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California National Guard Communication Innovation Bridges Hurricane Katrina Communication Gaps

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Figure 8: The California National Guard’s Incident Commander Command Control and Communications Unit sits at the Joint Task Force California here in Louisiana. This emergency system has been vital to the Army and Air Guard’s mission to support Hurricane Katrina recovery. (69th Press Camp Headquarters Photo)

Hurricane Katrina destroyed many communication venues in its destructive path—cell phone towers, telephone terminals, television stations—creating one of many obstacles for rescue workers, but its deadly tantrum is no obstacle for the California National Guard’s Incident, Commander’s Command, Control and Communications Unit (IC4U).

“Without that (IC4U), we wouldn’t be able to accomplish our mission,” said Col. Scott Johnson, Commander of Joint Force California. “We were able to coordinate our operation the minute we got here. Let’s not forget there was no means of communication. But once that got off the plane, we were talking to Sacramento.”

The California National Guard has deployed five IC4Us to support Hurricane Katrina’s recovery effort. The task force is based at Belle Chasse Naval Air Station, Louisiana supporting Task Force Pelican—which includes three sub-task forces delivering a balanced mix of engineer, aviation, logistical, communication, security, and evacuation support to New Orleans’ disaster-stricken residents. Two IC4Us remain in Sacramento in case of a state emergency.

“It’s extremely valuable,” said Staff Sgt. Charles Devon, telecommunications operator from the 240th Signal Battalion in Compton. “It has one satellite, but it’s being used for three or four different functions. It’s intriguing to see how some of this equipment can be used.”



Figure 9. The inside of the IC4U contains just about every emergency communication necessity. Internet link ups, surveillance cameras, CB and HAM radios, etc. This one-man system also features a computer, printer, fax machine, and digital player.

Mounted on a six-by-six-foot metallic frame its “self-acquiring satellite antenna” can uplink and plug into communication systems anywhere within the Continental United States, sending and receiving streaming video, telephone, fax, television, and internet communications as well as generating up-to-the-minute weather reports and other valuable incoming information. It’s highly flexible in that it can link into higher headquarters as well as to radio systems on the ground of civilian or military rescue units.

“Whether it’s landline, cellular, VHF, UHF, HF, 800 Megahertz or even military radios, the IC4U translates the signal into a digital format and retransmits it to whomever you want to talk to” said Brig. Gen. Louis Antonetti, deputy adjutant general, Resource Services Division, California National Guard. “It’s just one more recent disaster response upgrade for California. Hurricane Katrina will provide us other lessons in its deployment and use.”

The IC4U can also function as an internet Café, allowing deployed troops or evacuees, if necessary, to communicate via internet with loved ones back home.

“Right now it’s the only commercial telephone operation available,” said Golden. “No operation

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can flow successfully without communication. With this, we can communicate with anyone anywhere in the world in the toughest of situations.”

Recovery Update as of Sept. 7, 2005: 5:30 p.m.

47,000 Lives Saved

33,000 Saved by the U.S. Coast Guard—six times the number saved in 2004
235, 400 evacuees in shelters in 750 shelters in 20 states

70,000 personnel on the Ground

41,500 National Guardsmen

17,000 Active Duty

2,100 Federal Law Enforcement

4,000 Coast Guard

7,000 Federal Emergency Management Administration

11.9 million Meals Ready to Eat (MREs) distributed

21 million liters of water distributed

The Joint Task Force California is using the IC4U to its full capacity. Katrina marks the first time the mobile communication center is being used in a military operation. The IC4U was initially tested at the U.S. Olympic Trials in Sacramento in May 2004.

“It’s really a tactical communications van,” said Sr. Airman Stephen R. Lebb of the California Air National Guard’s 149th Combat Communications Squadron in Sacramento. Sr. Airman Lebb is the IC4U systems administrator at JTF California. “Basically it’s two things: first, it’s a communication bridge for different frequencies—the police and fire department talking on two different frequencies can be linked through the IC4U; second, it can produce live video with web access.”

The IC4U is highly mobile. It sits on a Humvee and can be driven through harsh terrain. Four bolts secure it to the vehicle frame, making removal so that it can be lifted by helicopter or carried onto a boat and lowered onto buildings or even mountain tops when terrain is simply too restrictive.

“This was designed to fit onto the back of a commercial pickup truck,” Golden said, “It’s built to last. As long as we have satellite link, it won’t fail.”