

MARS Moves Front and Center

Planning, preparation, and training yield results. That sums up the work that has gone into the Army's MARS program in the past year. This month we'll take a look back and see how MARS has re-invented itself to remain an important organization in providing emergency communications.

Last year at this time we reported that Army Military Affiliate Radio System (MARS) Chief Stuart Carter had shifted priorities and procedures. He focused attention on retraining all MARS members and building tighter bonds with the federal and state agencies that MARS is designed to interconnect in an emergency. At the time he said, "The challenges we face are new and more demanding than those we've prepared for in the past ... We also have to tell the nation that the 2600 trained and dedicated members of Army MARS, along with our Air Force and Navy-Marine Corps partners, bring a huge and agile readiness to the front lines of emergency response. No other resource at America's disposal is positioned to or capable of providing this kind of support."

MARS is a Department of Defense sponsored program, established as a separately managed and operated program by the Army, Navy, and Air Force. The program consists of licensed amateur radio operators who are interested in military communications on a local, national, and international basis as an adjunct to normal communications.

Moving Forward

"The tornadoes that swept across the mid-South in February carried Army MARS into a new era of operations," said Carter recently. "For the first time, as far back as we can remember, a state government called for MARS deployment in response to an *actual* emergency. The resulting teamwork and use of Army MARS WinLink 2000 radio e-mail system capability gave the Tennessee Emergency Management Agency (TEMA) its only e-mail link during President Bush's visit to the storm-stricken area."

On Tuesday, February 5, Army MARS Region 4 Director Jim Hamilton, K4QDF/AAA4RD, was watching the weather on TV, and based on the developing storm, he called Tennessee State MARS Director Chris Bindrim, KE7GZ/AAA4TN, to place Tennessee Army MARS on alert. A short time after calling Bindrim, Hamilton received an e-mail from David Wolfe, WA4VVX/AAR4KY, Chief of Communication for the Tennessee Emergency Management Agency (TEMA), and State RACES Officer, requesting TN Army MARS be placed on standby for possible support to TEMA. In addition

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Army MARS Chief Stuart Carter says "the challenges we face are new and more demanding than those we've prepared for in the past." (Photo courtesy of Army MARS)

to calling Bindrim, Hamilton also called Kentucky State MARS Director Barry Jackson, WB4N/AAA4KY, who was already alerting Kentucky Army MARS members to stand by for possible emergency support to officials in Kentucky.

According to Carter, "This event illustrates the importance of detailed preparation and training which has taken place during realistic disaster response exercises over the past several years." In late 2006 Steve Waterman, K4CJX/AAA9AC, began working with TEMA's David Wolfe, preparing for just such a deployment. At the time, Army MARS was just beginning to adopt the WinLink 2000 radio e-mail network system, and with the assistance of the then TN State Director Paul Drothler, WO4U/AAV4DJ, Army MARS had just signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with TEMA. Carter said this MOU "just served to strengthen an already strong relationship between TEMA and Army MARS." Next, Wolfe led TEMA staffers who were already hams to becoming MARS members and qualified MARS WinLink 2000 operators. The rest of Wolfe's team soon obtained their amateur radio and Army MARS licenses.

Working Together

There was joint classroom training for TEMA staff and TN Army MARS members. What was learned in the classroom was followed up with extensive field training. The culmination of the field training was TNCAT07, a massive exercise which included the Central United States Earthquake Consortium (CUSEC, an eight-state alert consortium along the New Madrid fault line). Carter said this exercise also included the participation by members of the Amateur Radio Emergency Service

(ARES), Civil Air Patrol, and other emergency communication services, which clearly demonstrated interoperability among TEMA, TN Army MARS, the amateur radio community, and other municipal communications services. Carter calls this TCAMO, or take charge and moving out.

Locals Able to Cope ... Almost!

Even though there were many tornadoes and several casualties, the storms' swift movement allowed local communication systems to handle the situation immediately afterward. As Carter said this was not a category 5 hurricane. Army MARS resources weren't needed until Friday, three days after the tornadoes struck. Steve Waterman, AAA9AC, received a phone call from TEMA on Thursday night, February 7, summoning him to the Tennessee Emergency Operations Center in Nashville, and MARS station AAN4ETN, at 6:30 AM Friday.

