

URBAN STUDIES/STANDING BY

# Hams on Alert

**O**N the subway, Charles Hargrove of Port Richmond, Staten Island looks exactly like the mild-mannered office manager he is. But if disaster should strike, he has a ham radio and enough electronics equipment in his briefcase to set up a makeshift communications center almost anywhere in the city.

As the emergency coordinator for the city's Amateur Radio Emergency Service, Mr. Hargrove and the group's 80 other members handle communications between hospitals, shelters, city agencies and emergency services units, in the event that telephone lines and other radio services are down. Sept. 11, combined with government terror alerts, have put the city's hams on high alert.

Charles Gallo, another emergency service member, carries around a large green backpack loaded with 50 pounds of ham equipment and survival gear, including a rain poncho, socks and underwear, a Sterno stove, hot cocoa mix, a pocketknife and saw, a sewing kit and duct tape.

He now has a mast 20 feet tall that he can mount in less than five minutes onto his

pickup truck as an antenna, instantly turning the vehicle into a mobile communications center. The other day, in the driveway of his house in Bayside, Queens, he showed off his mast, piecing it together quickly, then holding it aloft triumphantly. "There. What'd that take? A minute and a half?"

The need for ham radios and their op-



Joyce Dopkeen/The New York Times

erators arises more than you would think: consider the Staten Island barge explosion earlier this year, not to mention sundry storms, fires and blackouts.

Ham radios may bring to mind images of basement electronics fanatics or cold war bomb shelters. And, indeed, cellphones and the Internet have rendered much ham-radio activity obsolete.

Charles Gallo has a mobile communications center at his fingertips.

But hams take pride in telling you how useless cell-phones often become in emergencies, because of dead spots or flooded circuits. Ham radios, by contrast, can run on many different frequencies and provide an open network, like a huge conference call. They are broadcast over hundreds of repeaters mounted on tall buildings citywide, boosting signals from individual ham radios to well beyond city limits.

Charlie Alfano, a telecommunications technician from New Hyde Park, just over the Queens border, has five different ham radios and a computer installed in his sports utility vehicle, plus several extra car batteries, five antennas and his own 10-foot mast. "I can set up a mobile command station anywhere in Queens in 15 minutes," said Mr. Alfano, who has worked the city's emergency airways since the 1970's blackouts.

But Mr. Hargrove tells members that they do not have to be as gung-ho as Mr. Gallo or Mr. Alfano.

"We still have some Rambo guys, but I try to tone them down," he said. "If one of our members comes to a scene with three radios squawking on his belt, the cops label him a geek and say get the hell out of here.

"We want guys with calm exteriors, but churning away underneath."

COREY KILGANNON