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AUXCOMM — Intense Training for Serious Disasters

My review of a tough Federal course for serious communicators.

Only 1200 radio amateurs have passed through the rigorous US Department of Homeland Security — Office of Emergency Communications' (DHS-OEC) Auxiliary Communications (AUXCOMM) course, a grueling 3 days of classroom lecture, videos, and tabletop exercises, culminating in a mega-disaster exercise as a final exam. There are five prerequisites: Completion of the four FEMA Independent Study courses I discussed in last March's column, and an Amateur Radio license.¹ I took the OEC TRG-AUXCOMM course when it was offered in Orlando, Florida, February 9 – 11, at the Orlando Police Training Center. Forming the impetus for the course is the following, excerpted from the *National Emergency Communications Plan* (2014):

Today, nearly all the states and territories have incorporated...Amateur Radio auxiliary communication operators into their TICPs [Tactical Interoperable Communications Plan] and SCIPs [Statewide Communication Interoperability Plan]; this allows them to quickly integrate the operators into response efforts, which can strengthen communications and operations during incidents of any scale.

Primarily, auxiliary communicators provide alternate communication services when local services fail or are overwhelmed during incidents, but they also support planned events and training exercises. They are one of many technical specialists to support the Incident Commander, typically positioned within the Communications Unit and under an auxiliary communications manager. If the student communicators volunteer and concur, TRG-AUXCOMM course graduates' names and contact information are entered into the *Communications Assets Survey and Mapping Tool Next Generation* (CASM NextGen) database. It's used by Statewide Interoperability Coordinators to geographically locate Auxiliary Communicators for deployment.

Why TRG-AUXCOMM?

Why use the term "AUXCOMM" when radio amateurs are historically familiar with the traditional groups/programs such as ARES®, RACES, SATERN, REACT, etc? On hand for the Orlando course was Technical Assistance Functional Manager John E. Peterson, N4KEA, who explained that AUXCOMM is an umbrella term for incorporating all of amateur communication service groups under the NIMS ICS structure when supporting public safety. While participating amateurs are trained by their home groups, such as ARES, when activated under the ICS, they check their titles and any internal group rivalries at the door. Under ICS, they all become technical specialists/auxiliary communicators, thus avoiding confusion on who they report to, and the protocols to follow. AUXCOMM is not an organization or program and does not compete with any Amateur Radio program or organization that provides public service, disaster, or emergency communications.

In addition to Peterson, lead instructors for the course were Jason Matthews, K4AUS, from central Florida, and Carter Davis, KH6FV, from Honolulu, Hawaii. Both instructors brought extensive credentials in emergency management and public safety communications to the head table. Some 35 students came from across the country to attend the class. Many were telecommunications experts/professionals, and all were Amateur Radio licensees.

The instructors led off the discussion with what makes Amateur Radio volunteers so important to the professional emergency management community. The primary reasons being spectrum, manpower, and operator/communicator proficiency. The instructors cited the fact that EOCs and emergency management agencies are typically funded at a base or "peacetime" level, but a deficit of resources occurs when an

emergency/disaster arises — the larger the incident, the larger the deficit. Trained and credentialed Amateur Radio operators can help fill the resource gap. The TRG-AUXCOMM course is designed to give amateurs competency in this regard.

Putting ICS Forms to Use

To familiarize students with the many ICS forms encountered during an incident response, instructors had us fill out an ICS 214 Activity Log daily, to track our course progress. We were also required to complete other critically important forms, such as Form 217A (Communications Resource Availability Worksheet), and Form 205 (Incident Radio Communications Plan) on each of several challenging tabletop exercises.

At the beginning of each exercise, students would populate the 217A with all of the local simplex frequencies and repeaters (with offsets and tones) that would be available to use in an incident response. Then, when the instructors would present the scenario, we would break into teams, identify critical sites, functions, and resources needing communications (using a team-prepared communications organization chart), and then select HF/VHF simplex and repeater frequencies from the 217A for direct links and nets, entering the selections on Form 205. Backup frequencies were also entered onto the sheet. Team leaders then presented their communications plan to the class, which was critiqued by the instructors.

Team-based tabletop exercises were conducted on the following scenarios:

- Parade drawing 5000 to 7500 attendees
- Power outage in a rural community, with cellular and public safety repeaters having only 4 – 6 hours of battery backup
- Train derailment involving an explosion, power outage, subzero temperatures, and evacuations

■ Wildfire with communications needed for animal rescue, hazard assessment, EOC-to-State EOC, and health department activities.