Cater explained that TEMA's command bus was summoned on Thursday night to an airport in Macon County, approximately 70 miles east of Nashville, to which President Bush was flying to make his announcement of declaring Tennessee a disaster area and offer federal support. TEMA's on-scene logistics operation was headed by Wolfe. He said "The facts are: although there was no commercial power at the deployment site, TEMA's communications infrastructure was fully operational. Both the VHF high-band and 800-MHz repeater systems had good coverage for voice command and control. Our shortage was internet connectivity, and our unmet needs were e-mail and the ability to send pictures. MARS WinLink provided exactly what was not available by any other means. We also utilized it to reduce the 'chatter' on our C2 nets by sending short event notices direct to TEMA operations." Waterman said 70 messages were sent during the state operation. They ranged from casualty figure updates and signal reports, to staff rosters and photos.

Waterman pointed out that operationally speaking, this was not just a Tennessee communications job. He said close-in HF propagation was less than optimal, so much of the traffic was directed to an Army MARS Radio Messaging Station in Montana, AAB8MT, owned and operated by Jim Moore, WU3V/AAM8AMT, of Great Falls. According to Waterman, "that was our first real-world demonstration of WinLink's

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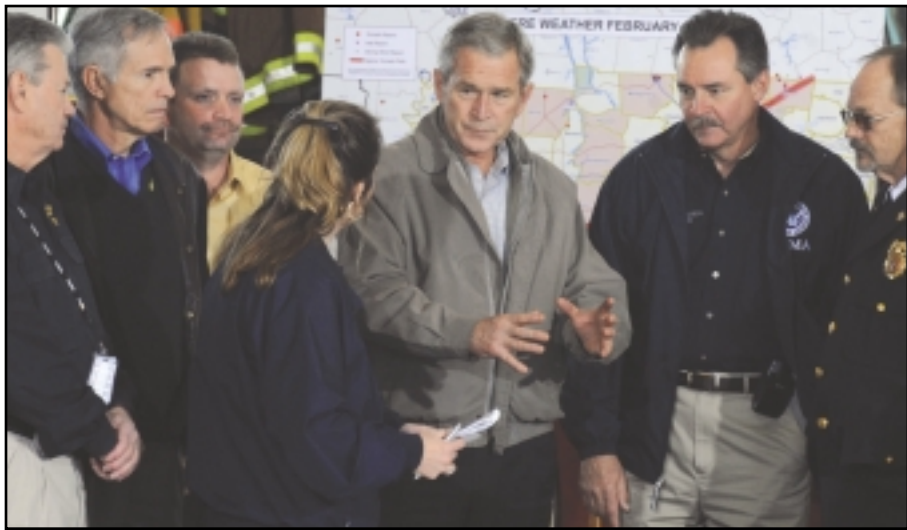
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President George Bush asks questions as he looks over maps of the areas impacted by recent tornadoes. The only connection to the internet was via the MARS WinLink system. (FEMA photo by Jocelyn Augustino)

adaptability to challenging circumstances, including Mother Nature's fickle propagation."

First Deployment Since Katrina

"To make a long story short, we now have seen a demonstration of seamless collaboration between Army MARS and

one of our supported agencies under 'real-world' emergency conditions," said Carter. This was the first Army MARS deployment since the Katrina/Rita disasters. He said successfully meeting the challenge involved deployment readiness on the part of its members, and it required total WinLink 2000 mobility. First, he said, came the build-

Yellow Jackets



Members of the Benicia (CA) Amateur Radio Club show off their new jackets, which will be recognizable when supplying emergency communications. (Photo courtesy of Art Mayoff, AB6HB)

Members of the Benicia (CA) Amateur Radio Club will be ready to spring into action thanks to help from Valero Energy Corporation. The company donated \$2000 to the club to purchase flashy yellow jackets which will be handy for quick recognition in the event of a disaster. Valero spokesperson Sue Fisher Jones said, "We're all about safety in our workplace and community. So when the hams asked for support, we wanted to help." There are over 100 hams in Benicia. BARC Vice President Art Mayoff, AB6HB, says the club supports the fire department. "We could put a ham on every vehicle," he noted. Club members volunteer to provide emergency communications in direct support of their immediate neighborhood. They work in conjunction with the Benicia Citizen Corps Council and the Benicia Fire Department.

ing of relationships with existing and potential customers, and then came meticulous training of state and federal staffers, and frequent exercising at home and in the field. "With this pattern of established collaboration between our customers and MARS members," Carter said, "we enter the new era of Army MARS emergency communications support."

