

I would like to thank W2IK Bob Heij for the source material for this program. Today, we are being asked by several agencies to take on the task of assembling "jump teams" that will have the ability to travel to a disaster area and supply emergency communications from the "lion's mouth." The jump team concept, and jump teams themselves are almost as old as ham radio itself, however, in light of the recent disasters it needs a new spotlight. Jump teams are involved in special situations which will require addressing special concerns relative to today's needs. First and foremost, every jump team that's created must strive to be a self-sustaining operation. There can be no doubt about this. Jump teams cannot place an additional burden on a devastated area by requesting supplies or shelters. They must complete their communications responsibilities acting as a "stand alone" unit, bringing with them all the equipment, supplies, food, water, shelters and all the support they might require to the stricken location. Depending upon the disaster, its location, and time of year, jump teams will be required to bring not only basic ham radio and personal gear but also different equipment, supplies and clothing which will be specifically suited to support each particular event.

The most important piece of any communications support program is its operators. However, before ANY ham radio operator even contemplates raising their hand at an EmComm meeting to volunteer for inclusion into a jump team, they must be fully aware of what will be expected of them. Being part of any deployment team of this nature requires that you might be asked to deploy in situations that are both physically and emotionally demanding. This is not like deploying for some limited disaster or at the tail-end of an event such as many of you who've handled communications in some shelter for a few days following a hurricane or winter storm might have done. This is much different. Jump teams quite often are the very first communications out of a decimated area. It is imperative that they get on the air as quickly as possible and stay on the air by whatever means at their disposal. They must be able to erect antennas in areas where nothing might be left standing or where the average ham thinks it cannot be done. It requires special knowledge, skills and training. The hams who form as a jump team must know how to improvise and adapt using what they've brought and what limited things they can scrounge. There needs to be a little "MacGyver" in every team member.

I believe, when someone or some group forms or are part of an emergency communications "Jump Team," they need to approach it as if it were on a DXpedition to some uninhabited island where the only thing they can count on is bird dooty, bad weather and each other. Like a DXpedition, there will be a team leader who will delegate responsibilities that each member must fulfill so the station(s) can be up and running in as little time as possible. This pre-delegation will be based on skill-level and experience in each area. I don't think I've read of anyone taking the same attitude of a DXpedition and applying it to an EmComm Jump Team, but it certainly fits.

With all of this; being a team member also means being in very good physical and emotional condition. At times it can be much more demanding than "rustic camping." If you are deployed to a tropical island following a hurricane; you will find it to be oppressively hot and humid in the hurricane's aftermath. Weather-wise, it won't be what you'd experience during any vacation period. You will likely sweat like a man about to face a firing squad from little or no effort. There will be no place to cool off. It will likely effect your ability to sleep during your scheduled off time and you will lose weight from deploying in this type of harsh environment. Living in a tent, and not in the air-conditioned luxury of some hotel as would be the case during a vacation, will place an additional burden which will reveal itself by increased stress levels among all the people you will have to work with.

There may be times when it will be a trek to pick your way through rubble and debris just to go to a makeshift bathroom. No showers. No fancy food. Just eating what you've brought, especially for the first 72 hours. You have to honestly answer this question: "Can I do this?" "Can I operate and act as a professional communicator under more deplorable conditions than we might associate with living in the back areas of any "third world country" or the dirtiest conditions you might ever imagine... or be deployed in a location where you've felt that you were losing the feeling in your fingers from the extreme cold?" As a "go anywhere" jump team member you must be able to withstand both extremes of climate. If you think I'm exaggerating, then talk to a few "first responders" of past major disasters. It would be a good idea to first get a physical and ask your doctor if you'd be up to the task of deploying in hardship areas. Remember, you're not a kid of 18, anymore. (At least this way you'd be getting the physical that you keep putting off.)

OK, let's say that you have answered "yes." Now another potential roadblock gets thrown into the mix. That is the emotional stress of any disaster. First is the stress of assembling a station where none ever existed. This won't be a casual "Field Day" setup. People are depending upon your team to get communications up and running in as little time as possible. When your team gets to it's location, usually each team member has already been pre-assigned a specific logistical task(s) to perform such as setting up shelters, erecting antennas, doing station setup (rigs and power,etc), contacting and interacting (with informational gathering) with local agencies and supplying nutritional support for the team are examples of but five of the basic required needs.

