



Voices in the AIR

**Ham radio isn't a "hobby"
– it's a safety net, a fail-
safe, a service that brings
people, electronics and
communication together.**

A \$350,000 catamaran was stolen from the Florida Keys in early April.

The theft of the 40-foot water craft was significant enough to make the Miami Herald. It didn't cause much of a stir here, even though a Punta Gorda Isles man was instrumental in its recovery in Cuba.

Glenn Tuttle operates an amateur radio station – two, actually – in a spare bedroom. He's on the air for about 90 minutes or so every morning, keeping track of such things.

He's KPK for the Seven Seas Cruising Association, passing along information to cruisers. "For instance, if there's someone on a sailboat in Trinidad that is boarded by pirates, association members will know about it," he said. "Their purpose is to record and document it – and pass the word out to other cruisers so they'll know where it's safe to go and where it's not safe to go."

In the case of the purloined vessel, "I read about it on Facebook," Tuttle said. "I contacted the owner and asked him if he wanted help in finding it. He said yes, so I started broadcasting the lookout on the radio, and a boat in Cuba heard it and said it was in their marina but had been turned away because the two occupants had no papers."

He called the Seven Seas Cruising Association station host in Cuba.

"He is friends with some people in the Guardia Frontera, and they responded within hours and caught the boat and the thieves and towed the boat back to a marina, impounded it, and put the two American thieves in jail."

Nice work.

Tuttle never left his spare bedroom. ►

**Story by Rusty Pray
Photography by Steve Donaldson**



"People will call me and say, 'Glenn, do you have any way to get in touch with somebody on a boat in Ponce, Puerto Rico?' Through a network of boaters, I'll be able to contact the boater."

Tuttle is a ham radio operator. Yes, that ham radio, the one the nerdy kid down the block used to operate from his basement, talking to bodiless voices from faraway places into the wee hours. And, yes, that ham radio, the one the cool, tech savvy people operate to keep tabs on boats, talk to compatriots around the world without bothering with cell phones, and keep the channels of communication open during storms and catastrophes after all else has failed.

Tuttle and his wife, Eddie, are both retired FBI agents. They came to Punta Gorda in 2011, almost as if they'd been assigned here.

"We lived on a boat for 30 years," Eddie said. "We were coming back from the Caribbean on our boat – we'd been in Caribbean 10 years and were on our way to St. Petersburg. We assumed we would look for a house up there. We stopped at the Isles Yacht Club and met a friend, Al Alexander, a retired DEA agent. He started showing us around, and we just fell in love with Punta Gorda."

Glenn also plays a role in the SHARES program, which is administered by the Department of Homeland Security. SHARES provides personnel with a national security or emergency preparedness purpose to communicate through high frequency radio when landline and cellular communication are unavailable.

He got a SHARES license as member of Seven Seas Cruising Association. He runs a separate radio network for both.

"We pass both digital and voice traffic," he said. "In the event of a major catastrophe like a hurricane, or a nuclear event, that's the way the government will communicate – through high frequency radio. In the aftermath of a hurricane, any kind of big flood, if there were ever an electromagnetic pulse that shuts down all the computers and everything, the only thing that would be working would be the ham radios."

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Every day, a digital instruction comes over his computer at noon. He then does a voice check. He'll check in with somebody, maybe someone in Tennessee or a person in Alabama.

"In case there ever is a real emergency, they know my equipment is capable," Tuttle said.

Ham radio is defined on the internet as a popular hobby – operators say it's more than a hobby – and service that brings people, electronics and communication together. People use ham radio to talk across town, around the world, or even into space, all without the internet or cell phones.

It is alive and well in Charlotte County, which is home to two clubs – the Peace River Radio Association and the Charlotte Amateur Radio Club – populated by highly sophisticated operators such as Tuttle. The clubs together have well over 100 members.

The ham radio demographic in Charlotte County is not surprising. The operators tend to be older, and they tend to be men. There were three women – including Eddie – at a recent gathering of operators at the Tuttle's home.

"This area, because of the demographics, we don't see a lot of young people getting in," Tuttle said.

"Most of us aren't teenagers anymore," nodded John Wildeman, a Punta Gorda operator.

Wildeman might be typical of the ham radio operator in Charlotte County. He was interested in amateur radio as a kid, then lived an entire lifetime without pursuing that interest before retiring and picking it up. He's been a ham radio operator for about four years now.

"I got interested in high school in the 1960s," he said. "I was in an all-boys school, and then I got transferred to a coed school and realized there was things other than radio. They had girls there, and that totally ended my career in ham radio. I always wanted to get back into it, and after I retired and moved to Punta Gorda about four years ago, I got my license."

Others come from military or law enforcement backgrounds. For instance, Virginia Bryant is a retired Army master sergeant and serves as the flotilla commander for the United States Coast Guard Auxiliary. Ron Farley is an expert in risk management. Dave Schall is a rocket scientist. Really.

Bryant and Schall were among about 10 operators who gathered at the Tuttle's home to talk about their hobby.

