

Beamers Knob, Carroll County VA- After-Action-Report for “Operation Wildfire” October 1, 2011

What were your expectations for this exercise?

Our RACES unit in Carroll County was expecting to work with a number of jurisdictions operating under a number of organizational structures. This included such organizations as ARES, other RACES groups, Baptist Disaster Response, the Red Cross from different jurisdictions, various counties Emergency Management and the National Weather Service. Working together would mean allowing the free exchanges of data across jurisdictional and organizational lines. The message load would be equal to or exceed the kind of traffic exchange that we would experience in a major disaster. This would allow testing of infrastructure and personnel's ability to handle this kind of communications load. We were expecting to have mutual aid support for a simulated Wildfire at the peak of Beamers Knob at an elevation of about 3400 feet above sea level. Our expectation was that our needs could be communicated dependably throughout this exercise to all points of operation supporting the firefighting and evacuation efforts. We would be able to handle the large volume of messages needed to support the onsite effort and support agencies involved.

What actually took place?

We have the agencies participating that included the above listed groups. These stretched from the west side of Wythe County, to the east coast of Virginia and south to Rockingham County NC. Communications took place with agencies located over 337 miles apart. We also were able to make contact to the far reaches of our support network and all points in-between. It required innovation due to the local Winlink gateway having problems related to a combination of factors from human error to heavy equipment usages. A number of the Winlink stations were not able to send their Winlink traffic due to congestion. Most shifted to voice and handled their assigned messages. I was able to clear all traffic from my location and this included 8 voice messages sent or received and 50 Winlink messages for a total of 58 messages sent or received. This is far more traffic than I passed in a week while providing communications support during a deployment to Mississippi during Hurricane Katrina. The dependability of the Floyd County Gateway helped make this possible. The Floyd County gateway handled traffic for a number of jurisdictions. The Roanoke gateway provided dependable Winlink service to Franklin County during their simulated outage of their local gateway. The Rockingham Gateway handled their traffic load with no problems. The NWS shifted from HF Winlink to local VHF Winlink to handle their traffic. The Baptist Disaster Relief Communications trailer in Newport News Virginia was able to use HF to handle their Winlink traffic.

What went well and why?

Communications continued to flow even when modes became problematic. With a few exceptions those that committed themselves and their agencies were there for the exercise. A number of new hams were in their first exercise of this type and they handled themselves very well with their limited experience. A couple of these had to pick up a new assignment at the last minute and had very limited information available upon arrival at their duty stations. They didn't allow this difficulty to overwhelm them. There was a sense of frustration among some of the participants, especially with the new hams. This is very normal when you thrust into a setting of high traffic volume in a short period of time with lots of pressure to get the job done. By and large this was handled very well by most of those that took part in the drill.

What can be improved and how?

We need to insure that needed documentation (at least equipment manuals) is available at the operational sites. Participants also need to give a close look at the website and print off material that might be needed upon arrival at their assigned area.

With voice traffic, there was congestion on the main net frequencies. Part of this was due to the need to pass traffic beyond simplex range and a lot of traffic was passed on the two main net frequencies. New River Valley traffic could have been shifted to the 147.18 repeater. The Roanoke, Floyd, Montgomery, and Franklin County traffic could have been handled through a number of Poor Mountain repeaters. The Wythe County traffic could have been shifted to the Sand Mountain repeaters (440 and 2 meter repeaters). Those stations located in the impact area, in the higher elevation could have been handled traffic thorough some of the broad coverage repeaters located in Rockingham County.

We needed at least two operators at each location to provide for needed breaks and to care for the hectic pace of logging and provide for needed operator breaks.

A number of counter-productive practices of operators needed to be handled through local training nets rather than trying to make on- the-air corrections in drills such as this exercise. Our net control resisted the temptation to try to make these suggestions in the middle of a drill. This would have gotten in the way of handling messages which was the primary goal. This lifts up the need for ARES, RACES and other EMMCOM nets to have a strong training component as part of the net. A simple roll call or ragchew net doesn't meet these requirements.

Basic traffic handling and procedures for mutual support needs constant review and education as an on going process with each agency and jurisdiction. ICS and NIMS needs to be central to this training experience.

In regard to Winlink, I should have insured that constant on site supervision of the gateway was provided. This would have allowed the manual disconnecting of stations were hung up and failed to disconnect prior to trying to reconnect. In the future, the creation of portable Winlink gateways that will operate with the new "Relay" software

installed. This would allow the handling of a large amount of the volume of traffic that didn't require an Internet connection. This would have included about all traffic in this exercise with the exception of Newport News. This would free the Internet connected gateways to handle the long-haul traffic. I was in the position to do this during Operation Wildfire but I had written myself into the exercise as a traffic handler. It would have been better to use my VHF Winlink station in the EmComm trailer as a gateway and use HF for any messaging required.

Thanks again to all those that participated and I would hope that it was a real learning experience for all of us. I know that it was for me. In the future, I would like to see exercises of this type that would be spearheaded by other jurisdictions allowing out Carroll County unit to assist in a support role with these drills.