How One Salvation Army Ham Responded to a Major Earthquake

by GRAHAM HICKS, W4PJS

Shortly after the 8.3 monster earthquake struck Mexico City on September 19, 1985, my phone rang. It was my old friend, Quent Nelson, WA4BZY, in Covington, Georgia, with whom I had worked many hours of emergency traffic. He said the Salvation Army's Atlanta Divisional office had no communications with the Territorial office in Mexico City and asked if I could possibly be of some help.

Amateur radio for me has never been a hobby. It has always been a service. This was an opportunity I could not ignore. I put my little audio/video business on hold and began making preparations. My little 25-year-old Drake TR-3, a power supply, a Radio Shack TRS-80 I was using for RTTY, and a handful of tools and test instruments went into heavy-duty cardboard boxes—four in all. I made sure I had my original FCC license in my wallet and my wife drove me to Pasco, Washington, to catch the first of several planes to Mexico City.

We knew there would be little chance of finding a usable antenna in the disaster area, so I had called Sea-Comm Communications in Seattle, told them my situation, and ordered a Cushcraft A-3 beam, 100 feet of RG-8U, and an assortment of coax connectors. A very kind salesman there offered to drop them by the Salvation Army Thrift Store the next day, where they were picked up by an Army driver who met me at the airport. I spent a restless night in a cheap motel near SeaTac; about 6 o'clock the next morning I boarded a plane for Mexico City.

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Long before SATERN formally existed, Quentin Nelson, WA4EZY was using his vast communications skills to assist The Salvation Army in its relief efforts. Quent was passing traffic in the immediate aftermath of the 1976 Guatemala earthquake when Col. Harold Hinson, now Chicago’s territorial commander, asked him to help with The Army’s communication needs. Because of Quent’s efforts—and the efforts of a small but dedicated group of hams—he recruited to work 14-18 hours a day from his “state-of-the-art plus” station (none dare call it a shack!)—Atlanta HQ was in daily contact with field personnel in Guatemala. During the 5-6 months that this operation continued over 250 phone patches were completed and more than 2,000 h-8-w messages were passed via RTTY. Quent, himself, twice journeyed to Guatemala City to coordinate efforts between his stations and those on site.

At the end of the period of intense involvement with Army personnel, Quent attended an informal debriefing session, which really guaranteed his future involvement as well! As he himself explains, “After our work was all performed, we all got together and had a nice get-together at The Salvation Army in Atlanta to review and talk about our experiences.

“Afterwards, many other disasters seemed to crop up somewhere around the world. I worked a long time with Salvation Army in handling traffic—hurricanes, torna- does, floods. And then, of course, the big earthquake that hit Mexico City September 1985. My station was quite active for 6 weeks handling emergency traffic during that episode. [Editors’ note: See Graham Hicks’ article elsewhere in this issue for more details on the Mexico City earthquake.]

“I also made a trip to Salvation Army Headquarters in Mexico City, along with some officers from The Army in Atlanta and Washington D.C. in coordinating emergency traffic existing between Mexico and the U.S.A.

In recognition of Quent’s efforts, The Salvation Army presented him with its prestigious “Others” award in 1985. This award is presented annually to one civilian who has rendered exceptional outstanding service.

How can Quent do all this, you might wonder. In addition to being a skilled and motivated Extra-Class operator, he has a supportive wife and family (all hams, too) and had an understanding employer. Quent retired as southeast distribution manager for Gates Rubber. While on the job, Gates generously gave him paid leaves of absence to assist the Army.

His station has three operating positions "for handling anything that might happen," Quent explains. His antenna farm is spread over eight acres in his suburban Atlanta home. He’s equipped to operate all bands, all modes (with the exception of slow-scan TV), either from his station or his car.

"I continue to help The Salvation Army," he explains. "I keep my station in first-class condition and stand always ready to assist The Salvation Army in any way I can to help them in the event of major disasters all over the world. I conduct a test with Salvation Army HQ in Oklahoma City on the second Saturday of each month to insure all systems are working properly and the equipment is doing the job it is supposed to do.

“I have access to many top-notch traffic handlers all over the U.S.A. In July of each year I make a trip to Oklahoma City to be with N5FM, Frank McCollom, trustee of the Oklahoma City Salvation Army radio station. I have eyeball conversations with hams from that area who would render themselves immediately available should an emergency arise.”

