Hillsborough County Mass Exercise (March 28, 2007)
After Action Report

The following exercise objectives were developed for ARES/RACE:

- To test the interoperability of City of Tampa/ Hillsborough County emergency communications systems
- Provide back-up communications at EOC, Sun Dome, Raymond James Stadium, Gaither HS, school bus dispatch operations and hospitals.
- Support MARC unit operations
- Test the communication flow to the Florida State Warning Point at the Florida Emergency Operation Center
- Support the communications needs of Served Agencies (Red Cross etc...)
- Provide HF communications between EOC and the Florida Division of Emergency Management
- Provide interoperability between the EOC and other local, state, federal, and military agencies
- Test simplex communications
- Test digital modes
- Practice transmitting and receiving formal written traffic

General Comments

There was a lot of enthusiasm among the ARES/RACES leadership, led by Keating Floyd KC4HSI, in the planning of this exercise.

The use of the walk in cheat sheet was great and should become a permanent fixture. This will help with those responding as part of mutual aid.

Like other organizations, exercise observers for ARES/RACES was provided by the WCF section leadership. Thanks for your help.

ARES/RACES members provided excellent support for this drill, given the fact that the drill occurred during normal working hours in the middle of the work week. Approximately 75 amateur radio operators participated in the drill.

Organizations that supported ARES/RACES include STARC, TARC, BARS, BEARS, Sun City, and CERT

All objectives that directly supported the exercise were achieved. Most of the other objectives related to the ARES/RACES communications plan were achieved.

ARES/RACES received very favorable comments from all organizations participating in the exercise. The participation of ARES/RACES in this exercise continues to lend credibility to the organization's ability to be a viable and effective back up and auxiliary communication resource to emergency management, first responders, and served agencies.

The use of a press release netted one media inquiry directly. A couple of TV reports highlighted STARC members.

Specific Comments

Planning and Coordination:

While planning was good, communicating that plan to ARES/RACES members came late and led to some confusion, especially where messaging was concerned. **(ARES/RACES Leadership to Address)**

While digital communications (Packet, APRS) was set up and tested at the EOC, there were no other field stations operating portable digital stations. **(Suggest that clubs and individuals in conjunction with our Digital Coordinator develop portable digital stations capable of operating Winlink 2000. Explore the possibility of getting surplus laptops from county and develop digital go kits)**

Because of exercise artificialities, simplex and HF testing was not as effective as it could have been. **(Suggest conducting a separate simplex exercise before hurricane season)**

MOSI was under utilized. They could have been a great resource to the Sun Dome to relay communications.

Several organizations such as STARC and BEARS supported specific functions. These groups are dedicated for those purposes. While communications occurred with these groups, better coordination could have occurred in meeting exercise objectives. **(ARES/RACE needs a better understanding of these specialized groups. Suggest tighter liaison through our club coordinator)**

Support for Tampa Bay Weather was provided, but little if any support was provided for the Red Cross. It is not know if Red Cross required any support. **(Continue to work with our Red Cross contacts and work through EOC for support requirements)**

Technical Issues

Two primary frequencies (147.105 and 146.940) were planned to be used by ARES/RACES. The 146.940 frequency was under utilized. When used it was used for some formal message training. (Suggest re-thinking how we use the frequency. **(May want to use both frequencies simultaneously. One frequency to regulate incoming traffic and the other to regulate outgoing traffic. A third frequency may be needed for overflow and formal messages. Net Manager to work issue)**

Communications ability from Gaither and Raymond James appeared adequate. Communications from the Sun Dome and Hospitals not served by BEARS was difficult. **(Possible solutions include establish amateur resources in hospital as TGH did, cross band repeat capability or staging one operator out side and one inside. The inside operator would communicate to the outside operator via simplex and relayed into the net by outside operator. The third choice is the least desirable)**

Operations on other nets (STARC, Sun City, BEARS) with liaison to ARES/RACES seemed to work OK.

Some operators dispatched to the field were having a hard time hearing due to noise. **(Each operator should have the capability to use headsets or ear phone. This should be a part of your go kit.)**

HF was limited to Sun City. TARC was consumed with NCS and there were no available operators to man HF from that location. **(Need to ensure HF operator at TARC. Also need to recruit some capable home stations to support this function. Need to appoint HF Coordinator to work this issue.)**

MARC unit support was excellent given last minute assignment.

Operations

All involved must be knowledgeable of ICS. Ideally, our operators need to realize when dispatched to the field that they must seek out the incident command to plug in. There were operators that were confused where they should go when getting to the site. I believe some operators were reluctant to take the lead at a site because they were unsure of their role and where to report. Not sure if we really integrated with the IC unless it was done by STARC. **(Encourage everyone to complete ICS 100, 200, and 700. Currently seeking to fund 100 slots for the ARRL level 1 course.)**

Announcement of ARES/RACE drill on periodic basis was a good idea, but should have been limited to repeaters not currently being used for the exercise. **(Just need to better communicate instructions to stations involved in net operations)**

Net Control Stations (NCS) are merely the gatekeeper of the frequency to allow efficient message flow. The NCS in some cases was required to handle traffic directly. There may have been some confusion on where traffic was to be delivered and the NCS became the default. **(Better planning on message routing should be made. From an exercise prospective this falls to ARES/RACES leadership. On a more practical level each operation must be well versed in messaging and NCS must understand his/her role and facilitate traffic flow.)**

NCS was overwhelmed with traffic. That has already been established. The need to train additional NCS to allow for multi-frequency operations is obvious. **(Net Manager to continue to recruit and train operators. Recommend appointing a training manager if workload exceeds Net Managers time availability)**

Traffic was often repeated on the radio channel in acknowledgement of traffic received. This created addition radio congestion. Traffic should not be repeated; only the request for fills should occur. **(Further training required by Net Manager)**

During low to moderate activity, nets may need to go to a “free wheel” mode with the NCS standing by to facilitate traffic flow. Having to go through an NCS for every calls slows things down. The NCS need only intervene when traffic is heavy and regulation is needed to provide efficient flow. **(Net Manager to work the issue and provide recommendations.)**

Formal messaging on a tactical nets is a major source of slow down. Yet formal messaging is necessary for certain communications. Need to develop a policy to clearly delineate the use of informal vs. formal traffic. Also need to determine when NTS vs. NIMS forms are required. **(Net Manager along with ARES/RACES Officer to work issue)**

Submitted by Fred Nassar, KD8AQ, ARES/RACES Officer, Hillsborough County