After your team's initial station is running, your thoughts might then shift to an even greater stress agent. You have to ask yourself this: Can you subjectively deploy into a disaster area, and do your job, without letting your emotional floodgates open? This does not mean that you should be a cold-hearted person. If you were, you wouldn't even be considering volunteering! What this means is that you should be able to see beyond the sorrow towards the greater goal of helping the devastated area get back on its feet.

You'll need a means and a way not to focus on the actual disaster but rather to focus on your communications job. It requires courage. The emotional burden doesn't stop there, either.

Even if you are the most seasoned EmComm operator, you must remember that you are a guest of whatever communications group is in-charge of the disaster. You are there by their request/invitation. You must be able to take their orders and follow their rules no matter if it goes against everything you've been taught and drilled on. It's their show, not yours. They may make mistakes. Swallow hard and do your job. If you can't do this, then don't deploy. If they ask your advice or opinion, give it in a non-threatening manner. Again, it's their community and therefore their responsibility.

If your EmComm group is worth it's salt, then they will help you in your jump team training regarding "emotional conditioning" before you are faced with deployment. They'll show you techniques on how you can emotionally disengage from the event during your break times so you can sleep or physically recharge. You'll learn how to "decompress" after your deployment so what you've seen and experienced doesn't affect how you'll react when you get back home. These factors are just as important as bringing the proper gear.

Can you handle all of this? Can you physically and emotionally handle the task? Can you also afford to invest the additional time for special training and deploying? It won't be easy, nor will it be a "one day deal". You won't be able to "pick and choose" which event you wish to be involved in. If you can do all of this, then the next step is to talk to your local EmComm group about being part of a jump team. There are a lot of things you'll have to learn and many things you'll need to acquire to be a part of such a team. It's not a job for "badge polishers", to inflate egos or for the faint of heart. It's a down-and-dirty job for special people with special skills for a special responsibility.

After doing some nosing around on the Internet, and talking to EmComm people, it appears that some people and groups are confusing the terms "Go Kits" with "Jump Kits." To me, a "Go Kit" is something like a "Go Bag" which contains most of the personal supplies and radio equipment that an individual might need to deploy, i.e.: "go to" to a local event such as to a shelter to assist in communications until a weather event has passed in a day or two. These items are usually stored in a back pack or plastic bin. You actually aren't "jumping" lock, stock and barrel anywhere as much as you are being deployed to some location.

(A lot of hams who showed up at Red Cross in the hopes of helping out during the World Trade Center Disaster didn't even have something as simple as a "Go Bag", but just showed up with an HT and MAYBE one extra battery..... They weren't put to use because they were under-prepared. I hope that many have learned from this and now have adequate "Go Bags.")

However, by my definition, a "Jump Kit" is something very much different. It is not a backpack or even a "kit", but rather a large cache of supplies and radio equipment you'd bring with you to a non-local location such as what you'd bring traveling a distance to support a disaster in another state as either a stand-alone station op or as a member of a communications team. This would require more food, water, equipment, power and antenna considerations and shelters for an event where there wouldn't be much of anything to rely on.

There seems to be very little found about actually organizing an EmComm Jump Team anywhere on the Internet other than stating a need for them in local plans. It kind of reminds me of everyone wanting one, but no one knowing how to go about it. I know that there are very well run jump teams out there, however not much posted about them other than what they've done ie: "event deployment". I am aware that many teams are "area-related", however the more info we are armed with, the better job we can do in creating our own jump teams and making sure they have all they need to properly fill EmComm needs.

With this void of published information, there is a lack of self-confidence in the minds and hearts of those EmComm groups looking to develop their own jump team(s) beyond asking individual members to create/gather their personal go-kits in some back pack or bin to be used on a grander scale than supplying basic communications at a local shelter where they would be relieved in 12 hours. The basic go-kit is a nominal inventory of items and won't properly cover things needed during an event where one has to travel distances and to be deployed in the nakedness of a major disaster. Have you ever heard of a Dxpedition where members simply carried to "XYZ Island" gear and personal items on a few back packs? This would be courting disaster.

I look forward to your comments and if you are interested in belonging to a jump team.