Although Quent has been involved in many emergencies not involving The Salvation Army he finds working with the Army particularly rewarding. "I have enjoyed employing my skills to assist The Salvation Army in any way I can to make its job easier."
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One of my worst fears as I got off the plane was the prospect of getting a ton of electronic equipment through Mexican customs. I had taken care to wear a crisp new Salvation Army Emergency Communications uniform, and when I reached the inspector and he saw the uniform and the boxes marked "Emergency communications Equipment," he grabbed my hand, pumped it warmly and said, "Muchos, muchachos gracias, senor," and waved me through.

Arriving at Territorial HQ, I first called a young lady who worked with the Army and with the local Mexican government's contracting office as well. She communicated with the government office which cleared us informally to operate until we could appear in person and get our official licenses issued. I then unpacked the little Drake TR-3 and its a/c power supply and quickly strung up a homemade 20-meter dipole on the roof. Within an hour, we had a good signal into Quentin's home, and the Territorial officers were talking on the phone patch with the Atlanta office.

During that first afternoon I scavenged up a piece of two-inch water pipe about 15 feet long and found some five-inch bolts and nuts at a nearby hardware store. I had brought some hand tools, and by 11 a.m. the next day I had the Cushcraft A-3 assembled, tuned and mounted to a security fence post on the roof.

To my delight, it fed a smashing signal into Atlanta. Both Quentin and my dad, W5IH (now a silent key) in Natchez, Mississippi, said it was one of the strongest signals on the band. We ran about four regular schedules each day, coordinating airlifts of emergency blankets, food, water, medical supplies and personnel into the Mexico City airport.

Several days into the operation, we received word from the Mexican equivalent of the FCC that they would like us to come to their office and get our official licenses. We drove downtown and found that their building had not escaped the terrible quake. There were cracks in the walls on every floor. We dared not use the elevator but instead climbed endless stairs to their office. The officials were extremely gracious and, after a nominal bit of paperwork, issued us temporary Mexican licenses for the duration.

Between schedules, I had a chance to visit the Esperanza Corps Unit. It could not have been better named, for "esperanza" means "hope." The men and women of the Corps and the many volunteers made the building seem as busy as an ant hill. Doctors and nurses worked without breaks tending to those with broken legs and arms, lacerations and bruises. In one corner on makeshift shelves were rows of donated over-the-counter medicines. In another, shielded only by bed sheets hastily strung up and lighted by three automotive trouble lights hanging from another wire, were two surgery rooms where volunteer doctors performed all kinds of MASH-type surgeries. And, as though one could forget where he was, another corner was occupied by a big Salvation Army bass drum.

Just out the side door of the building, three times a day a trio of Mexican women whose faces belonged in National Geographic transformed vegetables and other foods brought by the Army into hot, nourishing meals for the hundreds of families living in makeshift plastic tents or cardboard lean-tos near the Esperanza unit. They came each day, these people who could pack their entire lives' possessions on their backs, and fell quietly into line outside the building. They brought their pots and pans and their pitchers for fresh, cool lemonade, and waited cheerfully in line for volunteer Army workers to give them their next meal.

But the people in Mexico were not the only ones working. Two days before my arrival, a cruise ship from the Sundance line arrived in Acapulco—the nearest usable port—loaded to capacity with donated goods: two new Ford trucks, each packed with 2,500 Coleman tents, 10,000 blankets, camp stoves, lanterns and medicines of all kinds. Even the operation of the ship itself—crew,
Bill Shillington, W9ZCL, SATERN Motor Vehicle Officer will accompany a fully-loaded canteen being donated to the relief efforts in Kobe, Japan. After much bureaucratic red-tape, Bill and the canteen will depart O'Hare Tues., Feb. 28. He hopes to operate aeronautical mobile on the SATERN 20-meter net. Join him in an unusual QSO.

**Mexican Earthquake**

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fuel, and longshoremen’s pay—was donated by the Sundance line. Residents of Calgary, Alberta, collected seven tons of clothing and arranged for Japan Air Lines to bring it down. And so it went, on and on.

By my tenth day, long-distance communication lines were repaired and there was no further need for me and my little TR-3. With mixed emotions, I said my good-byes to the Territorial staff, packed my gear, and headed home to wait for the next call.

It was not that long in coming!

(Editors’ note: Graham’s vivid account will be continued.)