Volunteerism and Professionalism

The collaboration between Tennessee Army MARS and the Tennessee Emergency Management Agency is something for ham radio operators and MARS members to look forward to. Carter said it demonstrated "volunteer communicators and salaried civil servants, state and federal, working hand in hand to accomplish our mutual mission of public service."

Carter's comments apply equally to MARS members and amateur radio operators providing public service communication. He said, "volunteers must learn to speak the language of the professionals. That's largely what the FEMA courses are all about. On the government side, the professionals have to learn our capabilities as well as the other realities of our individual lives, like family and job commitments. That's a significant part of what joint exercises are about—getting to know each other."

"But let's be realistic," said Carter. "By and large, the homeland security workforce is a very young entity, with very little awareness of Army MARS despite its 82-year history. To remedy that, MARS members at every level need to make themselves and their resources known in their neighborhoods. No MOU is required to attend an EOC open house, SkyWarn training class, a ham club presentation on emergency response, or to join in support of a bike race or marathon or an ARES net."

Annual Armed Forces Day

The Army, Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard are co-sponsoring the annual military/amateur radio communications tests in celebration of the 58th anniversary of Armed Forces Day (AFD). Although the actual Armed Forces Day is celebrated on Saturday, May 17, 2008, the AFD Military/Amateur Crossband Communications Test will be conducted on May 10 to prevent conflict with the Dayton Hamvention®, which is the same weekend as the actual Armed Forces Day.

The annual celebration features traditional military-to-amateur cross-band communications SSB voice tests and copying the Secretary of Defense message via digital modes. These tests give amateur radio operators and shortwave listeners (SWLs) an opportunity to demonstrate their individual technical skills, and to receive recognition from the Secretary of Defense and/or the appropriate military radio station for their

proven expertise. QSL cards will be provided to those stations making contact with the military stations. Special commemorative certificates will be awarded to anyone who receives and copies the digital Armed Forces Day message from the Secretary of Defense. Schedules and frequencies of participating military stations will be published on the Army MARS website, <www.netcom.army.mil/MARS>. For hams not famil-



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iar with the rules for contacting military stations, the FCC states in Part 97.111 that amateur stations are authorized to exchange messages with a “participating United States military station during the annual Armed Forces Day Communications Test.”

More Support

Each May participants in the Amateur Radio Military Appreciation Day (ARMAD) get on the radio and allow members of the general public to say hello and thanks to the troops. Emery McClendon, KB9IBW, who first organized the event, says that ARMAD asks “amateur radio operators from around the world to team up during this effort to allow the people from our communities to gather at public locations such as shopping centers, parks, VA hospitals, and sporting events to express verbal positive support ‘live’ over two-way radio for members of the military, veterans, reserves, National Guard, retired, coalition forces, first responders, and military support groups.” He says, “Many of us have friends, relatives, and neighbors who are active duty, and past members of the armed forces. ARMAD gives us the chance to support one another, and to express our thanks and appreciation to those who sacrifice and serve in the Armed Forces.” This year’s activity is centered on May 24th. For more information check out the group’s website at <<http://www.armad.net>>.

Planning for Field Day?

ARRL Field Day is coming up next month on June 28 and 29. This is a great opportunity to practice setting up an emergency communications station in the field or operating at an emergency operations center. Take the time now to learn how to operate the radios that will be used at your group’s Field Day event. It’s better to know beforehand than to have to learn it during a disaster situation.

