

By Alan K. Unangst, WC7R

Hams and the Rodeo-Chediski Fire

Arizona fires heat up during ARRL Field Day—an unwelcome opportunity to put emergency communications skills to the test.

On Tuesday, June 18, 2002, Leonard Gregg, by his own admission, started what would soon become the largest wildfire in the State of Arizona's history. This fire would, in a week's time, join up with the Chediski (the Apache word for White Rock) Fire. This one was started by a "lost" hiker on June 19 while she was trying to circumvent road closures necessitated by the Rodeo Fire. Her intent was to signal a Phoenix CBS affiliate's news helicopter. This area is also part of the White Mountain Apache Reservation.

On the morning of June 18 when the Rodeo Fire was first reported and attacked, it was barely 300 acres in size. Based on their past experience with the Rainbow Fire, however, Cris McBride, KB7QXQ, and Dave Epley, N9CZV, of the Kachina Amateur Radio Club, in Show Low, knew that they needed to start talking about an emergency plan should the fire grow larger and start to threaten any of the small high country towns located in the fire's projected path. Epley and McBride contacted several other members of the club and then the Show Low Police Department to let

them know that ham radio operators were available if needed. McBride would for three days "shadow" Show Low's Mayor, Gene Kelly, in addition to organizing the initial volunteer effort. At the fire's end, it was estimated that because of this "shadowing" the mayor was never more than 15 seconds from "Where's the mayor?" to "Here I am"—something the town greatly appreciated.

Change is in the Wind

By mid-morning of the 18th the fire had grown to only 500 acres and was not threatening any structures. That would all change, and change rapidly. By 1300 hours that afternoon, the fire had exploded to over 1400 acres, with plumes of fire and smoke reaching up 10,000 feet. It was completely out of control and racing toward the small picturesque towns of the White Mountains in northeastern Arizona. Show Low's Police Department went on alert, as did the Arizona Department of Public Service (Highway Patrol), Navajo County Sheriff's Department and the Apache County Sheriff's Department.

Bob Delzer, AB7CM, the Vice-Mayor

of Show Low, was contacted by the Show Low Police Department and told to have the ham radio operators at a meeting that was set for 0400 hours on June 19. The Kachina club members who would attend this meeting would go on to carry out, with the help of over 40 additional hams, what would become a monumental Amateur Radio volunteer effort. The club had six of their members in attendance, including Theo Halsall, KD7LYS, and his wife Melinda, KD7QPS. President Bush hugged Melinda when he visited the Eagar Evacuation Center, and he asked to extend his personal thanks and appreciation to all the hams involved in the fire emergency.

A core group of those who had attended the 0400 meeting began developing a plan of action, which would be executed should the fire grow in intensity and threaten the towns in their mountain community. June 19 dawned and the fire was still growing in intensity and size, having destroyed over 24,000 acres. Still no hope of containment was in sight. At this time, Epley was asked to take the club's emergency communications van to a staging area at the Linden School, in Linden, Arizona. That was di-



At the Eagar Ham Radio Emergency Communications Center, Theo Halsall, KD7LYS, operates the radio alongside his wife, Melinda, KD7QPS. Charlie Whiting, KD7CL, is pictured in the background.



Evacuees on the floor of the Round Valley High School Dome at the Red Cross Evacuation Center in Eagar, Arizona.

rectly in the fire's immediate path. Dave, along with August Johnson, KG7BZ, and McBride took the van to the staging area in Linden where they waited and prepared to spend the night if necessary. The fire raged into the town, and they were forced, along with the town's population, to leave. They took the van back to Show Low and re-established a command and communications center there. Here the van was constantly manned and supervised, either by John Taylor, KD7DEB, or August Johnson, KG7BZ, for the duration of the emergency.

Hams Jump In

Members of the Kachina Amateur Radio Club were contacted and other hams in the White Mountain area were called. A group of approximately 30 hams, of all ages and license class, were put on alert and given their anticipated duty locations. While this was taking place, the American Red Cross and the Salvation Army had begun to mobilize their staffs and equipment. Contacts were made with the ARRL Emergency Coordinators in the area and plans to institute the agreement between the ARRL and the American Red Cross were discussed. Emergency evacuation sites were also discussed.

It was decided, with input from the various city entities, county officials, and local law enforcement personnel that the two primary evacuation sites would be in Holbrook and Eagar with secondary sites in Payson and Winslow if needed. The enormity of the fire demanded that the White Mountain area hams had to set up, and fully man, stations in Show Low, Heber-Overgaard, Snowflake, Taylor, Winslow, Holbrook (Navajo County EOC), Eagar and finally in White River on the White Mountain Apache Indian Reservation. Here, the authorities needed four hams to accompany officers who were attempting to round up lost pets and domestic animals plus two operators at the Red Cross Evacuation Center.

