

# Dateline: O'ahu

*Hams Respond When the Hawaiian Islands Hula*

**Ann S. Shaver, WH2E**

*On October 17, 2006, an earthquake measuring 6.7 on the Richter scale struck the Hawaiian Islands. The quake's epicenter, located off the Kona coast, was caused by tectonic plate movement, not volcanic activity.*

It really was a dark and stormy morning, but that isn't our story. And there really were not one, but two serious earthquakes that Sunday morning in Hawaii, but that isn't our story either.

"You have to remember," explained Harold Buckle, KH6HB, "that the situation on O'ahu (where Honolulu and most of the state's population are located) was a prolonged power outage, not earthquake damage." But, of course, that wasn't realized right away.

"My first thought was tsunami. I actually heard the rumble of the earthquake before the vibration began, and I ran for the radio," Connie McCurdy, NH7IE, reported. "I knew ham radio was the fastest way to learn if we'd be facing a locally generated tsunami."

Almost before the shaking stopped, David Cabatu, AH7E, organized an emergency net on the 146.88 repeater owned by O'ahu Civil Defense and maintained by the Emergency Amateur Radio Club (EARC). Kevin Bogan, AH6QO, and Ron Hashiro, AH6RH, opened an HF net on 40-meters. At the same time, Ray Moody, AH6LT, RACES coordinator, hurried to the Emergency Operations Center for O'ahu (Honolulu County).

"I knew we'd be losing power right away, and I wanted to find out as much as I could, as quickly as I could," continued Connie. With two emergency generators and a small arsenal of portable radios, televisions and scanners, the McCurdys were not likely to be in the dark, literally or figuratively. Her OM,

Tom, NH7OL, got the generators going while Connie assessed the situation. And in fact, commercially generated power began to fail within 10 minutes of the 6.8 magnitude earthquake centered on an island about 150 miles south of O'ahu.

Miles from urban Honolulu, hams on the leeward coast tuned into the KH6JPL repeater. Like Connie, my own first thought was tsunami, after Al, NH2Z, my OM, explained that obviously, this was an earthquake. But unlike Connie, I had no idea earthquakes could be noisy. (Al's from California and knows about such things; me, I thought noise plus vibration must have something to do with a helicopter, perhaps a helicopter crash.) To verify this was, indeed, an earthquake and to learn about the tsunami likelihood, I grabbed an HT and went onto our lanai (balcony) to access the repeater. Reno Gomban, KH6QH, answered my call immediately and informed me that the first quake was measured at about 6.5, but no tsunami was expected. Other hams came on frequency, too, and soon we all began to report the loss of power in our various neighborhoods.

Billy Gomban, KH6JPL, repeater trustee, broke into the exchange of condition reports to verify the autopatch was operative. He asked us to spread the word any way we could that this resource was available. Although landline telephone service continued to function normally for everyone who still had a hardwired phone to use, cell coverage was

*"...a dark  
and stormy  
morning..."*



O'ahu - 44 mi (71 km) long and 30 mi (48 km) across—the third largest of the Hawaiian Islands.



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spotty. I reported the autopatch news on the local Army MARS VHF frequency.

Numerous amateur radio groups sprang into action. Emergency-minded hams were already on a heightened state of alert because of the flash flood and urban-and-small-stream warnings that had been issued the night before. In addition to the RACES and EARC response on O'ahu, the health comm group made sure vital communication links were preserved among the various hospitals on the island, the blood bank and related services. Billy Gomban, a state civil defense volunteer, phoned the state's EOC straight away to learn the precise details of the event; before heading to the state civil defense EOC in the Diamond Head crater, he relayed the official information to his brother, Reno, who made the announcement on the leeward repeater, which I had been monitoring.

As soon as word of the earthquakes filtered out, SATERN (Salvation Army Team Emergency Radio Network) activated. Within 90 minutes, SATERN volunteers were guarding their traditional frequency, 14.265, ready to assist with passing information back and forth among the islands and between Hawaii and the rest of the world, as needed.

By mid-morning the flow of information to the general public increased. Commercial broadcast stations got on the air and the newspapers were Web posting. Mainland friends and relatives began to call islanders with updates—not always accurate. “I monitored national news, and I heard a lot of distorted things,” Connie McCurdy remarked. “One of the strong points about our amateur nets was that hams only discussed confirmed facts. Tom and I relied most on the things we heard on the ham frequencies.”

Indeed, that night's EARC training net saw a spike in participation. By net time, power had been restored to many different neighborhoods but, was still out in some of the most heavily populated areas, including Waikiki. “Ron Hashiro, NCS for KH6OCD, the state civil defense station, requested that EARC stations checking in be asked if HECO power was on or off at their respective QTHs. Between 1930W and 2000W, approximately 39 stations reported power status from all over O'ahu ranging from Mililani and Makakilo to Kailua and Hawaii Kai,” said Tom Seale, KH6AAA, who has conducted this particular net for many years. “On average, about

15 stations check in on Sunday nights versus the 39 that Sunday.”

Moody, at O'ahu civil defense, made a similar observation. “I heard more call signs in one day than I hear in a month, some that I've never heard before. It takes an earthquake to bring people out. But it really worked!”

As it happened, this geologic hula was the proverbial learning experience. Some lessons were more profound than others. Among other things, Moody discovered the linkage among the three VHF repeaters didn't work as well as anticipated, despite careful planning and repeated testing.

More troublesome, perhaps, was the noise and commotion within the EOC. “Few people have been in OCDA during an activation,” Moody observed. “It's wall-to-wall people, bubbling chaos. All the major elements of city/county government

send representatives, including the mayor. Each is prepared to announce the most current information. Everybody has two to three cell phones (with priority output) and a radio or two, in addition to the phones at each station in the EOC. Direct TV links our EOC to state EOC and other islands for expanded conference calls, including the National Weather Service.

Several people are always talking on the phone to their units. The players assess the situation, identify needs and move to fill them.”

Commenting further on the noise level, Moody continued, “Voice talk was limited by overload. However, text messages went through with greater success. This is a plus for everybody.” Attention, hams: packet radio still has an important role to play!

“I should have had my AA-battery back-up ready to go,” confessed Edward Dung, NH6WI. “I've never had to rely on it for very long, so I don't know how long it will last. My primary interest is weather-related emergencies, and there's usually a little warning before they strike.” Attention, hams: fresh batteries at the ready are essential at all times. ■



Connie McCurdy, NH7IE, shown with some of the gear she used during the hurricane emergency.

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