

Here's To The Control Operators

***These Dedicated Volunteers Are Always There When Needed—
Don't Wait For An Emergency To Say Thanks***

by Murray Green, K3BEQ, mgreen@erols.com

Quietly, and from behind the scenes, control operators provide a necessary service for FM repeater users during day-to-day operations as well as during emergencies. But their efforts too often go unnoticed.

Most hams who use amateur radio repeaters typically operate while driving to and from work for short periods of time, and from home when not involved in raising kids, doing taxes, and performing household chores. Repeater licensees, trustees, and control operators, however, follow a different path. As volunteers, they monitor their respective repeaters most of the day and throughout the night. This is *not* as easy as you might think, because they're placed in a unique position of having to hear everything that occurs on the repeater, including interference. What they do is often taken for granted, and many hams are simply not fully aware of what is involved in this daily volunteer service.



Mike Gregory, KB3IYQ, formerly one of approximately 10 volunteer control operators who unselfishly monitor the two Green Mountain Repeater Association VHF repeaters near Washington, D.C. (Mike Gregory, KB3IYQ, photo)

Some may think there's a certain prestige in being a control operator for a repeater; it certainly requires a lot of patience, time, and discretion. Control operators, by virtue of their continuous monitoring, become very attuned to subtle changes in the repeater's operation, a definite plus for those maintaining the equipment. They also listen to all types of exchanges and have to make decisions on illegal and poor operating practices. Sanctions, if required, must be diplomatically applied by control operators, who must make certain that they're not censoring speech or causing ill feelings.

Murray Green, K3BEQ, has been a control operator for repeaters owned and operated by the Green Mountain Repeater Association, serving the Washington, D.C., area, since 1971. He is also an ARRL Official Observer.

As a control operator, the last thing one wants to do is create an atmosphere of self-importance or come down too hard on a fellow ham. That's the way to lose a current or potential club member and create an atmosphere of unfriendliness that's not in the best interests of a repeater organization. Hams like to talk and word gets around! Control operators must have that rare combination of being assertive, straightforward, sensitive to the feelings of others, and sincere in wanting to help. Not everyone is suited for that, so control operators must be selected wisely.

Emergencies

During emergency situations our club repeaters (transmitting on 146.610 and 146.880 MHz near Washington, D.C., and maintained by the Green Mountain Repeater Association) are automatically turned over to the Amateur Radio Emergency Service (ARES) or the Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Service (RACES). Examples of when this has happened include 9/11, and numerous hurricanes, ice storms, and tornadoes. Also, many seriously ill persons are transported to hospitals for dialysis treatment, for instance, by ARES personnel during inclement weather when regular transportation vehicles are overloaded.

Although the repeaters are assigned Net Control Stations (NCS) to help conduct an orderly flow of emergency messages among participating stations, the control operators continue their monitoring in the background. They stand ready to assist if required, in addition to ensuring that the repeaters are properly used.

The Highest Standards Of Operation

Radio scanners are a multi-million (if not billion) dollar industry. In a city where the population runs into the millions, tens of thousands of people may be listening to ham VHF/UHF frequencies. Because our repeaters are located near the nation's capital, their transmissions are easily monitored by those who fund, regulate, enforce, and oversee the Amateur Radio Service frequencies and operation. Congress is only six line-of-sight miles away. It's essential, therefore, that repeater users operate in a manner that reflects the highest standard of operating practices. Control operators are there to diplomatically ensure compliance. Regardless of location, however, this

applies to all repeaters licensed in the U.S. Amateur Radio Service by the FCC.

No "Off" Switch

Monitoring repeaters can be a frustrating and irritating exercise when one has to continuously listen to all sorts of interference that the average operator does not experience or has the option of turning off. A control operator has to stick it out. Some of the interference is of short duration and inexplicable; other interference, such as that caused by open microphones or extended interference from unknown sources, requires coordination and corrective action. Add that to the equation and it's easy to see how difficult the job can be.

Call it dedication, a strong desire to help, to be involved, to want "their repeater" and its users to be the best, or just plain old stick-to-it-iveness. In any event, control operators get the job done. But, they do have some help from the FCC.

Part 97 of Title 47 of the Code of Federal Regulations, the section that defines the rules for the Amateur Radio Service, provides for three types of controls for repeaters: local, remote, and automatic; the latter gives some form of temporary relief for the control operators. Part 97.3(a)(6) defines Automatic Control as, "The use of devices and procedures for control of a

station when it is transmitting so that compliance with the FCC Rules is achieved without the control operator being present at a control point." I believe that the FCC rule makers, in their wisdom, realized that it's unrealistic to monitor a repeater every hour of every day continuously. However, there must be a responsible control operator available to bring the station into compliance with FCC rules, even if that means he or she is woken up at 3 a.m.!

Minding The Store

"...Automatic control must cease upon notification by an FCC District Director that the station is transmitting improperly or causing harmful interference to other stations..." (Part 97.109(d)).

The FCC is not bashful about issuing this notification. Why? Because in certain instances, the abuse most likely extended to a repeater operating without any designated control operators or control operators who did not monitor for lengthy, unacceptable periods of time. Essentially, no one was minding the store, and user exchanges or interference got out of hand with no corrective action taken. Still, the number of issued notifications is minimal



Police helicopters and emergency ambulance crews stand by to aid injured workers following the crash of a hijacked commercial airliner into a section of the Pentagon. Military personnel and civilians helped transport injured people on litters to ambulances for treatment and transportation to hospitals. During emergencies, the Green Mountain Repeater Assn.'s repeaters are automatically turned over to the Amateur Radio Emergency Service (ARES) or the Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Service (RACES). (U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Gary Coppage)



The Green Mountain Repeater Association's repeaters are located near the nation's capital; in fact, the Capitol building is only six line-of-sight miles away.

when you consider the large number of repeaters in the U.S. that are properly used.

A Credit To The Community

Amateur radio operators who “show up” when needed, who face extreme hardships during major storms and other disaster-related events, who ensure communications are available (including the use of emergency power systems), who provide transportation for those in need, and who monitor the repeater for countless hours are deserving of our sincerest gratitude.

A final note on the control operator's dedication: Every repeater has a station licensee or trustee (for repeaters using club callsigns) who is the principal party responsible for the proper operation of the repeater. If the FCC calls a trustee to task for a violation, the control operator shares the responsibility. It takes a special level of commitment to assume that kind of responsibility.

So the next time you talk to a repeater control operator or ARES/RACES member on the air, thank him or her, or send an e-mail. Most repeater clubs list their names, callsigns, and e-mail addresses in newsletters or on webpages, or simply ask a club officer how to get in touch. It's the right thing to do. ■