Major Pat McPherson’s Column

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that the six-hour drive to headquarters seemed friendlier and safer with communications. The seed, however, had been planted.

Communications also seemed to sync with the work of the Army. It was automatic public relations. There were not many mornings on the way to the office or on the way to some conference where the subject of the Army’s ministry failed to be noted on the airwaves for all within listening range to monitor. The young officer was born in Kansas City where an historically dynamic Salvation Army emergency-services team prospered. Major James Barker, the patriarch of modern day Salvation Army disaster services led his team and conceived the term SAC Team (Salvation Army Communications) as the monogram for the effort. This was somewhat inspirational to the young man and indeed the combination of disaster teams with communications personnel was an effective and functional marriage for the teams built in his appointments.

The entry into the amateur ranks soon followed. In every appointment, new friends and associates were claimed, some as Salvation Army disaster volunteers. The trail journeyed through Oshkosh, Pekin, Dubuque, Springfield and into Chicago.

Mel McDermott, WD0AQS, became the first Amateur Radio Liaison Officer (ARLO) in Dubuque, IA. Art Evans, KA9KLZ, became a member of the Dubuque team and installed the first amateur antenna on the corps facility there. Art later helped pioneer the SATERN movement. Bob Iler, KX0T, traded in one of his rigs for a Bach trumpet and became a soldier of the Dubuque corps and a staunch bandsman.

Original driving forces to earn the license were to be able to talk to his brother, Larry, KAOQEO, another Salvation Army officer, ragchew with his friends, and take advantage of the phone patch to talk to his mom.

The phone patch idea did not turn out to be the most palatable due to the fact that, thanks to his mom’s cajolery, the entire world learned a good deal of the family medical history via that route. His brother’s primary motivation for getting on the air was to discuss the tri-annual officer moves or rumors of moves in the organization, which seemed all the more covert because the modus operandi was via Morse Code in the early years, and then later by packet radio via the Chicago, St. Louis “wormhole.” Keeping in contact with friends and volunteers was very gratifying and meaningful.

In 1988 SATERN was born. The movement took advantage of the tremendous goodwill that others have for the work of the Army, including those friends and associates gathered along the way in previous appointments. I believe it is the work of the Lord, as all of our work is in The Salvation Army. I believe that there is an element of timing that only God could bring about in its inception and that He marvelously has provided (Continued on page 5)
Major Pat
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the right people to accomplish our vital ministry of disaster services.

As I view the last five years, I re-
live many disasters. There have been tornadoses, floods, earth-
quakes, fires, hurricanes, explo-
sions, and air crashes. We have run the gauntlet. But God has
provided the help, the skills, the
people. In fact, He has provided
you to help. I have a hundred sto-
ries of those who have come with
the right skills at to do the job. It
certainly is Divine Providence.

This last month has been very ex-
iting. It is perhaps a microcosm
of the whole effort. The program
indeed is on the cutting edge of
Salvation Army volunteerism and
disaster endeavor. There is a per-
ceptible geometric growth to its
existence. The intercontinental
net on 20 meters has established
a huge, virile presence for Army
disaster services. Local SATERN
teams are growing in many ar-

cas. Local two-meter nets are
being formed, with all of their po-
tential for training and cultivation
for SATERN. Minot, North
Dakota, is building an exemplary

team. San Diego has an estab-
lished communications group
pulling on the SATERN rope. Mt.
Clemens, Michigan, Alton, Illin-
iois, New York and Pittsburgh
are all building teams. The digi-
tal communications network is
growing. Disaster exercises are
being held on behalf of the Army
as never before by SATERN
members. Over and over individ-
uals call expressing their interest
in becoming part of the service.

On February 28, the Metropolitan
Division will be airlifting a canteen
and crew to Kobe, Japan, to as-

Just when you think you’ve got
the hang of things, Major Pat
comes along with a great new
idea and you have to rethink ev-
everything you thought you knew,
like Field Day. Every ham knows
about Field Day—big outdoor
event, every June. Right? Well,
not quite, but then not quite
wrong, either. Thoroughly con-
fused? Well, read on!

During The Salvation Army Terri-
torial Congress, June 9-11 in Mer-
rilville, Indiana, Saturday, June
10, is designated as Field Day.
At the High School Stadium there
will be great festivities, indeed.

