



Special Edition

NGRC-SPSC Amateur Radio Association

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W6TRW Club Members Mike Hamada (KF6UCN) and Stuart Gorsky (K9STU) deploy to Catalina Island...

CATALINA FIRE:

by Stuart Gorsky

May 11, 2007

It's six o' something on a Friday morning and the phone is ringing. By the time my head cleared the ringing had stopped and the voicemail icon on my cell phone had appeared on the screen. The phone call was from the County of Los Angeles Disaster Communications Service of which I am a member. The message was from Chuck Lobb (KN6H) T-043, the DCS City Radio Officer (CRO) from Torrance California. Because of the Santa Catalina Island fire La County had activated it's Disaster Communications Service and DCS members were being called out to deploy. I was being asked to call back with the status of my ability to deploy.

The line was expectedly busy but a short time later I receive another phone call from Bill Pomeranz (KB6FB) T-01. Bill is our DCS Lomita Station District Communications Officer and he was also was looking to find out about my ability to deploy.



Bill Pomeranz (KB6FB) T-01

Bill quickly explained that the main reason we were going to the Island was that there is a single fiber optic cable that



Santa Catalina Island is west of Los Angeles

runs between Avalon City and the tower on the hilltop that carries all the communication to the mainland. If that cable burns and fails, we would be the only link to the mainland. DCS members were being deployed on "around the clock" basis as backup for this important system. Bill also told me that he had no immediate information regarding working conditions, the availability of food and water or how long we would be there but he knew that we have all trained hard for events like this and he knew that we had the knowledge and training to successfully handle a situation such as this.

I informed Bill that my girlfriend Wendy Khoo (W6NDY) T-120 was under the weather and could not deploy but fellow team member Mike Hamada (KF6UCN) T-109 and I would be able to deploy after 5:00 pm (17:00 hours). Bill said we were now officially activated and should be ready to deploy to Long Beach and catch the Catalina Express fast boat leaving for the island at 7:55 pm (19:55 hours). He wished us good luck and with that I prepared to deploy!



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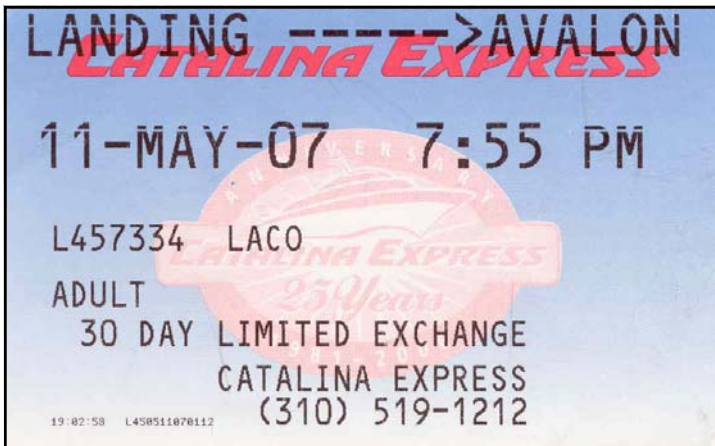
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Special points of interest:

- Swapmeet — Saturday May 26th, 7:30 to 11:30 AM
- Club Meeting — Tuesday, June 12th Round Table Pizza 6:00 PM— Field Day
- Photos - Submit your favorite Ham Radio Related photos for all to see...

Los Angeles County DCS Members Deploy to Catalina Island!



Catalina Express Boarding Pass

Mike and I arrived at the Long Beach Catalina Express depot at approximately 7:00 pm (19:00 hours) and parked in the closed parking structure. We grabbed our gear and headed to the ticket counter where we obtained our Catalina Express tickets. In both cases we presented our LADCS badges and were admitted for free.

We walked out to the terminal and as we waited other DCS members showed up and introduced themselves to us. In total there were five of us crossing on the boat.

Dee Schuyler (KE6ZBV) T-115

Harry Almada (KG6WTW) D-001

Jim Albright Sr, (NB6V) S-025

Mike Hamada (KF6UCN) T-109

Stuart Gorsky (K9STU) T-061



LA DCS Members on the Catalina Express



Along with us on the boat were many Fireman, Policeman and CERT members. The Crew of the boat made us store our gear in a special area of the boat.

