The New Ballgame at Army MARS

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The New Ballgame at Army MARS

Bill Sexton N1IN/AAA9PC

This was like Major League spring training; three months of strenuous workouts, rookies and old hands alike pushing their limits, coaches scrutinizing every play. An awesome number of balls in the air, too, coast to coast.

It is serious business, getting in shape for the arduous season ahead. However, we’re talking hurricane season here rather than baseball season.

Army MARS was not tuning up for pennant races, but for the next Katrina, 9/11, or any other destructive event the nation might face. The only certainty for its ten domestic leagues (regions), 43 teams (state-defined field organizations) and 2,800 players (volunteer hams) is that the tropical storm season has officially started. MARS is preparing for Ana, Bill, Claudette, Danny, Erika, Fred, etc. whatever the weather might hurl at the U.S.

Never before has MARS undertaken such a unique, intense approach to preparedness. Chief Stu Carter candidly admitted “retraining” hardly describes the program he revealed in his Feb. 23 announcement to members:

• A new game plan under the title “The Road Ahead” calls for raising the level of training and sharpening the focus on services that disaster relief agencies might need, both civil and military. “The mission isn’t changing,” trainers were told. “What will change, as training and leadership proceed, is mindset.”
• Membership requirements are tightened, eliminating the FCC’s entry-level Technician amateur radio license as sufficient qualification. Now, General Class is mandated, plus completion of designated FEMA courses. In addition, all stations must be equipped to access the Army MARS Winlink email-over-HF system.
• To put it all into effect, the 12-week “Spring Training” cycle was launched March 2 beginning with written lectures delivered by email every Wednesday and followed by weeklong on-air discussions conducted on daily HF nets. Topics ranged from “What’s Expected of Members” to “Chain of Command: Holding Army MARS Together” and “Incident Information Reporting.” Participation was mandatory.

And with that, Army MARS plunged into a rigorous catch-up operation all the more notable because the need was not of MARS’ own making.

The MARS mission consists of being ready with the auxiliary communications that government might need in a major disaster. But until all the military commands and civil government agencies worked out their own post-9/11, post-Katrina configurations—state agencies as well as federal—MARS could hardly nail down its own planning. (The government’s process still isn’t fully complete.)

In the meantime, MARS members had gone about their normal business of training and exercising (and pitching in during hurricanes and winter storms). But the long holding pattern did precious little for morale, much less preparedness. Finally, the Department of Homeland Security published its post-Katrina revision of the National Incident Management System last December.

Chief Carter jump-started MARS long-range planning about the same time. However, he opted against the usual bureaucratic route with HQ doing the drafting. The job went instead to what the military calls a “Tiger Team”—experienced members outside HQ who are particularly dedicated to the specific activities involved.

The seven-man Tiger crew included (to mention only several) a State Director with 30 years experience working actual hurricanes, another ex-leader with background in corporate management and communications technology, and one of
the best-known net controllers in Army MARS. As head of the team, Carter chose Bob Mims, Region 1 Director (New England) with years of EOC experience in RACES. (Disclosure: the writer was a member). Our group was given six weeks to complete the job, a deadline necessitated by the approach of hurricane season.

The team analyzed the MARS record in 9/11 and subsequent weather and other emergencies, then surveyed the resources now available to MARS, the scope of services likely to be needed and the range of agencies likely that might call for assistance. Requirements of the Department of Defense and Department of the Army also went into the mix.

Some issues were keenly debated, including the upgraded FCC license requirement, but the draft was ready by deadline. With language added by Chief Carter and HQ staff, the eight-page single-spaced Road Ahead officially became Army MARS doctrine Feb. 23, 2009.

Member reaction varied. “It seems like they’re trying to freeze some of us out, always adding something new,” one older member complained on his home-state net.

The Chief’s response: “The ‘something new’ is the environment in which Army MARS operates... We didn’t add something new, it grew out of our mission to be relevant.”

