

Broken Box

A short story by [Trevor Hopkins](#)

Back in the 1970s, I did quite a lot of work associated with that voluntary first-aid organisation called the St. John's Ambulance Brigade. In those days, St. John's did not have the funds to equip their ambulances with two-way radio. Rather, they preferred to spend their limited resources – accrued by the time-honoured expedient of rattling charity collection boxes vigorously under people's noses on street corners and in shopping centres – on more important things like medical supplies and first aid training.

When the need arose, the Brigade would sometimes engage with a local group of volunteers to provide communication between their command and control post, the ambulances and their fixed first aid posts. These licenced radio amateurs, widely known at the time as Ham Radio enthusiasts, would make themselves available for practice exercises and the occasional planned 'live' event,

I have often thought that explaining the tenants of amateur radio, especially to a modern audience, is really quite difficult. The idea that individuals are supposed to be responsible for their own behaviour in a medium that could have quite literally worldwide implications seems anathema to governing bodies in a modern world which seemed to insist on policing even the most microscopic elements of everyday life.

The published purpose of the Radio Amateur licence was to perform "experiments and self-training", harking back to the heyday of the hobby in the early twentieth century when a few talented individuals made discoveries which opened up the world to near-instantaneous communication. It was expected that one should be able to construct one's own two-way radio equipment and operate it in the approved fashion. So, it was quite legal to make radio transmissions, provided that one had acquired the appropriate a Home Office licence. In those days, it was necessary to pass a formal examination, including a two-part multiple choice paper, as well as a test in Morse Code: you know, the dots-and-dashes, Ess-Oh-Ess and all that.

I was at the time a student at one of the larger red-brick universities in the North of England. In between my studies and my sporadic social life, and quite probably to the detriment of both, I became an

active Radio Ham. Encouraged by my few friends and acquaintances, I studied for and passed the examinations, and rapidly acquired both licence and callsign. The latter was quite a lengthy sequence of letters and numbers, since it had to be a unique identification world-wide, but I soon became adept at rattling off my new callsign into a microphone.

With my wet-behind-the-ears enthusiasm, I purchased several pieces of second-hand radio equipment with money from my student grant – funds which might have been better used for books, or even food. I also started attending regularly a local radio club, which took place in a community centre building a short bicycle ride from the university, and took part in a variety of social and technical events. It was through a contact at the Club that I was first invited to become a member of the Radio Amateurs' Emergency Network, also known as Raynet.

Raynet was, and indeed still is, a volunteer organisation dedicated to the supply of radio communication in the event of local or national disaster. When that airliner came down at Lockerbie, for example, Raynet members accompanied groups in the harrowing search for parts of aircraft or bodies. As part of the training, however, Raynet members were permitted to undertake practice events – not real emergencies, but planned activities in the public eye – usually in conjunction with volunteer first-aid organisations like the St. John's Ambulance Brigade.

My first 'live' Raynet exercise was supporting the Brigade in providing first-aid coverage of a bicycle race around the streets of the city. This particular part of town was notorious for being built entirely on the slope; steep hills, cobbled streets, sharp bends winding between the buildings were amongst the hazards facing the racers. There was a high probability of competitors falling off and suffering grazes and bruising, or perhaps more serious injury: broken bones or gravel forced under their skin by their fall.

The other hazard anticipated for this sort of event was explained to me by old George, an overweight and avuncular senior first aider that I had somehow fallen into conversation with. I suspected that George had been patching up accident victims for several thousand years, or perhaps just since the Second World War. In any case, he told me that the heat and crowded streets would over-tire the weak and elderly, with a real risk of collapses and even heart attacks amongst the spectators.

An acquaintance of mine, a student doctor at the university's teaching hospital, described such volunteers in rather disparaging terms.

"First Aiders," he suggested pompously, "Can usually be relied upon only to mark the *approximate* site of an injury with a bandage."

I have no medical training, but I have worked with such first-aid groups off-and-on over the years, and my erstwhile friend's remarks are a little overstated. In my view, it is certainly useful to have people around who would not faint at the sight of blood – it always makes me rather queasy, I have to say – and were equipped to quickly get the sick and injured to professional medical attention.