Eight complete stations plus "shadow hams" to stay with key personnel and roaming hams were eventually set up and functioning. During the height of the fire, a plea went out from the Linden Fire Department for us to supply several hams to relieve their exhausted dispatchers. The area hams came through on this request, just as they would on every other request that they received, and the need was met.

By the afternoon of June 19 the Rodeo Fire was exploding in size and intensity. It exhibited temperatures in excess of 2000°F, and towering plumes of smoke and fire could be seen even from the Space Shuttle orbiting the Earth. The fire would take on a new name, "The Monster."

Out of control, no containment antici-



KB7QXQ

Highway 60 was crowded with evacuees from Show Low and Pinetop-Lakeside.

pated, and growing ever larger literally by the minute, "mandatory" evacuation orders started. First, the areas of Pinedale, Clay Springs, Aripine, Taylor, Linden, Cheney Ranch and their surrounding areas, with Heber-Overgaard, and Show Low, Pinetop-Lakeside on a one hour notice. (In Arizona, even though residents are told that there is a mandatory evacuation, the law does not provide for the physical removal of any adult who remains in the area and who is trying to protect his or her property.)

All the planning and training started to pay off for McBride, Epley and the other area hams. Cris McBride, KB7QXQ, who had been awake for almost 24 hours by this time, went to the Holbrook Emergency Operations Center where he brought in radios and antennas, then to the high school grounds, where the Red Cross had established the Holbrook Evacuation Center, to see if they needed a communication center placed at the site. The Red Cross felt that as long as the phone lines were up and working that our manpower could be more wisely used, and they declined assistance, for the moment.

Repeaters Help

The Northeastern Mountains of Arizona are blessed with one of the finest mountaintop repeater systems in the state. The sites are owned and maintained by Dave Epley, N9CZV, for the open use of any ham. The primary 2 meter repeater assigned to the emergency was the 145.310 machine on Greens Peak, which is linked to the 449.750 machine atop Bill Williams Mountain outside Williams, Arizona. This one repeater combination gave excellent coverage to all but the Payson Evacuation Center, which was only opened towards the tail end of the fire when it threatened the community of Forest Lakes (located on the far western border of the Chediski Fire). Other frequencies such as 448.200,

449.750 and 145.190, all with PLs of 110.9 as well as 146.520 simplex were utilized for specialized communication. Clifford Hauser, KD6XH, the ARRL Arizona Section Manager, contacted the FCC and they issued a General Communications Emergency for two HF frequencies to be used exclusively by the amateurs who were handling traffic for the fires: 7.265 MHz on 40 meters from 0800 hours to 2000 hours and 3.990 MHz on 75 meters during the evening. Both worked very well, and interference was minimal, despite the fact that we were only given 3 kHz on each side of the allocated frequency. These frequencies were used primarily by hams working for and coordinating with the Salvation Army and their logistical needs although some health and welfare traffic was handled for the American Red Cross by other area hams.

As the one-hour notice to evacuate was given to the residents of Show Low, two hams, Theo Halsall, KD7LYS, and his wife Melinda, KD7QPS, whose home lies on the western portion of Show Low, could see the fire coming and decided to evacuate. Theo has been licensed for less than a year and Melinda for less than six months. However, they had two terrific Elmers, Larry Maniag, KD7JTG, and Jim Murphy, N7QYC, who taught them well. Theo had the presence of mind to think he might need to set up an emergency 2-meter communications center to assist with fire communications. His fast thinking led to the creation of the Eagar "Dome" evacuation site's Ham Radio Communication Center. This is an example of how important initial training can be. This center was manned by not only Theo and Melinda, who slept by the station, but also Charlie Whiting, KD7CL, Gene Wiseman, W7LHP, Jim Betts, N1WZ, and myself, just to name only a few. The Eagar "Dome" evacuation site Communication Center was fully staffed with at least two opera-

tors for the duration of the emergency. Darv Nelson, W7KNA, set up both a mobile HF station and one in his home. This equipment gave the Eagar Center complete communications capability, 24/7.

Relocation to Snowflake

When the evacuation of Heber-Overgaard was ordered, a new location for the Amateur Radio station and communications center needed to be found. Since Snowflake did not seem to be in the fire's path and was housing the Arizona Director of Disaster Relief for the Red Cross, Pedra Ayala, it was the logical location to relocate the station. Ayala had been assigned a shadow ham, Galen Hicks, KD7ONQ, who agreed that it was a good location to relocate. The operators in the Heber-Overgaard center really brought to the forefront what being an emergency communicator was all about. While under immediate evacuation orders, these hams never left their posts and continued to handle traffic while packing up the stations and moving them to Snowflake. All this while, their spouses were left alone to evacuate their personal homes.

