Hillsborough County
Florida

Office of the County Administrator
Patricia G. Bean

MEMORANDUM

DATE: April 28, 2008

TO: ARES/RACES
Jeff Copeland, Emergency Management

FROM: Fred Nassar, KD8AQ

SUBJECT: 2008 MASS CASUALTY RACES AFTER ACTION

Introduction

The 2008 Hillsborough County Mass Casualty was a full-scale exercise designed to establish a learning environment for players to exercise emergency response plans, policies, and procedures as they pertain to a mass casualty incident. The exercise was conducted on April 17 and involved the simulated crash of a commercial jet at Tampa International Airport, and the transportation of about 800 students from a local high school to local hospitals for the purpose of triage and treatment. The Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Service (RACES), a volunteer communication resource of emergency management, was tasked to provide back up and auxiliary communication support for incident locations (TIA, Chamberlain HS) as well as the School Board bus garage, and hospitals in Hillsborough and Pinellas Counties.

Participation

Between 50-60 amateur radio operators participated for this event. This includes significant participation from the following organizations:

- Tampa Amateur Radio Club (TARC)
- Baycare Emergency Amateur Radio Society (BEARS)
- American Victory Ship Club (AmVic)
- Brandon Amateur Radio Society (BARS)
- Museum of Science and Industry (MOSI)
- Sheriff Tactical Amateur Radio Club (STARC)

- Sun City Center Amateur Radio Club (SCCARC)
- Kings Point Amateur Radio Club (KPARC)

In addition, amateur operators from Pinellas, Pasco, and Polk County participated by providing liaisons from those counties to the Hillsborough County effort.

Strengths

1. Significant participation from a volunteer group during a weekday when many would normally be working.
2. Demonstrates the interest and preparation level is high for ARES/RACES

Planning

Primary planning was coordinated by Keating Floyd, KC4HSI. The planning phase included the following elements:

- Recruiting volunteers for key locations
- Developing a communications plan for the drill
- Developing a staffing plan for the drill
- Developing drill objectives

Strengths

1. Use of the appropriate ICS forms for staffing and communications plans
2. Recruitment of volunteers and coordinating with clubs
3. Providing additional drill objectives to keep all participants engaged and active
4. Use of email lists to keep the amateur community updated on planning efforts

Weaknesses

Selection of traffic repeater frequencies. Another repeater such as the WA4SWC repeater located downtown Tampa would have been a better choice to handle two meter traffic from key locations. **Solution**: Net Controls operators need to maintain an awareness of the disaster scene and the repeaters that are physically close.

There was confusion between drill traffic and additional injects to keep operators engaged. **Solution**: Code additional inject messages so they are not taken for legitimate drill traffic. Operators should continue to practice message delivery as written – drill traffic was coded with "this is a drill" and in some cases that verbiage was not transmitted every time every message was passed.

Operations

Operations consisted of providing communications support at the locations noted above. To accomplish this various nets were established. They included:

- EOC Net: Providing direct interface with the EOC, both ICs, other County EOCs and the bus garage.
- BEARS Net: Primary net for hospital communications
- STARC Net: Mostly simulated for communications to the Sheriff
- Simplex Net: Operated by MOSI to test simplex communications
- Traffic Net: Use of multiple repeaters and frequencies to facilitate simulated drill traffic
- Digital: Use of Winlink to send emails from the field

Strengths

1. Net control stations did a good job of controlling traffic flow and providing frequency control
2. Most stations followed appropriate net procedures and use of tactical call signs. Communications were concise and clear
3. Lead participants at each site were well trained and prepared.
4. The first documented use of ICS-213 written messages for training in the history of Hillsborough County.
5. Use of Winlink in the field was well done

Weaknesses

The net control stations failed to announce that this was a drill often enough. Even though all participants knew this was a drill, there are many who may be monitoring the 147.105 repeater who are not aware that a drill is ongoing and may become confused. **Solution**: Provide a script or other reminder at the net control position to help as well as continued practice as a net control.

While written messages included the verbiage "This is a drill, this is a drill", in many cases the delivery of those messages often did not include the words "this is a drill" or "exercise". **Solution**: Continue to gain experience by sending and receiving traffic messages during nets or other training opportunities.

Some written drill traffic was not delivered using proper NTS or ICS format. Hillsborough County will use the ICS format to pass written tactical traffic. Health and Welfare or other traffic that relies on NTS nets to move beyond Hillsborough County will adhere to NTS format. **Solution**: Review proper format for both ICS and NTS traffic. Obtain ARES training manual.

Use of Q-signals. All transmissions should use plain English, therefore the use of jargon or unfamiliar terms should be avoided. **Solution**: Continue to participate in VHF nets and review NIMS requirements.

Hospitals were asked to communicate through the BEARS network to free congestion on the EOC net. Some hospitals remained on the EOC net. It may be that these stations did not have 70 cm capability. **Solution**: Find a way to accommodate two meter users and integrate them into the BEARS network, or ask hospitals to purchase radio equipment capable of operating on one of the BEARS repeaters. **EM may be able to facilitate discussion between RACES and hospitals related to equipment and training**

Failure to respond to Winlink messages from the EOC. In this case the sending stations had not included the hillsboroughcounty.org domain to their white list. **Solution**: Add the proper domain names to white list before going into the field, learn how to add domain name from the field, or turn off white list.

The signal from the bus garage was weak into the repeater. ARES/RACES encourages all members to invest in a high power mobile radio, preferably a dual band radio. **Solution**: Ensure that high powered mobile stations with outdoor antenna from key communications locations. Although amateur radio does not support the bus garage often, it is conceivable that school buses would be used in a large scale evacuation. For that reason it may be worth while to see if the School Board would purchase and install an amateur radio antenna at this location.

Inability of some stations to change frequency: Some stations had not pre-programmed drill and emergency frequencies into their radios -- and lacking the radio manual were unable to do so. **Solution:** All deployed stations are reminded to bring their radio manuals with them.

Miscellaneous:

Two field-deployed radios failed during the drill. **Solution:** Deployed stations should bring a backup radio or HT (if available) to the site. EOC NCS should occasionally run "roll-call" to ensure deployed stations are still on the air.

ICS forms: At one location, ICS forms 213 [Messages] and 214 [Personnel check-in and traffic log] were not employed. **Solution:** Each ARES/RACES member should maintain a supply of these form, and additional training and require participating stations to submit after-action ICS-214 logs.

APRS & Packet radio not tested; perhaps needed if Winlink-Internet fails. **Solution:** Set-up TNC/radio on APRS frequency at EOC to test