

Spring Exercises Test Amateurs' Readiness For Terrorist Operations over Wide Areas

It could happen. The country suffers a wide-scale weather emergency akin to May's onslaught of tornadoes. Well-organized terrorists choose the moment to launch simultaneous attacks on storm-battered population centers. How would the stricken area cope?

This was the scenario handed to MARS members from the Ohio Valley west for the annual spring emergency exercise in March. The Military Affiliate Radio System, an organization of volunteer amateur radio operators, had the mission of replacing broken commercial communications links and funneling information on the developing crisis to relief agencies and the Pentagon.

To the east, meanwhile, MARS operators in a separate exercise simulated the effect of terrorist attack on the commercial long distance telephone and Internet systems and regional power grids. This, too, is a credible scenario for homeland security planners, and MARS headquarters reported that much useful information was obtained.

Both tests serve as a warm-up for MARS participation alongside the Army's active-duty, Reserve, and National Guard signal units in a nationwide test of emergency communications. The larger exercise, scheduled in June, takes on added significance for MARS members this year because of the number of reserve Signal units deployed overseas. There is thus a potentially greater need for the amateur operators' service in a homeland emergency.

Regular Army and Reserve units will be joined by Mobile Emergency Response units from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Air Force and Navy-Marine Corps MARS members are also invited to participate.

Army MARS members within the United States are divided into two areas of roughly equal membership, with the result that Western Area Coordinator James Banks' operators are spread over 29 states. His after-action report for the one-day exercise on March 1 cited participation by 220 members handling 504 simulated emergency messages.

"Within the first hour of the exercise during recovery from the storm, [simulated] terrorist attacks were directed at each state within the western area, indicating how vulnerable a community can be to terrorist groups during a disaster,"} Banks said. "Terrorist attacks on major highways and Interstates, rivers, bomb explosions at airport, chemical spraying and vehicle theft were issued, causing the members to submit Essential Elements of Information of what was happening."

With members resident in or near virtually every county in the country—Air Force and Navy-Marine Corps as well as Army—the MARS organization is well equipped to serve as the Defense Department's early-warning system for domestic emergencies.

In the April exercise dealing with simulated attack on commercial utilities, Eastern Area Coordinator Robert Hollister reported participation by 275 amateur stations from 20 states, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. The system handled 508 simulated emergency messages during the one-day operation.

“Most message handling was done through the MARS digital and voice networks,” Hollister reported. He noted “significant improvement” in participation over last year.

--Bill Sexton, N1IN