided much of the immediate help to the disaster zone. Simply put, Amateurs know how to keep the traffic moving under adverse conditions. And SATERN Amateurs are among the best prepared and the most experienced.

SATERN membership is open to any licensed Ham with a desire to assist

The Salvation Army in emergency disaster services. Check around your local area—there's a good chance you can locate SATERN members. Or tune into the daily 20-meter net on 14.265 MHz, 1500Z. But don't expect to join into a lively discussion on local conditions or the joys of helping others. With more than 50 check-ins on a typical day, this is no longer a ragchew net! Or, e-mail Director McPherson at [ww9e@aol.com](mailto:ww9e@aol.com) for a membership application. Whatever method you choose, please be patient. More than a thousand requests for membership information have rained in since the response was initiated in late August. But this doesn't mean your help isn't needed. It is, because no one knows when or where the next calamity might occur. And you just might be in a unique position to help! ■



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