By the time we arrived on the Island it was very dark. We were met on the dock by outgoing DCS members who briefed us on where to go and who to see once we got there. After the briefing we hopped a ride in a Sheriff's department SUV and were dropped off at the Avalon Fire Department where our DCS I/C was setup.



DCS Incident Command located in the Avalon Fire Department

The DCS I/C was located in small office in the Avalon Fire Department. We met the crew on duty and they were filled us in on the current status of the fire and what our role was. They also gave us a tour of the Fire Department, the adjoining Police Department and City Hall. The main EOC for Catalina Island was located in the Police Department Building and even though it was nearly 10:00 pm (2200 hours) there were several meeting going on. As

Los Angeles County DCS Members Deploy to Catalina Island!

we were being shown around I couldn't help notice the food supplies that were available for the work crews. The food looked exceptionally good to be emergency rations but then it was explained to me that a large wedding was to have taken place on the Island and because the wedding party was forced to evacuate, all the gourmet food was donated to emergency services. I understand the couple was able to relocate the wedding and got married in San Diego.



Police Officers hard at work in the Avalon EOC

Three of us opted to work the all night shift from 10:00 pm (22:00 hours) till 07:00 am (07:00 hundred hours) While the remaining two were “golf carted” out to a local hotel to catch some shut eye.

Jim Albright Sr, (NB6V) S-025, Mike Hamada (KF6UCN) T-109 and Stuart Gorsky (K9STU) T-061 took the all night shift while Dee Schuyler (KE6ZBV) T-115 and Harry Almada (KG6WTW) D-001 would be our relief in the morning.



Stuart Gorsky (K9STU) T-061 takes his turn as Avalon I/C

The night shift was very slow for us as the only traffic being exchanged from Avalon I/C to the La EOC were our hourly status updates. Additionally, all was quiet in many sections of the Island as most of the fireman were being allowed to sleep. The plan was to rest as many of the fire crews as possible so when morning came they could hit the fire in one big push.



The Avalon Fire Station was empty of fire fighting vehicles as this area would be used for a major briefing in the morning



Many fire fighting vehicles were lined up outside on the narrow streets. The trucks in this photo are from the California Department of Corrections Fire Crew

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At approximately 5:30 am (05:30 hours) we took shifts and attended a breakfast provided for emergency workers and by daybreak the whole area was alive with briefings and deployments. For Jim, Mike and I our day was over. We were relieved and “golf carted” to the hotel where we got a well earned “three hours” of sleep. After that we were awakened and transported to the dock where we took the Catalina Express back to Long Beach and finally home.



Early morning breakfast



As the sun came up activity increased sharply. The main briefing was at the Avalon Fire Department and from there the firemen deployed around the Island. For us it was the end of a satisfying day as all of our training proved its worth. end



A California Department of Correction firefighting crew gets ready for the early morning push to fight the fire. Along with the firefighter prisoners each crew has trained professional firefighters and “handlers”



How About You? Are You Ready To Go?

By Chuck Lobb (KN6H) T-043, the DCS City Radio Officer from Torrance California.

The phone rang about midnight. Bill T-01 KB6FB sleepily answered. "We need three teams of three DCS hams each to deploy to Catalina", the caller stated. "The first team on the 0630 boat, the second on the 1230 boat, the third at 1830." Object was to provide radio communication between County Fire and Sheriff units at Avalon.

Bill went to work. For the 0630 team he rounded up Rich T-03 KG6JKJ who joined RDT's (Rapid Deployment Team members) mostly from the Carson sheriff station. Bill then called Chuck T-43 KN6H asking him to round up teams for the 1230 and 1830 boats. Chuck and Bill volunteered themselves for the 1230 boat, and Stu T-61 K9STU, Mike T-109 KF6UCN and Dee T-115 KE6ZBV were pledged for the 1830 boat.

