

Musings from the Vice President October 2018

For this article I am going to take off my MARS VP name badge and put on my ARES®/RACES ID. Oops, I better put it back in my pocket. You'll see why in a little bit. This last week I attended the AUXCOMM course in Denton put on by Homeland Security as part of the Incident Command System (ICS). As it implies, AUXCOMM provides auxiliary communications during an emergency. This can consist of operating ham radio, data links, GMRS, FRS, public service radios, etc. They also provide support for the EOC's dispatch centers, program some or all radios, or help setup and maintain repeaters. Qualified AUXCOMM personnel can be used as dispatchers on public service radios and responsible for documenting all radio and telephone messages. These are known as RADOS. This all happens under the ICS system.

Some other positions in communications are the COML. The *Communications Unit Leader* heads the Communications Unit and is responsible for integrating communications and ensuring that operations are supported by communications. The COML must understand ICS and local response systems to support the efforts of Incident personnel. The COML can or cannot be amateur radio licensed.

One of the positions under the COML is the *Auxiliary Communication Manager*. ACMs are normally Hams. They manage the operational and technical aspects for the auxiliary communicators and resources. They also establish staff and maintain the AUXCOMM network.

Under the ACM are the AUXCOMMs. Depending on the size of the incident, these three positions can be done by the one person, two persons, or as many as needed depending on the size of the emergency.

When my application for the AUXCOMM course was accepted, I was told to not wear any badges, ids, have any radios or any agency or ham apparel. I found this very curious, but complied with their request. During the introduction to the course, we were told the reason why. HAMs do not have a very good reputation with some incident commanders and COMLs. The reasons can be summed as follows:

1. Radio Cliques

Groups such as RACES, ARES, Ham Clubs, and REACT have come to emergency deployments with the attitude of "We are Hams; we know everything there is to know about communications and have brought all of our own gear. Just get out of the way and let us work." Needless to say, that goes over liked a pinned coax.

I have personnel experience in this. During Katrina, our Carrollton ARES group was activated to provide communications at a shelter. We were assigned shifts at a local recreation center and told to bring a VHF go box if you had one. On arrival, our instructions were to submit hourly reports of shelter attendance to the Denton EOC. We were to use the fax, telephone and as a last resort, our VHF voice in that order.

After a couple of hours, I was approached by a police officer and was informed that some radio guy was trying to get in, but his name wasn't on the list. I vouched for him as he was a VP in our club and an officer in a neighboring ARES/RACES group. He righteously informed me that we should use our radio not a fax machine. "We are Hams not fax operators," he said.

Having only one year under my Ham belt then, I didn't argue, saluted him, but immediately after he left, continued to use the fax machine as per my instructions. We later found out that the RO of that group felt "left out" because his city didn't activate a shelter. He wanted to claim that our group needed direction from him.

Once picked as an AUXCOMM, you're working as part of the incident command system. Your duty is to them, not your served agency, Emergency Manager (unless they are part of the ICS), your RO, ES or groups such as Red Cross, MRC, etc. (Even your ever so humble MARS VP.)

2. People just show up, claiming they are Hams

There have been cases where these people were taken at face value and put to work. It did not go well. Some of these people purposely screwed around when they got bored with the task they were assigned. Also if you just show up, it takes valuable manpower and time to check you out.

Having taken the AUXCOMM course, your information is put into a very secure database so you can be contacted if you are needed. You can still take the course but opt out of being contacted. But let me stress: *Never self-deploy.*

3. In-fighting between groups

AUXCOMM training is now being actively encouraged. But still not without problems. We were told about a course where two different groups came. One group sat on one side of the room and the other group on the other. Loud arguments erupted between the two groups. It got so bad, that the instructors left!

Now you see the reason for no badges. Even during training, Hams can be their own worst enemy sometimes. Could this be one of the reasons that no ham groups were activated for the Rowlett Tornados?

So let me encourage all hams to join their local ARES/RACES group. You'll get valuable training and practice. If a local emergency occurs, you'll likely be used to help, coordinated by your local Emergency Manager.

However, if you want to help outside your local community, I'd suggest you join a group like the Baptist Men, Red Cross, Medical Reserve Corp. or CERT. Those last two groups were asked to mobilize for Rowlett. Also you may be lucky enough to be a member of an ARES group that works closely with their County Office of Emergency management. Denton is one example. They are mobilized quite frequently to handle incidents across our big State. If your role in one of those groups is communication, then I suggest you then take the AUXCOMM course for the many benefits it will give you. Just my humble musings.

73 Andy, KE5KOF