Back in Holbrook, McBride and his team, made up of hams from the earlier evacuated areas, such as Walt Sheaffer, N7CMT, and his wife, Christine, KD7HHY, Tom James, W7OPS, and many others were deep in the throes of operation when the evacuation site's capacity overflowed. An additional location had to be found. Quickly, the overflow evacuees were sent to Winslow where Jack Betts, KK7JU, who had been monitoring and working traffic on HF, jumped in to help set up the additional communications center along with Howard Nutter, K7GHS. The Salvation Army also had moved additional personnel into the area along with several hams to operate on the restricted HF frequencies.

The fire roared out of control taking with it many structures and homes in the towns of Linden, Clay Springs, Pinedale and Aripine, and devastating the twin cities of Heber-Overgaard. As the flames moved past Heber-Overgaard, it was determined that there was a real need to re-establish communications in the area. Dave Epley, N9CZV, was given that task and was issued special US Forest Service "turn out" clothing. Dave braved the smoke and remaining fire and successfully set up a HF station, as requested, without injury. He headed back to Show Low, where he was asked to move the emergency communications van to the National Guard Armory in Show Low. This area was believed to be more defensible if, as was forecast, the fire overran the town.

By June 20, over 40 hams were en-



The Rodeo Fire roared eastward into the town of Show Low, Arizona.

trenched in their various assignments throughout the White Mountains of Arizona. However, the worst was yet to come. On June 26, the Rodeo Fire joined with the Chediski Fire to create what can only be described as everyone's worst nightmare—a wildfire beyond anyone's comprehension.

Staffing and Scheduling

Staffing was now becoming a concern because most of the operators had not had a day off since the fires started. McBride, who by this time was stretched tremendously and traveling between the different evacuation and communications centers, asked Scott Midkiff, WA7SAM, to take over the scheduling of personnel for the duration of the emergency. Scott, who was at the Eagar "Dome," found that Theo had the foresight to take the names and calls of the hams who had been evacuated and come to the Eagar High School. With that list, and the names from the various station logs and a club list, he was able to piece together an entire week's schedule. That was a monumental job when you consider that he had to physically track down the evacuee hams.

The Navajo County EOC had taken over the job of Net Control, and continued to coordinate all communications. The Kachina Club's call sign, W7EH, was assigned to that location and three main operators were assigned as net controllers: Walt Sheaffer, N7CMT, Bill Smith, W7ARZ, Ed Cifelli, KC7MWP, among others, who did an admirable job under difficult conditions.

Finally, there was some light at the end of the tunnel. Firefighters were beginning to get the upper hand. Just as everyone in the ham community was starting to settle into their routine, a new emergency arose. Pets and domestic animals were found roaming loose, some injured, in the areas that had been evacuated. Paul Jaster, Navajo County Emergency Disaster Coordinator, requested hams to supply operators for the evacuation center in White River and to provide four operators to ac-

company rescue officers. Volunteers were found, one of whom was a ham from Prescott Valley. Phil Diaz, KC7AFB, had heard of the need, and drove many hours to get to Eagar to help. He, along with Theo Halsall, KD7LYS, took up the challenge and headed out to handle just one more twist. They were successful in their endeavor, and many animals were saved.

Containment

The fire was finally contained on June 30 by the 4000 dedicated firefighters, which included four of the five Level A-1 wildfire teams in the nation. It had consumed more than 468,640 acres of tall timber (fourth largest wildfire in the history of the United States), 491 homes and outbuildings were destroyed.

The first weekend of the fire coincided with the ARRL's annual Field Day exercises. This group of Amateur Radio operators really showed all who were looking in on the value of this yearly exercise. The men and women of the White Mountains ham community gave over 2500 man-hours of service, countless miles on their personal vehicles and dollars out of pocket to assist people they may never meet. Dozens of health and welfare calls were handled, and all the people who were in the "need to know" loop were kept accurately up to date. Each operator met every challenge that was put before him or her.

The monsoon rains finally arrived, not only extinguishing the last of the smoldering embers, but also bringing with it the threat of floods and mudslides. The area radio amateurs are prepared for this eventuality, and are ready to answer the call if they are needed.

A grateful "thank you" goes out to all the firefighters, American Red Cross, Salvation Army, the scores of nameless volunteers and, of course, all the hams!

Alan, WC7R, is a 20-year resident of Arizona, making his home in Prescott. He is a veteran ham radio operator, and long time ARRL Member. He holds WAS, WAC and DXCC, among other ham radio awards and citations. He is an OO for Arizona and an Assistant Section Manager for the Arizona Section. Alan was one of the first ARRL VEs in the Prescott area when the program started. He set up the first ham radio emergency communications center for Yavapai County. He and his wife, Carol, own a summer home in Greer, which is approximately 16 miles from Eagar, in the White Mountains. He was there when the fire started and lent his assistance to the volunteer effort. You can contact the author at 1431 Haisley Ct, Prescott, AZ 86303-6395; wc7r@arrl.net.

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