Amateurs in Action

Recounts of ham radio operators who have used their effort and skills to help others in a time of need

Disaster in Mexico City



Around 7:17 am on Thursday 19 September 1985, residents of Mexico City were rudely jolted by a magnitude 8.0 earthquake. Almost immediately, telephone, telex, and commercial radio were rendered inoperable due to the ensuing widespread equipment damage and power outage, while amateur radio operators scrambled to set up stations by battery power.

An army of ham radio operators provided a vital link to the earthquake-ravaged city, alerting the world to the destruction, relaying messages about conditions to officials, and appealing for blood and medicine, organizing arrangements for rescue services. They provided damage and casualty reports and immediate needs such as water, medicine, equipment, and manpower.

Members of the San Fernando Valley Amateur Radio Club jumped to action and organized help by setting up relay stations. A club member would tune up and down the band, searching for an available Mexican operator who was handling calls. Once connected, they relayed as many names and phone numbers as they would agree to process. Others in the 125-member ham radio club, including Len Drayton WA6LAU of Sepulveda, California, and Rick Stuber N6LGO also operated their radios to relay traffic into and from Mexico City.

Lenore Jensen W6NAZ of Sherman Oaks, California, was in contact with the Mexican Consulate, relaying health and welfare information and needs for four frustrating days. *You had to be patient*, she said. *I sat by my radio for hours, and I was afraid to go to the bathroom, for fear that I might miss an important relay*. Esther Wolf KB6HW of Sepulveda, California, who teaches at a heavily Hispanic San Fernando elementary school, said she was passing ten messages a day from her school alone.

South of the border, Carlos Sartorius XE1HC of Mexico City was taking a bath at the time the quake struck but quickly jumped to action and set up his radio to monitor, then relay vital information to those of the San Fernando Valley club and other US hams.



In the end, over 9500 were killed and over 30,000 were injured, plus damage that exceeded $5 billion, 3500 buildings seriously damaged, including over 400 collapsed.

You can read more about amateur radio involvement with the Mexico City earthquake aftermath in the *LA Times* and United Press International and the *Washington Post* and Time Magazine.