As had been planned carefully beforehand, the Raynet group set up a control centre in the local St. John's headquarters. This was located in an unprepossessing suburb, and it had taken me nearly twenty minutes to cycle there with a heavy rucksack of radio equipment on my back. The other members of our squad had already arrived by the time I got there. Dave, the leader of the Raynet squad, was a weather-beaten man of middle age, wiry-thin and very fit from regular walking expeditions to the more inaccessible parts of the UK.

Dave would be manning the control station, together with a couple of those fresh-faced school-age kids known as SWLs – standing for Short Wave Listeners – to whom, with the advantage of several years of age and an operator's licence, I felt so superior. The juniors would act as runners, and assist in liaising with the Brigade top brass, who were easily recognised by their heavily braided uniforms and self-important attitudes.

When I got there, Dave was supervising the assembly of the base station in one corner of the main hall at the HQ. The headquarters was housed in a single story building with rather weathered brickwork with a flat roof which featured a curious upper floor, a protrusion from the roof presumably built to house a water tank. A month or two before, a small group from the local Raynet group, including myself, had spent some time drilling holes into the brickwork to mount a mast for an antenna. From the aerial, a thick cable ran into the building under the eaves, the remaining length of which had been stored, neatly coiled, in a corner of the hall. The team had also erected a second temporary aerial mast in the grounds nearby to allow for a second radio channel on a different band.

I had been allocated to an ambulance crew who were to station themselves at a designated spot on the race course as first aid cover, and I was to provide two-way radio communication. My acquaintance George was the leader of the group and he casually pointed out the vehicle we were to use. I immediately set about installing the radio equipment I had brought with me in the selected ambulance.

The Brigade's ambulances, which were usually acquired second-hand from the public ambulance service, were an eclectic mixture of vehicles of a variety of vintages. About the only common denominator was the custom-built aluminium coachwork. It was therefore not possible to attach an external aerial using a 'mag-mount'; the magnetic base would simply slide off when the vehicle started moving.

Pre-warned, I was forced to attach a mounting bracket to the vehicle guttering with a couple of Allen screws. On this particular vehicle, the only available place was just above the passenger side door. This worked well enough, I suppose, although it made getting in and out of the ambulance through that door a little awkward.

My lightweight portable transceiver was attached to the antenna by a short length of cable, and fed through the rubber door-seals so that the door could still close easily. It was also possible to charge the set's battery by a second cable plugged into the convenient cigarette lighter socket, although why an ambulance would need a cigarette lighter at all was beyond me.

Once I had got the equipment installed, we set off for the designated station, with me in the middle seat in the Ambulance, squeezed between the professionally taciturn driver and Old George, with the transceiver sat precariously on my lap.

The remainder of the group of first-aiders were transported in the back of the ambulance, and a surprising number of individuals of all shapes and sizes were decanted from the rear of the vehicle when we arrived. Each was dressed in the distinctive uniform of the St. John's Brigade, including a para-military peaked hat. Most were carrying a large box with webbing handles filled with the sterile dressings, rolled bandages and sticking plasters which are the stock-in-trade of the jobbing paramedic.

As we set up our first aid station, I found a moment to look around at the surroundings, finally properly appreciated the difficulties of the situation. The races themselves would traverse the normal streets and

concourses of the town, which was reputed to have been built, like Rome, on seven hills. Although, as a regular cyclist myself, it certainly seemed like a lot more than was identified by the official description.

This event was held in the middle of that repeating period laughingly known as the English summer. Normally, overcast conditions with occasional periods of rain were to be expected. On this occasion, we were enduring, with typical British stoicism, an unusual spell of hot weather.

As well as the cycling events, there were stalls selling food and drink, a small funfair set up on the green at the bottom of this particular hill, and an open-air market featuring an eclectic collection of stalls. The police had closed much of the town centre to traffic. There were many people moving up and down the numerous and often narrow streets, and it was quite crowded, with the warm sunshine drawing much of the populace outside. All together, there was quite a party atmosphere.

