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Dunkirk on the Bayou

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As I write this, I am in south Florida, recovering from last week’s visit from Hurricane Irma. Two other hurricanes of the 2017 season are still in play. Hurricane Jose is sweeping northwest toward the middle Atlantic states and New England, destination and timing unknown. And another Caribbean storm, Maria, is working west from the African coast, with a forecasted track that *again* includes the Windward Islands, the Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico. Houston is beginning a long recovery from Harvey. The Virgin Islands — both British and American, along with many nearby Caribbean islands — are in match sticks. My beloved Florida Keys resemble the Virgin Islands. Much of the state of Florida has been without electrical power.

Contemplating the loss of human life, the personal suffering, the destruction of homes and businesses, and the loss of habitat, it’s difficult to find good news here.

But there is good news. The worst disasters seem to bring out the very best in mankind. These events stoke the fire of ordinary folks to step forward and assist their neighbors, even at the risk of their own safety and the cost of enormous personal inconvenience. Such was the case in Houston. While Houston Amateur Radio operators discovered that Harvey was mostly a flooding — not a communications — disaster, they stood by, ready to assist. I spoke with ARRL’s South Texas Emergency Coordinator after he spent 43 hours in the Office of Emergency Communications. I marveled at his coherence and stamina. Then there was the Cajun Navy. These citizens had not forgotten the kindness of Texas following Hurricane Katrina 12 years ago. Leaving their jobs and families behind, they dragged their flatboats, dories, and bass boats several hundred miles to return the kindness.

On Thursday, September 7, ARRL HQ received an urgent request from US Virgin Island Section Manager Fred Kleber, K9VV, asking us to send ARRL’s Ham Aid kits of HF gear. While Houston’s infrastructure proved hardened in a post-Sandy world, the Virgins were not so fortunate. The absence of significant hurricane disaster activity over the past decade has made our small inventory of Ham Aid equipment woefully obsolete. We placed an immediate order for more advanced transceivers, laptops, dipoles, and power supplies. They equipment arrived 12 hours later, and was tested and packed into waterproof shipping containers Friday morning. **But getting the kits to the affected areas proved impossible until FEMA’s Chief Technology Officer Ted Okada, K4HNL, arranged for transport. Jeff Hugabone, N1KBY, a FEMA contractor, arrived at HQ later that afternoon to accompany the equipment to St. Thomas, where some of it was delivered to FEMA’s hardened emergency broadcast station (PEP) on the island.** In and out the

door in fewer than 24 hours. More kits were sent to San Juan for staging with the Red Cross. At this moment, with Maria on the way, that decision seems fortuitous, if not prescient.

Many of you stepped up, and are still doing so, with funds to replenish our depleted inventory of Ham Aid equipment with modern replacements. The donations come in all sizes (“Here’s 25 bucks; it’s all I can manage,” wrote one member.) For us, any size fits. The YASME Foundation made a generous contribution. Those outside harm’s way did not forget the needs of their less fortunate colleagues. All of us at HQ are deeply grateful for your continued generosity. And not a moment too soon.

In south and central Florida, 20 ARES groups reported in by the Sunday following Irma’s landfall. Communications outages proved more sporadic than in Houston, as damage reports followed. Coordinating Section Manager Steve Szabo, WB4OMM, reported that the SARNET (Statewide Amateur Radio Network) performed well despite a shortage of net control stations. Operators from as far away as the panhandle and operators in southern Florida filled in. At the date of this writing, south Florida had not reported, and neither had the Keys, understandably. Several mariners were racing their sport fishing boats to the Florida Keys, where they will soon learn that — notwithstanding their generosity and enthusiasm — the Keys remain off-limits to non-authorized vessels. Even in disaster, there are protocols.

In all of this outpouring of support, at its core, is the generosity of spirit that defines the citizen-volunteer. And for those of you who stood steadily by, they also serve who stand and wait. Writing to FEMA Administrator Brock Long over the mid-September weekend, thanking him for his instantaneous response with the US Virgin Islands, I observed, “In my view, the effort of citizen-volunteers serving their communities in times of disaster is the more powerful model than government alone. Guided by government agencies like FEMA, these volunteers — whether they operate communications equipment or pilot a bass boat — can be a powerful force projection in the service of their communities and their country.”

And that’s what all of *you* do. We’re enormously proud of you. Keep doing it. Write you next month — when I’ve dried out.