

## Top Story

### Mystery signal traced to TV

By Jennifer Nitson  
Corvallis Gazette-Times

CORVALLIS — When Chris van Rossman moved into his downtown apartment about a year ago, his parents bought him a new 20-inch color TV with all the bells and whistles.

The flat-screen Toshiba came with its own set of stereo speakers, a 181-channel tuner, built-in VCR, DVD and CD players, a V-chip for parental control over content and, of course, a remote control.

Van Rossman, unfortunately, does not have cable and can only get four channels in his apartment. He mostly watches Oregon Public Broadcasting, which comes in clearest, and he's acquired a taste for OPB children's programming.

Maybe the television suffered an identity crisis. Maybe it aspired to higher things.

Whatever the reason, van Rossman's TV set sent out a cry for help. It began emitting the international distress signal on the night of Oct. 2.

The 121.5 MHz frequency signal was picked up by an orbiting search and rescue satellite, which informed the Air Force Rescue Coordination Center at Langley Air Force Base in Virginia.

Such signals usually come from electronic locator transponders that help search and rescue workers find overturned boats or crashed airplanes. It is said that more than 90 percent of ELT signals are false alarms, but each and every one is checked out.

Langley got on the horn to the Civil Air Patrol, an all-volunteer auxiliary to the Air Force, and the CAP got ahold of Benton County Search and Rescue Deputy Mike Bamberger for assistance in locating the source of the signal.

"My initial thought was, 'Oh, it's the airport again,'" Bamberger said. "We've had the signals from the airport go up the Willamette River all the way through Albany and into Lebanon."

The radio-wave signals can bounce off metal structures and rocky hillsides. From time to time Bamberger is dispatched to the airport to locate a transponder in a plane that has been bumped by a mechanic or set off by a rough landing.

But this case was different.

Armed with small receiving devices, Bamberger and a group of Civil Air Patrol volunteers determined the distress signal was coming from an apartment building on the corner of Fourth Street and Jackson Avenue, narrowing the possible sources down to a couple of upstairs units.

On the morning of Oct. 3, van Rossman opened his front door to find CAP personnel in Air Force uniforms, a Corvallis police officer and a Benton County Search and Rescue deputy looking at him expectantly. To his



**Ryan Gardner/Gazette-Times**  
Chris van Rossman's television sent out a distress signal that was picked up by an orbiting satellite.

credit, he did not stress out.

"I have a pretty spotless record, so I wasn't overly concerned — just a little confused," van Rossman said. "The police officer asked if I was a pilot or had a boat or anything. I said no, and they moved on."

After checking in with van Rossman, the group continued the search.

"We narrowed it down to a spot on the wall in the hallway," Bamberger said. "Whatever was behind that spot is what it was."

They knocked on van Rossman's door again, and the signal abruptly stopped.

"When he answered the door he turned off the TV, and the guy in the hall said, 'It just stopped,'" Bamberger recalled.

An inspection of the television confirmed it was the source of the signal. "Their equipment was just bouncing everywhere as they turned it on and off," van Rossman said.

Van Rossman was instructed to keep his TV turned off or face fines of up to \$10,000 per day for emitting a false distress signal.

He's not taking any chances. He's keeping the television unplugged just in case he forgets one morning, groggy with sleep.

Unfortunately, the warranty on the TV had run out 16 days before it started freaking out. It had already tried to escape the van Rossman household by refusing to play DVDs a few months back, but that didn't bother van Rossman. He has a DVD player on his computer, and besides, he mostly just likes to watch OPB — especially "Arthur."

"I find other stuff to do," van Rossman said. "It's not too important. It's changed my morning routine."

Alas, "Arthur" will have to wait.

Not for too long, though. Maria Repole, director of public relations at Toshiba, is going to get van Rossman a new TV.

"We have never experienced anything like this before at Toshiba," Repole said. "We really value customer satisfaction, and we will replace the television set free of charge."

Repole told Toshiba's technicians about the TV in distress, and they'll be on the lookout in case it happens again, she said.

"They've never heard of that before," Repole said. "They don't really have a technical explanation available. It's just very strange."

David Mandrell, squad leader for the CAP team that responded to the TV's distress call, attempted an explanation.

"All electronic equipment creates a frequency called a tempest," he said. "Sometimes these frequencies emit low-level signals that are close to the 121.5 MHz signal."

Mandrell has heard of this sort of thing happening with customized computer gear. Sometimes CAP equipment will pick up these signals, he said, but they are usually weak enough to ignore.

"This was really strong," Mandrell said. "This was abnormally strong. It kind of surprised us."