Once the races had started, it seemed that there was little to do, except wait in the warm sunshine and watch the cyclists whizzing past. I was required to spend much of the afternoon sitting in the passenger seat of the ambulance, listening to the radio sat on my lap, since the internal battery in my second-hand set could not be relied upon, and the box had to remain connected to the cigarette lighter socket.

The radio-telephony traffic hinted at some minor incidents elsewhere on the temporary racecourse. I could hear Dave measured and laconic tones directing an ambulance here, passing on messages requesting additional supplies of medical supplies, or commenting on the need for more drinks to prevent dehydration. I was beginning to think that we would have passed the entire day with nothing more serious to worry about than keeping ourselves in the shade.

I was, of course, quite wrong. Towards the end of a long day, perhaps getting tired and less able to concentrate, two riders collided at speed not twenty yards from the spot where we had set up shop. One of the competitors was thrown by the force of the collision into the pillars which supported the roof of the little shopping arcade under which we had taken shelter.

George and his team rushed over eagerly; this was, after all, exactly the reason why the first aiders had been stationed here all day. As far as I could tell from a distance, the fallen rider had broken bones

in his arm, and seemed to have some kind of head injury as well. Following their training, the Brigade members were taking care to avoid moving the wounded rider until the full extent of his injuries were known.

The other rider had also sustained injury, and was currently lying unconscious on the pavement a few feet away. It rapidly became clear that both riders would need to be taken to the Casualty department of the local hospital, and would occupy both of the available berths in the ambulance.

It was just at this inopportune moment that an elderly person collapsed in the pressing crowd surrounding us. The old woman had been hemmed in on all sides, but a space rapidly opened up around her as she crumbled onto the ground.

Unhesitatingly, the St. John's group leader swung into action.

"Come with me!" George instructed one of the first-aiders, leaving the remainder of the team to deal with the fallen riders.

The two men moved swiftly to the woman's side, urging the pressing crowd to stand back a little further. George checked the woman's pulse and breathing, then rolled her on to her back and started a vigorous resuscitation procedure.

"We need a second ambulance," George called, glancing up from administering the old woman the Kiss of Life.

In the panic, I had leapt from the ambulance to find out what was going on. A split-second later, I heard to my dismay an expensive-sounding crash from behind me. In my youthful enthusiasm, I had failed to disconnect the set from the cables which led to the antenna and power socket. My transceiver was yanked from my hands and smashed on the ground, with pieces flying off in several directions.

I must confess I used a number of very rude words at this point but I was really desperately embarrassed. This was my first opportunity to show just how effective Raynet – and I – could be in a real emergency, and I had fluffed it.

I bent over the pavement, reaching desperately for the pieces of my broken set, trying to find some way of getting the box back together again. A man appeared out of the crowd at my elbow. He was a rather odd-looking old boy with flowing grey locks and beard, and he was dressed in a tightly-buckled brown mackintosh despite the heat of the afternoon.

“You need help?” he enquired gently, in a soft barely-audible voice. I nodded imploringly in response.

From somewhere, he produced a rather bulky and old-fashioned portable transceiver with a short flexible aerial attached directly to the socket on the front panel. At the time, I assumed the other man had been carrying the box around to listen in on the exercise, as I myself had done on previous occasions, and must have seen my mishap.

“Use mine,” he said, pressed the equipment into my hands. I was not paying very much attention at the time but later I wondered if he had made a few strange gestures in the direction of the set, and there might have been a brief glow, a sparkle around its casing, visible even in the bright sunlight.

“Keep it for now,” he said, “You can return it after the event.” He tapped at a callsign stencilled neatly on the casing of the box.

I needed no second urging. I took the equipment from his willing hands and removed the flexible antenna, instead connecting it to the larger ambulance aerial for greatest range.

For all its age, the box appeared to work efficiently. I quickly turned the dials to the Raynet channel on 144.8 Megahertz, and put in a call to HQ to report on the situation. To my utter relief, Dave’s calm tones were clearly audible in response. I gave the sitrep in breathless tones and was relieved to hear, a few moments later, Dave directing a second ambulance to our location.