Other objections were raised to the required ham license upgrade. The response to that was easy. For MARS members to help at EOCs, they would need access to HF bands not open to Tech licensees. Also, the superior license reinforces the professionalism MARS now wants to emphasize to its partner agencies. Leadership promised to help individuals qualify for the General exam during the year’s grace period.

Overall, reaction ranged from interest to delight. “I have either monitored or directly participated in 41 nets since we released Unit 1,” said Paul Drothler, AAV4DJ, one of the plan’s authors. “The obvious level of enthusiasm and involvement has been most gratifying. We have people checking into nets that have been dormant for many months. They are now participating regularly. Yes, some members will be lost and that’s regrettable, but it’s their decision.”

For all the immediacy built into the new Road Ahead doctrine, the most significant change almost certainly would be slow taking effect. Hopefully so, since it involves real disasters.

Members traditionally operated from home. Deployment to disaster scenes wasn’t contemplated or authorized. Katrina, however, taught the impossibility of assisting government agencies if the agencies themselves had no working communications on site, as in New Orleans.

So last year during Hurricanes Gustav and Ike, half a dozen “Emergency Response Teams” were fielded by MARS from Tennessee and Texas (including one led by Paul Drothler). It was a successful learning experience and the ERT concept is now built into the Road Ahead.

Similarly, agency augmentation — the loaning of otherwise uncommitted MARS personnel to help at EMA and EOC installations — proved itself during the winter’s ice storm onslaught in the Northeast. This, too, has become doctrine.

There were still two primary tasks for the members whose responsibilities, health, or interests wouldn’t permit external...
activity. One was familiar, the nets MARS operates to relay traffic and conduct command and control communications. The other offered a new twist, converting the often-dormant practice of circulating Essential Elements of Information reports about local incidents into a sort of national “forward observer” system.

“Collecting early warning situational information on developing emergency situations (known internally as ‘EEIs’) for transmission to designated agencies,” leads the list of general duties for all members. “This requires ongoing liaison with local agencies.” Providing Incident Notifications, as NIMS calls them, does not require penetrating disaster scenes, only a listing on local agency phone trees for activation.

Viewed in totality, the new doctrine reflects not so much a change of mission as a drastic revving up of machinery already in place and long awaiting a “go” signal. This it now had. To quote the Trainer’s Guide on the new mindset:

“Army MARS is no longer to be viewed as a sort of free-standing assemblage of military-connected hams with an open-ended mission of unspecified support to unnamed customers in undefined circumstances. To put it in a word, post-9/11 Army MARS is focused. What the Road Ahead sets out to do is sharpen the focus.”

That certainly was the intent of the MARS team’s burst of spring training

“I’m asking all members of Army MARS—100 percent of the membership of Army MARS—to set aside their own plans and make a three-month commitment to intensive training,” Chief Carter said in a broadcast message. “It is essential that we all operate from the same perspectives/training/point in time as we adjust our processes to meet the current and future needs of Army MARS.”

Really Interactive Training

The new approach to training called for dropping the traditional practice of lecturing (or reading from official documents) and instead engaging the trainees in open discussion.

The following interaction ensued when an on-air instructor commented on the way MARS members and volunteer firefighters both encounter professionalism on their jobs.

A member attending the state net said he works across the street from a firehouse. He said he was familiar how hard the volunteer firefighters trained, donning heavy turnout gear even in the hottest weather.

The MARS instructor inquired whether he considered these unpaid volunteers to be professionals. “Absolutely,” the member replied. “I’d let them carry me out of a burning house any day.”

Then another member entered with a comparison between firefighting gear and the manner in which MARS operators dress if they’re on duty at an OEC or other public situation. He felt that the sloppy t-shirts and dirty jeans often worn to Field Day would be inappropriate.

The trainer responded with his own observation working at a school that includes would-be physicians in the student body. “You can always tell the medical students from the rest,” he said. “There’s not the usual sloppiness. Looking like a professional gives you two advantages,” he added. “It makes you feel professional, and people treat you like a professional.”