



VCS Manager is Critical Link for Disaster Medical Assistance Team in Katrina's Wake

When Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast on August 29, VCS Manager Jack Harding was called to action with the *Virginia 1 Disaster Medical Assistance Team (DMAT)*. Jack who has been a volunteer in fire and rescue services for the past 25 years was tasked with providing field communications for the Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) teams that would be operating in the hardest hit areas.

"I used to be the Captain of the Ashburn Volunteer Fire Rescue Department in my hometown and I currently volunteer with National Ski Patrol at Timberline Resort in West Virginia," said Jack. "Joining DMAT this past January seemed like a perfect fit for me. I saw it as an opportunity to put my emergency training and the communication skills I've acquired at Verizon to good use."



Jack pauses for a photo at what was once a K-Mart store

A DMAT is a group of professional and paraprofessional medical personnel, supported by administrative and logistical teams, that provides medical care during a disaster or other event. The Department of Homeland Security, through the National

Disaster Medical System, fosters the development of DMAT's throughout the United States. Each team is identified by the state in which they reside. Formed a little over one year ago, Virginia 1 is the first DMAT to be sponsored in the state.

Virginia 1 was originally deployed to New Orleans, but Jack spent the majority of his 17 day tour in Gulfport and Biloxi, MS and the surrounding communities. As soon as he was notified of his team's deployment, Jack and his partner were sent to a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) location in Rockville, MD to pick up their truck and communications trailer.

Designed to be self sufficient, DMAT's are deployed to disaster sites with enough supplies and equipment to sustain them for about 72 hours. Since Virginia 1 was in the Gulf Coast area for a longer period of time, they had to rely on other teams and local agencies, and make the best of the situation around them. This meant sleeping in an open parking lot for four days on cots borrowed from a nearby naval base and bathing in portable cold-water showers, not that anyone complained.

"It seemed like everyone we met pitched in to help. There was a time we ran out of gas on our way back from New Orleans. The sheriff and deputies of a small town along the way came to our rescue by giving us diesel fuel from one of their generators and a hot meal," said Jack. "Sometimes we bartered services. When the U.S. Marshals needed CAT-5 wiring installed in their building, we exchanged

that service for the use of their rooftop where we placed one of our antennas.”



Broadcasting from a bridge

Jack’s primary responsibility was to establish radio networks so that the teams working in remote areas without power or phone service could communicate with the command center and other authorities. Reporting to the chief command center and working with USAR teams from across the country, Jack and his partner supplied communications through radio transmitters, satellite phones and networks where it was needed the most.

“The experience was humbling to say the least,” said Jack. “In the midst of all the physical devastation, I met the most caring and grateful people. Every where we went, the citizens greeted us with ‘God bless you’ and ‘Thank you.’ It’s hard to even describe what it felt like to be part of such an extraordinary effort.”



Wreckage in Katrina’s aftermath

Jack traveled about 4,000 miles in 17 days. The last four days of his tour were spent between Atlanta, GA and Raleigh, NC where he was staging support operations for Hurricane Ophelia. He is prepared now to return to the Gulf Coast and help with the

ongoing restoration if he is re-activated with Virginia 1.

“Jack has my full support and the backing of the entire VCS family in this endeavor,” said Ed Ruby, Director – Business Operations who sponsored Jack during the DMAT application process. “We’re extremely proud of his selfless dedication, spirit and the way in which he represents this organization. He is a true role model.”