To start things off dramatically, a
team of sky-divers will make a
grand entrance. The Chicago
Staff Band, a world-class brass
ensemble, will also perform.

Why all the excitement? The high-
light of the Territorial Congress
Field Day will be the enrollment of
1,000 junior soldiers in The Salva-
tion Army. General Rader, the
first American Salvation Army
general, will be the guest
speaker. General Rader has a
full appreciation of the Army’s
role in emergency disaster ser-
dices, by the way, having been
Territorial Commander in San
Francisco during the 1989 Lomo
Prieta earthquake.

Experienced hams (that is, hams
having been licensed 3 days or
more) will quickly realize that an
event of this size can use lots of
volunteers with 2-meter HTs to
help with various aspects of this
event, including canteen coordi-
nation.

All SATERN members are cor-
dially invited to take part in this
big event. Not only will it be an
important contribution to the
Army, it will also be an enjoyable
time. And since it is an official
SATERN activity, count on a lot of
tasty munching.

Come to think of it, it doesn’t
sound all that different from ARRL
Field Day, does it? Frequencies,
fellowship and food—what more
could a person want on a Sat-

day afternoon? See you there!

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Phoenix Emergency Exercise
by C. Warren Andreasen, N6WA

On February 4, 1995, the City of Phoenix conducted a major emergency disaster drill, simulating a crash of a passenger jet at the Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport. The exercise involved a major mobilization of the city fire and police departments, the airport authority, the military, and volunteer organizations including The Salvation Army and the Red Cross. The Salvation Army, in turn, activated SATERN to provide communication with other agencies. We expanded our effort to form links with other parts of the nation and to test and demonstrate SATERN capability.

The exercise was massive, involving a real fire to put out and simulated wreckage with real people trapped inside. The call went out and first on the scene were the foam trucks to put out the fire. The billowing smoke was quite a sight! One can only wonder what people in arriving planes thought as they saw the huge flames and rolling fire equipment!

Real people were used as casualties, people painted to look injured, burned and worse. As more and more units were called in, including The Salvation Army to handle food services, it got crowded. I estimate there were 50 fire trucks on site at the peak of the exercise. There were many ambulances, helicopters and vans transporting the "injured" to surrounding hospitals.

The SATERN effort consisted of two mobile units, each equipped to be self-supporting communication stations. One vehicle had HF capability on several bands (SSB) and 2-meter FM for voice and packet. The second vehicle contained HF AMTOR capability. Our idea here in Phoenix is to roll into a disaster site and work from our "mobile communication center," one of which is a Salvation Army-owned mini-van.

As we went into the exercise, we had only a faint idea of what would be required of us—just like in a real emergency. As it turned out, while we did handle drill traffic, much of what we did was handle real traffic. We were able to assist the Fire Department in communication with one of the hospital volunteer groups, we were able to link up an Air Force Chaplain with his Red Cross team member, and we coordinated getting the Salvation Army Canteen onto the scene, past security check points and such. While this was a drill, our communication was real, and the food the Salvation Army served was real. Serving the hundreds of hungry and thirsty people was not a drill.

SATERN communications were almost flawless. The biggest problem, which could have gotten around in a real emergency, was a contest that made the HF voice frequencies almost unusable with QRM. We had good contact all over the nation and Canada during the morning net and before the contest kicked off. What saved the day was AMTOR. We were able to handle rapid, real-time traffic with Headquarters in Chicago, both by direct contact to W9IIB and by connecting directly into an NTS hub station in Utah. We also used normal VHF packet with good effect, handling traffic on all modes. HF voice was the only weak point, and we did fine without it.

Overall, the exercise went extremely well and we had no major problems. We did learn to add a few things to our check list. Items we failed to bring but needed were a camera to record the event, a small table for the packet computer, and a chair for the packet operator to enjoy. Finally, it was a warm, sunny day—my face feels the effects of too much sun. I should have had a sun block.

We also learned that when you get that much equipment together, there is a lot of noise. A good set of headphones to block outside noise would have been valuable. Airports are noisy anyhow, but when you get many trucks with engines running, generators, shouting, and hundreds of radios blasting, it is hard to hear one's own radio.

The exercise was a good one. SATERN—and amateur radio in general—demonstrated we can do the job.

Please send material for the SATERN RING to Major Pat McPherson for forwarding to Ann Shaver, WH2E and Al Shaver, NH2Z, Editors