

Recurring Problems during ARES/RACES Exercises

Having participated in more emergency exercises than I care to tally, I'm able to confidently predict that one or more of the following problems will recur in every exercise. These are evidence of lessons NOT learned, either because emcomm teams aren't aware of their mistakes, aren't bothering with training, aren't training often enough, or else they've been inundated with newbies. Here are the problems that come to mind, in no particular order:

1. Team members don't know how to work the radio equipment they're using – even their own:

Do you know how to set your own radios and your EOC or station radios for frequency, offset, and PL tone? Can you program this into a memory channel? Do you know how to turn on the 12V supply in the EOC? How about starting up the packet or WinLink station, if you have one? If your team is supporting multiple sites, with different models of radios at each one, then the problem can be especially acute. There are several ways to tackle this problem: Buy the same models of radios for each venue; make or buy quick-reference guides ("cheat sheets") for each radio; pre-program the memory channels with all of the frequencies you think you might use; and have ongoing training sessions with small groups of your team members on how to use the equipment.

2. Teams use the exercise as an excuse for a work day: I'm still surprised whenever this happens: teams decide that the exercise will be a dandy excuse to take care of some antenna work, re-route cables, or whatever. If you need the excuse of an exercise to get the team together for this work, then it's better than not doing it at all, but it's certainly not the purpose of holding exercises. Schedule your equipment maintenance and upgrades on non-exercise weekends or prior to the exercise.

3. Teams don't check equipment in advance of the exercise: You wouldn't wait until company shows up at your door to start cleaning house (at least I hope you wouldn't), and you shouldn't wait until the day of the exercise to check your equipment. Exercises are intended to test your "wetware" (i.e. your personnel), not your hardware. Your team should be checking all of the equipment at each site on a monthly basis. I shouldn't have to mention that disasters won't wait for you to fix your gear.

4. Confusion about when to ID, and how to use tactical and team calls: I hear team members give both their team's and their own call signs, and many are unaware of the protocol for using tactical calls, or even what their tactical call is. Part 97 says that amateurs must give their legal call once every 10 minutes and at the end of their QSO. As a practical matter, since we're unlikely to have a QSO lasting more than 10 minutes during an event, then both stations can initiate contact using their tactical calls, and give their own or their team's FCC call only when they're done. Knowing when you really **are** done talking with the other station is more art than science, so I won't fault an operator for giving his legal call more often than needed. Your team can practice exchanging tactical calls as a table-top exercise or over-the-air during or after your regular net. Decide in advance of the exercise what your tactical calls will be; they should be obvious, like "Podunk EOC" or "Station 73".

5. Not knowing how to exchange formal traffic: Almost none of us, including Yours Truly, get enough practice in exchanging formal traffic. This is something your team should be practicing regularly as a table-top exercise. Don't spend more than 5 minutes per session, but do it frequently.

A related problem is speaking too quickly when sending traffic. It's easy to forget that, especially in the excitement of an exercise or actual event, the person on the receiving end probably can't copy the

message as quickly as you can say it. One common trick is to trace over the characters of the message as you send it, so you have a better sense of how long it takes to write down.

6. Not using phonetics, or using non-ITU phonetics: This should be second nature for all team members, but some are either unaware of them or can't shake the unofficial phonetics they hear and use during casual operating. This could be remedied with some tabletop or on-air exercises; a fun one is to give the team a pangram (a sentence containing every letter of the alphabet, e.g. "The quick brown fox jumps over a lazy dog.") and have them repeat it back phonetically. There are lots of pangrams available online, many of them funny or just bizarre.

Police and fire departments use the APCO alphabet, as you're probably aware. This is the one that goes: Adam, Boy, Charles, David, etc. If your team is tasked with talking directly on public-safety radios to the responders, then it should be prepared to use these as well as the ITU phonetics.

7. Not saying "This is a drill" when passing simulated emergency traffic: This is important, since casual listeners (including the media) might misconstrue an exercise as a real event, if you're not identifying your simulated emergency messages as such. Your formal exercise traffic should routinely include "This is a drill", "This is an exercise", etc. in the body of the text.

Conversely, some teams get overzealous about saying "This is a drill" during all transmissions. If you're not actually exchanging simulated emergency traffic, then it's unnecessary and you're simply slowing down the proceedings.

8. Not keeping a dedicated radio on the team's primary frequency: Remember that while you're tuning around to everyone else's primary frequencies, they're likely to be doing the same thing, and your odds of connecting are small if you aren't constantly monitoring your own primary frequency. Keep a separate radio locked on it.

9. Not advising repeater owner or control op before commandeering a repeater: If you plan to use a particular repeater for an upcoming exercise, and your group doesn't own it, then be sure to ask the owner or control op in advance for permission to use their machine. Let them know the start/stop times and whether you intend to commandeer the repeater for the duration, or just exchange brief messages. This applies even if you've signed an MOU with the owner.

10. Using ham jargon: This is a tough habit to circumvent, especially for those of us who have been in the game for a long time. We need to minimize our use of Q signals and other ham jargon, for the sake of our newbies and served-agency members who aren't familiar with the terms.

I'll embellish this list over time, but I'm betting that you've already come up with a few more "lessons" yourself.

Kirk Bellar N7UK
DEC/RRO for King Co. WA
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