I turned to thank the other Ham, but he had disappeared completely – just, I assumed, melted back into the gawking crowd which was still thick around us.

Meanwhile, the first aiders had scooped up both of the fallen cyclists, handling them gingerly and transporting them to the rear of our ambulance. I could hear the doors slammed shut behind me. The group that had rushed to the assistance of the old granny appeared to have got her breathing again, and were moving her to the recovery position

Without medical training, I could be of little assistance at this point, and I spent the time scooping up the fragments of my own box, tossing them into the ambulance footwell in disgust.

Fortunately, the second ambulance was not far away and arrived in less than three minutes. The fallen granny was rapidly moved to newly-arrived ambulance. Meanwhile, George asked me to put in a

second call to HQ, and we were immediately instructed to take all the patients to the casualty department at the Royal Infirmary.

The incident had also attracted the attention of the police, and a car drew up at the curb-side, evidently having followed the speeding ambulance. The coppers within appeared to be known to old George, who quickly apprised them of the situation.

“Get in, get in,” George instructed me, pushing me inside the vehicle and squeezing his own bulk in afterwards. Both ambulances set off in convoy, following the blue lights of the police car escort, and made rapid time to the hospital, leaving me with nothing to do on the way except sit in the passenger seat listening to the radio-telephony chatter.

I would later learn that the old woman who had collapsed so suddenly had indeed had a fairly severe heart attack and that the rapid transport to the hospital almost certainly saved her life.

By the time we had decanted our casualties at the hospital, the cycling event was over. I clambered back into the ambulance with the crew, and we made our way more sedately firstly back to our original station to collect the remaining members of our team, and then returned to the headquarters.

On our arrival, I shook hands with a variety of the St. John’s members, both on my own and the other ambulance, who thanked me profusely for my assistance. I was left with the distinctly pleasurable feeling that I had actually contributed, genuinely helped with the objectives of both organisations.

I then set about carefully removing the antenna from the ambulance, together with the borrowed set I had been using. I also picked up the sorry remains of my own equipment, which had been kicking around in the footwell of the vehicle, wondering vaguely if it could ever be made to work again. I carried the various bits of equipment inside the HQ building and placed it all on one of the tables set out in the main hall of the centre, making ready to pack it all into the rucksack for my return bike trip.

I found myself wondering how to thank the mysterious ham who had appeared in such a timely manner and indeed how to return his equipment. I would need to get his QTH – this is Ham speak for one’s home address from the official register of callsigns available to all. Later I would discover that the callsign must have been used fraudulently. It had belonged to a local Ham who had died recently –

“Silent Key”, as the expression is – leaving me with no way to track down the owner of the equipment I had been so fortuitously loaned.

At the time, though, I was simply astonished by the coincidence of the other Ham’s location – a miraculous appearance in the moment of need. And there was something almost magical in the way he had coalesced out of the crowd and produced the transceiver from under his coat. How could he have been concealing the bulky box I could not understand.

While I was mused, I slowly became aware that the transceiver had gone silent, not even emitting the usual low hiss which indicated an unused channel. It had probably had been so for some time, and I had simply not noticed in the turmoil. It’s probably a loose connection, I thought, just needs a bit of jiggling. I certainly did not want to return the set broken – that would have been far too embarrassing, especially after the unidentified Ham had done me such a favour.

I took me just a few moments to identify and undo the battery cover. To my surprise, there were no batteries inside. I felt sure that they must have fallen out somewhere. I looked around on the floor, to no avail, and even returned to the ambulance, now parked outside in the settling dusk. There was nothing I could find anywhere in the vehicle.

Puzzled, I returned to the hall. The box I had been given was still sitting on the table where I had left it. Even without batteries, the set seemed very light, something that I had not noticed up until now. With increasing curiosity, I undid the casing. There was nothing, absolutely nothing inside: no batteries, no electronics of any kind, and the controls on the front panel were not actually connected to anything. Even the labelling on the controls themselves, now that I looked more closely, seemed blurred and sketchy.

It could not possibly have worked in the fashion in which I had so evidently used it so recently. It was just an empty box.

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