



The Radio Amateurs' Emergency Network

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60th Anniversary of RAYNET Backgrounder

It has gone down in history as one of Britain's worst storms with the loss of 307 lives, but something worthy came out of the east coast flood disaster with the formation of a national emergency communications organisation which still serves the public 60 years later.

On the night of January 31st/February 1st, 1953, Britain was battered by gale force winds and a tidal surge swept down the east coast, raising sea levels six metres above normal and breaching flood defences in 1,200 places. In the Irish Sea, the ferry Princess Victoria sank with the loss of 133 lives.



Telephones and coastal radio stations were put out of action, but licenced radio amateurs came to the rescue. Humber Radio was dealing with a distress call from the SS Levenwood, which had requested the help of tugs and urgent medical advice, when it lost power and went off air.

But radio amateur Reg Hutcheson-Collins, callsign G3AXS, was monitoring and he arranged for a tug to go to the Levenwood's aid and got medical advice from a local hospital which he passed to the ship's master. That night G3AXS answered four distress calls, including one from the Humber Light Vessel.

At the time radio amateurs were licensed to speak to each other, but were not permitted to pass what is now known as "third party traffic", so the regulations had been broken. Although radio amateurs worked for MI5 during the Second World War monitoring Morse code signals – submitting 23,000 logs a month, the Radio Society of Great Britain's offer to provide an emergency amateur communications service was rejected by the Government in 1950.

The East Coast Flood Disaster resulted in an urgent rethink. The Amateur Radio Licence was amended to allow the passing of third party traffic on behalf of a Government-approved list of 'user services', including the police, fire and ambulance, and in November, 1953, the Radio Amateurs' Emergency Network was formed.

In the 60 years that have followed RAYNET, which has around 2,000 members nationwide but no paid staff, has provided emergency communications at many major incidents, including the Lockerbie air disaster where up to 200 people a day operated for 10 days until recovery of the 270 dead was complete.

The Lockerbie official report said RAYNET had made a vital contribution and the organisation should be considered as an integral part of future planning arrangements. “The facilities and co-operation of the RAYNET teams were essential to the management of the emergency and its search and recovery operations,” it said.

Today the “User Service list has been extended to all Category 1 and 2 Responders as defined in the Civil Contingencies Act. They include Police, Fire and Ambulance services, Emergency Planning Officers, Coastguard, health authorities, public utilities, St John Ambulance, British Red Cross, Salvation Army and WRVS.

Technical developments mean that RAYNET operations are no longer limited to voice transmissions. RAYNET is equally capable of handling data traffic – sending and receiving all types of digital files, including high quality photographs.

Over the years RAYNET has been called in to provide back-up communications where other systems have overloaded or failed. RAYNET has worked in snowploughs and gritters when county council highways systems were not functioning, operated on minimum power in hospitals to avoid interfering with sensitive medical equipment after switchboard failures and provided the communications system for Britain’s biggest rabies exercise where hundreds of stray cats and dogs were caught over five days.

Fortunately, major emergencies are comparatively rare, so RAYNET trains by providing communications at important sporting and other charitable events in difficult terrain where cell phone systems are limited, non-existent, or likely to be overloaded.

These include the Three Peaks Fell Race in the Yorkshire Dales and the Oxfam Trailtrekker walking challenge, which raises hundreds of thousands of pounds each year. Each year RAYNET assists on the Long Distance Walkers Association 100 event, held in different locations in the UK each year, where walkers cover 100 miles in 48 hours. This provides technical challenges for those involved, as well as considerable inter-group co-operation to ensure the event runs smoothly.

When RAYNET operates on events like the Etape du Dales 112-mile cycle challenge in North Yorkshire and Cumbria it exercises engineering skills, including the ability to set-up and operate a chain of repeaters to keep Control in touch with checkpoints and ensure the safety of more than 1,200 competitors around a course where cell phone cannot be relied upon.

Everywhere RAYNET goes, it starts with nothing and engineers and operates a radio system to meet the needs of its users. But RAYNET also keeps detailed paper logs of all radio traffic and has the ability to record all messages to a computer hard drive, which can be accessed for any future inquiry.

RAYNET members today are dedicated to providing a professional communications service to our User Services and event organisers, and remain ready to be called upon in emergencies.

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Arran Snow