

How NOT to Act At a Command Post

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Author's Note:

This article reflects generalized scenarios that have been related to me over the years by various people within the public safety community, usually immediately after I mention my affiliation with amateur radio. It is not intended to portray any one person or specific incident, although many who have seen this material say they "know this guy".
73, Tony Whobrey, KY4SP May 25, 2003

As an amateur radio operator, sooner or later you will find yourself involved in an emergency operation where you have the opportunity to interact with one or more public safety agencies. This guide will help you to present yourself in the "manner expected" by most of these agencies.

First and foremost when you arrive at the scene, place your vehicle in a location where as many people as possible will notice it. If there is already a public safety command post in place a good technique is to park as close to the door as possible so everyone has to squeeze by your car to get in or out. Leave the engine running, so everyone will see that you might have to leave on other important business at a moment's notice, this is an especially important point if you have a diesel powered vehicle. Be sure to lock the doors and leave all of the radios turned up really, really loud. If your vehicle has a PA or siren amplifier, use it to be sure your radios can be heard clearly - a loud feedback squeal when any portable radio is keyed within 40 yards indicates that the volume is about right.

Once you have secured your vehicle, set all of your equipment up as close to the already established dispatch positions as possible. You will, of course need electric power; unplug the coffee pot and microwave oven and use these receptacles for your station. If this power source doesn't seem adequate, set up a portable generator and run extension cords in the command post door, then under the dispatcher's chair and over to your equipment.

Turn your radio's volume up really loud, so you can hear it over the noise from your generator and other unimportant radios in the command post. After you are set up, take some time to tell the dispatcher how much more you know about his radio system than he does. Be sure and tell him that you talk to people thousands of miles away on your HF equipment at home, and have lots of QSL cards. Explain in minute detail how you have modified your radio for out-of-band use, the entire staff will be comforted by the fact that you can use your non-type accepted equipment on the department's licensed frequencies, should all of their carefully maintained stations simultaneously fail. Once you have done all this, expect many requests for advice, since dispatchers typically only know how to talk on 2 or more telephones and various radio channels simultaneously, and are completely in the dark when it comes to modifying radio equipment.

Sometimes your assistance won't be needed in the command post itself; this affords you an opportunity to roam on foot throughout the operations area, in order to obtain a firsthand view of important events. Be sure to make your presence known to any group of 6 or more personnel that you find, they are sure to want your input in regard to a variety of operational matters.

You may be asked to perform tasks that while in support of the overall operation, do not involve the use of any of your radio equipment; don't be misled by such requests. Your time is far too valuable to waste on such mundane tasks, these people should have realized that they would need food and drink as the event progressed, and it is certainly not your fault that everyone present doesn't have a raincoat available.

If news media are present, make sure they notice both of your portable radios, so they will understand that you are a vital part of the operation. If you are successful in this attempt, you might get on camera; if you are asked to speak, give as much information as you can, including any "inside" comments that you overheard while at the command post. Have at least one of your portables tuned to the incident commander's tactical frequency during the interview, and make sure that the reporter's microphone will pick it up clearly. Be sure to wear your call sign in at least 3 highly visible places (a large gold police-style badge is a good way to display your call) and use one of your portable radios as a handy pointer to emphasize your comments. Try to have some excuse to transmit on one or both of your portable radios while on camera.

After the event is over remove your equipment as soon as possible, in order to have it immediately available for the next emergency that might arise. Don't be concerned if you have to step over or around others or ask them to delay their work while you load your equipment; they will surely understand the importance of your mission, since they have been walking around your vehicle with its radios blaring for hours. Once you arrive home, kick back, have a well-deserved cup of coffee (wonder why that CP didn't have any?), and congratulate yourself on a job well done. ;^)