As if all that wasn't enough, the final exercise exam involved severe storm flooding, leaving a quarter of a million citizens without power, minimal Internet and cell service, the public safety infrastructure impacted, and a FEMA declaration. Time constraints and confusion were subtly injected into these exercises by the instructors as a simulation of the pressures that can occur in a real event — team members, including myself, felt the stress and acted out, trying to meet the exercise objectives!

The goal of each exercise was to illustrate the needs and components of each aspect of an incident response and how auxiliary communicators would assess the situation, identify the problem to be solved, plan, intervene, and evaluate for changes indicated for the next operations cycle.

The ham used the ICS 213 message form during these exercises to simulate requests of needed equipment such as radios, antennas, etc, as well as additional personnel should shortfalls occur.

The rest of the course was devoted to lecture, videos, and discussion, broken down into such learning units as the Communications Unit (part of the Logistics Section, under the Incident Commander in the NIMS Incident Command Structure), and the EOC. For example, I learned that during an incident, the EOC is primarily absorbed with policy (working with elected officials) and coordination among the various emergency support function leaders. Actual command and operations are functions reserved for the Incident Commander. Other learning units included AUXCOMM roles and responsibilities; interoperable communications; incident communications; Incident Radio Communications Plan; Incident Communications Center (ICC); team management and accountability; resources; best practices, and intrastate and interstate radio networks.

Tips: Best Practices

Some of the most valuable learning was in the unit on best practices, with timeless tips for all radio amateurs. For example, *don't make negative statements on the air*. Such statements serve no purpose, undermine the morale of weary volunteers, and interrupt

interoperability — the ability of all responders across all agencies/disciplines to work together from the same playbook. Speaking of relationships, have your Auxiliary Communications Manager make initial contact with EOC personnel and other public safety officials who use volunteers, such as CERT coordinators at the county levels, prior to an event if a working relationship does not yet exist. Learn and be prepared to follow their direction and protocols.

On the air, keep statements concise and transmissions short. Don't transmit sensitive information such as fatality counts, locations of staging areas, fuel areas, etc. Only transmit messages given to you by the proper authority. Log all messages passed and received.

In order to make your communications plan, you'll need to know what you have to work with. Be familiar with the auxiliary radio frequencies of your community, region, and state, including HF and V/UHF frequencies and assets such as repeaters.

Working with Public Safety and Other Entities

Don't force yourself or your organization on the professional emergency/public safety management community. Don't self-ID your personal vehicle without proper authority, and never "self-deploy."

Never express local politics. Maintain a professional appearance and behave like a professional. Don't wear public safety-type uniforms without official consent. Don't bring any unauthorized communications equipment into an EOC.

Perhaps the most important point of all: Don't make a negative impression. One operator who acts or speaks improperly can result in years of disenfranchisement with the local agencies. One ham involved in one unfortunate incident can spoil a good relationship and opportunity to serve for the group.

Resources

Our instructors advised us to be familiar with the primary communications systems that we may be supporting or even replacing during a major incident. A good place to gain some of this knowledge is the DHS' SAFECOM program (www.dhs.gov/safecom).

The instructors presented priority telecommunications services available to public

safety and national security users for use during times of congestion, including several that were discussed in this column in August 2012.²

The DHS' Interoperable Communications Technical Assistance Program publishes a repository (www.publicsafetytools.info) of valuable resources for communicators, including the *Auxiliary Communications Field Operations Guide* (AuxFOG). This publication covers best practices, radio frequencies, and mutual aid channels and protocols for integrating with a NIMS ICS environment.

ARES and AUXCOMM: Training and Reporting

If a group is activated by emergency management as auxiliary communicators, they should still report their activities to their ARES EC so it can be counted in monthly reports.

There are many similarities between AUXCOMM training and the ARES training offered by ARRL. The two training offerings should be seen as complementary, not in competition.

In summary, this challenging course was full of substance, taught by two veteran public safety communications experts and disaster responders, led by a staffer from the DHS in Washington DC, with a class full of eager radio amateurs, many of whom were public safety communications professionals.

Epilogue

While I highly recommend this course to all public service operators/communicators, DHS-OEC only conducts it when and where there is a strong demand from amateurs who are willing to make a serious effort. AUXCOMM requires a significant commitment of time and energy. It took me 2 full days just to take and pass the prerequisites. Once enrolled, I had to travel a considerable distance for another 3 long, grueling days of classroom lectures and stressful tabletop exercises. AUXCOMM is not a course for the casual public service operator. It's a course for serious operators willing to make a serious commitment for a demanding course.

Notes

¹R. Palm, K1CE, "Public Service," *QST*, Mar 2016, pp 81 – 82.

²R. Palm, K1CE, "Public Service," *QST*, Aug 2012, pp 75 – 76.