While driving to the ferry terminal, Station A advised the 1230 Catalina Express was departing at 1215 from Long Beach, not San Pedro. That resulted in a race across the Vincent Thomas bridge, the length of Terminal Island and across the Gerald Desmond bridge, plunging into Long Beach in the nick of time to catch the ferry.

The boat ride was a bit choppy through the afternoon whitecaps, and as we approached Catalina, dozens of little geysers of smoke could be seen literally covering every hillside. Small, vertical columns of white that would periodically shoot up, then die down looking much like Yellowstone Park geysers. A few puffs appeared on the hillsides above Avalon. No heavy flames, however, for which we were thankful, but a very heavy pall of thick smoke hung low in the air to the north between Avalon and Two Harbors.

Upon landing, we were immediately whisked via golf cart to the Avalon Fire Department where the RDT's had established two base stations. The first maintained contact with Station A in East Los Angeles via the DCS repeater on Mt. Disappointment. The second base rig was for handhelds between ourselves at the sheriff command post, the fire command post and the Avalon beach and dockside area. Interestingly, the repeater antenna that worked the best was a mobile mag mount just a few feet off the ground perched atop an upside down grocery cart.

The afternoon passed relatively quietly with Bill T-01 and Rich T-03 at the base station and Chuck T-43 on the Avalon docks reporting as each arriving ferry brought more residents. Tourists were not allowed and thus the majority of Avalon shops were closed and locked. The small community was virtually a ghost town, save a single pharmacy and the hotel.

But there was aerial activity aplenty. Literally dozens of helicopters filled their large buckets in the sea, then emptied them mostly in the canyons just north of Avalon. At one point, an enormous hovercraft from Camp Pendleton brought county fire engines and equipment from the mainland. The craft would run right up on the beach south of town, then lower a ramp and the engines drove off right into town.

The small Avalon Fire Department with just four units, was taken over by the county. The engines were pushed out and the space used for shift briefings. It was amazing to watch the Incident Command System in action with Operations, Planning, Logistics and Finance section chiefs conducting the briefing from printed briefing assignments distributed to all in attendance. It was an impressive and well coordinated briefing from the assignment sheets and large wall maps indicating the fire perimeter.

Food was in abundance and of incredible quality. We later learned it was from a wedding reception than had been canceled when the wedding party was evacuated. Rest assured, the food found good homes with us and with dozens of tired firefighters.

As the day wore on and the fire danger steadily reduced, Chuck T-43 and Rich T-03 decided to catch the 1955 boat back to Long Beach. Bill T-01 opted to remain overnight with the incoming shift of Stu T-61, Mike T-109 and Dee T-115. Remaining events included the final fire containment and communication support for the Two Harbors area that remained without power, telephones or water. The fire had apparently destroyed the lines and poles to Avalon.

Would we do it again? You bet! Ham radio communication experience in a large scale event like this was a wonderful exercise of our skills, our equipment, and our ability to plan quickly and stuff a knapsack with clothing, food and water for an extended stay in the field.

Did we learn anything? What do you think? --- How about you? Are you ready to go?

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DCS



NGRC-SPSC Amateur Radio
Association

NGRC Amateur Radio Association
Bldg. S MS/1156
One Space Park Blvd.
Redondo Beach, CA 90278
Phone: 310-813-8569
E-mail: w6trw@amsat.org

www.w6trw.com

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Commissioner	Mike Hamada	KF6UCN	M5 / 0560	(310) 814-2628
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2m Repeater	John Cheatham	KE6OJM	R9 / 2896	(310) 813-5903
447 Repeater/Autopatch	Duane Park	N6DSP	M2 / 2200	(310) 813-2824
Activities Chairperson	Greg Shreve	KE6YEX	R2 / 1120	(310) 812-9347
Crosstalk Editor	Stuart Gorsky	K9STU	R5 / 1160	(310) 812-0255
Emer. Comm. Coordinator	Connie Warner	WA6JLD	M2 / 2500	(310) 812-5511
Librarian	Jim Harrison	K6OUE	R6 / 2541	(310) 814-1937
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Webmaster w6trw.com	Duane Park	N6DSP	M2 / 2200	(310) 813-2824