

ShipCom Assists Coast Guard in Emergency Communications, Rescue Operations

(Mobile, Ala.) — ShipCom LLC, which operates radio station WLO for ship-to-shore communications, made its facilities available during Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath to the Coast Guard and other emergency agencies.

“Shortly after the worst of the storm passed us on Monday afternoon, we received a telephone call from the Coast Guard’s ATC [Aviation Training Center] Mobile, informing us that the roof was damaged over their operations center and they had lost all communication capability with their assets,” reported ShipCom president Rene Stiegler. “In response, ShipCom prepared a VHF radio, power supply, and emergency antenna, transporting it to ATC Mobile. With this radio, ATC could communicate with ShipCom.”

Using ShipCom’s advanced interoperability systems, Stiegler said “we took over all communications for over 24 hours, relaying hundreds if not thousands of messages from aircraft back to ATC Mobile,” which had been chosen as the main staging site largely because it was the closest suitable facility to the worst of the storm-stricken area.

ShipCom was able to provide these services to the Coast Guard and other agencies despite sustaining substantial damage to its own facilities. “We lost 50 percent of our antenna field,” said Stiegler, “and part of our roof is damaged. We lost 70 to 80 percent of our capacity but we repaired it sufficiently within 24 hours to be able to stay on the air throughout the crisis.”

Stiegler noted that ShipCom “devoted most of our normal capacity – the channels usually reserved for our ship-to-shore clients – to the Coast Guard’s emergency communications.”

“Some of the messages we received were chilling,” said Stiegler. “Reports of bodies floating near the Superdome, and of rescue aircraft being fired at, raised the hairs on the back of our radio operators’ necks.”

As search-and-rescue operations grew, Stiegler said, “ShipCom relayed coordinates of victims stranded on rooftops to the rescue aircraft and relayed reports of their rescue back to the ATC command center. The vastness of message traffic that passed through our radios is too large to describe in detail.”

In addition to ATC Mobile, ShipCom also established communications links for the command center in Alexandria, Louisiana, and with the NCS (National Communications System) SHARED RESOURCES (SHARES) High Frequency (HF) Radio Program.

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