"The word amateur sometimes connotes Mickey Mouse kind of stuff," Schall said. "But everyone here is licensed. The word amateur means we don't get paid for it. I'm a rocket scientist. The last third of my career was spent on satellites for NASA and the Air Force. My ham radio experience was more beneficial to me as a rocket scientist than my college education."

The technology is top-shelf. Aiding the Coast Guard or Homeland Security calls for something more sophisticated than telegraph.

"Some people may think we're kind of old and outdated," said Farley, of Punta Gorda, president of the Peace River Radio Association. "Actually, amateur radio is moderately progressive with some of the things we do. Emergency communications, we can use hand-held portable, or desk-based radio or a mobile unit. We also ➤



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do digital communication, which is like sending text email over the air. So, it's pretty current technology."

One of the first things the members of the gathering stressed was that ham radio is not a hobby.

"It's a thousand hobbies," said Dave Weinstein, a member of both local clubs and a retired biomedical engineering technician. He's held his amateur radio license since 1961.

"There are people who have never, ever communicated on a radio," he continued. "There are folks who communicate by satellite – and there are amateur radio satellites in orbit. There are folks who communicate with the (International Space Station). Astronauts have amateur radio licenses.

"There are folks who like to go out to remote locations that no one hardly ever goes to. They set up all their stuff, they operate for a period of time, and then they pack up all their stuff and clean up and leave.

"There are people that like to take little portable radios and go mountain-topping. They hike up to tops of mountains and operate. There are all kinds of activities.

"There are many, many aspects of radio. It's not a hobby. It's a group of things that are oriented around technology."

During the hour the operators spent in Tuttle's spare bedroom – his state-of-the-art radio room, really – the conversation continually turned to ham radio's value in emergencies. Truth is, ham radio operators do come in handy in a hurricane.

"Things fail," said Dave Rockwell, a retired electrical engineer and a staff officer for the Coast Guard Auxiliary. "People think they're immune to everything. But almost every major emergency that happens, in some place, in some area, everything fails. Amateur radio doesn't."

Never was that more apparent than during the hurricanes of last fall, Irma, which hit here, and Maria, which devastated the Caribbean.

During Irma, which slammed Charlotte County on September 10, Robert La

Rue pulled a 48-hour shift in the Charlotte County Public Safety Building.

"We were locked down in there, basically," said La Rue, a retired Navy guy whose ham radio nickname is Popeye. "We got there at 11 in the morning Saturday, and when the winds got to about 45 m.p.h., they covered the doors and windows, and we were there until Monday morning, when they cut us loose about 10:30, 11 o'clock.

"When power was lost at Liberty Elementary (a shelter), they could not call out with cell phones. All of a sudden, we were the only link to that shelter. We tried to keep everyone informed as to what was going on."

"With cell phones, internet and all that, we kind of take a back seat," Popeye said of amateur radio operators. "Two of those systems go down, like they did in Hurricane Charley (in 2004), and all of a sudden we become very important. Until those systems go bye-bye, nobody thinks very much about us."

Angelo Drammissi, another ham radio operator, was at Liberty Elementary, one of two shelters in Charlotte County, during Irma.

"We had about 500 people there, and we handled quite a few messages back to the EOC," he said. "After we lost power, we lost phone. After they put the shutters up, we were completely shut off from the outside world. So, it was a pretty valuable position to be in."

He said most of what he handled related to the health and welfare of those in the shelter – including a couple medical emergencies – and were relayed to the Emergency Operations Center, where Popeye helped man the radio room.

"We kind of stepped in and filled a gap," Drammissi said. "That's when we become very important."

During Maria, Tuttle carried "health and welfare messages for victims in Puerto Rico."

The Tuttles like to tell this story about the value of ham radio operators:

"A couple years ago, Eddie and I were on our boat in the Bahamas," Glenn related. "One morning, the dock master came out and said, 'Have you guys seen Joe and Charlie? They went out fishing yesterday in a small boat and they haven't come back.' So, we started asking around. They have a ➤

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search and rescue in the Bahamas. It's a volunteer organization. It's not like our Coast Guard. No one had called these agencies yet, and no one knew what to do."

Glenn corralled a couple friends, and they started asking around. They started putting out calls over high frequency radio to other boats in the area.

"I talked to a weather router we all use, and he was able to do a drift analysis with the wind and current... These kids didn't take any water. They didn't have an anchor. They didn't have anything. Talk about being unprepared."

Eddie took up the narrative:

"The only communication available once we left the marina was radio. He started relaying on radio to get the word out to all the boats in the area."

"That whole day," Glenn said, "no one had found them. It went into the night. By then, everyone in the Bahamas knew about them through our radio communications."

As it turned out, in the middle of night, a couple in a sailboat heard yells. They had been listening to the radio, so they knew it was the boys.

"They found those boys and brought them in," Glenn said. "That boat had drifted about 100 miles. If they had hit the Gulfstream, they would have been northbound and gone."

Disseminating information during a hurricane, casting a net for lost boats at sea, ham radio operators perform a service that few know about. That it's largely anonymous doesn't diminish its value.

Theirs are voices heard when needed. 📻