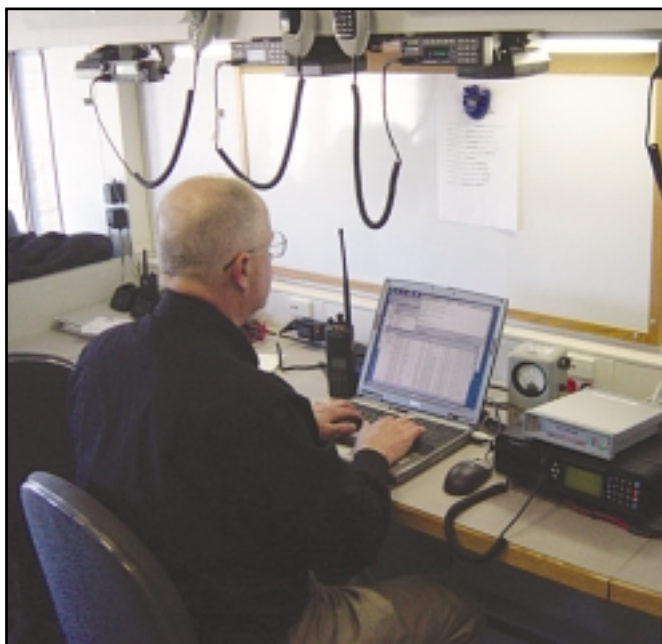
One piece of equipment that needs special attention is the gasoline generator being used to power your Field Day station. Recently, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) joined with the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) in issuing a warning to consumers. When there’s a power outage, exercise caution when using portable generators. Carbon monoxide (CO) is an invisible killer. You can’t see it or smell it. A generator’s exhaust contains poisonous CO which can kill you in a matter of minutes. Last year at least 65 people died from generator-related CO poisoning. Many of the deaths occurred after winter storms knocked out power.

Follow these important generator safety tips:

- Never use a portable generator inside a home, garage, shed, or other partially enclosed space, even if doors and windows are open.
- Place portable generators outside only, far away from the home, and keep the generator away from openings to the home, including doors, windows, and vents.
- Read the label on the generator and the owner’s manual, and follow the instructions.
- Install CO alarms with battery backup in the home outside each sleeping area.
- Get to fresh air immediately if you start to feel sick, weak, or dizzy. CO poisoning from exposure to generator exhaust can quickly lead to incapacitation and death.

Last year CPSC mandated a new danger label on generators manufactured after May 14, 2007. The label states that, “Using a generator indoors CAN KILL YOU IN MINUTES.”

FEMA and CPSC also caution people to never use charcoal for cooking in the home. Every year individuals lose their



David Wolfe, WA4VVX/AAR4KY, Chief of Communication for the Tennessee Emergency Management Agency (TEMA), operates a MARS WinLink station to communicate back to the State EOC. (Photo courtesy of TEMA)

lives attempting to cook with charcoal when power is out. Charcoal fires should only be used outside the home.

Have fun at Field Day, but remember, Safety First.

That Final Note

In the Philadelphia area, the Montgomery County ARES/RACES group had the opportunity to test its new station at the emergency operations center, participating in a local VHF/UHF Sprint sponsored by the Holmesburg Amateur Radio Club. The object was to work stations in different zip codes on different bands using simplex frequencies on 2 meters, 222 MHz, and 440 MHz. The sprint lasted four hours.

This month we focused on military preparedness, but many of the concepts used with MARS can and do apply to amateur radio emergency operations. Training, working with served agencies, and promoting amateur radio are important parts of effective emergency communications.

According to Steve Waterman, K4CJX, a member of the WinLink Development Team, MARS is really coming on strong in the world of emcomm. He bases this “on the very positive response of those they approach to serve, as well as the terrific internal communications and organization within the (Army) MARS infrastructure. Also, the amateur emcomm community is responding well to joint ventures and exercises, especially those run by professional agencies.” He continued, “On the ham side, county governments are working with their community amateur radio groups to build amateur infrastructures to deal with ‘last mile’ ordeals, while state, federal, and larger civil agencies are embracing Army MARS. It is working well to date, and all three branches seem to be jumping on the transport layer bandwagon.”

Do you have a public service or emergency communications story to tell? Drop us a note. Until next time . . .

73, Bob, WA3PZO