

Air Force MARS Responds in Emergencies

On January 12, 2010 the island nation of Haiti was rocked by a magnitude 7.0 earthquake and multiple aftershocks that devastated the country, destroying roads, collapsing buildings, and killing, by some estimates, up to 250,000 people. The country's fragile infrastructures, including its communications networks, were demolished.

In response to this disaster, members of the U.S. Air Force Military Auxiliary Radio System (MARS) — operating side-by-side with other MARS and amateur radio operators — played a substantial role in providing essential life-saving communications.

The effort was entirely a volunteer one supporting the work of medical and humanitarian relief organizations, but the experience provided real-world validation of the important role MARS can play in ensuring communications connectivity after a disaster.



An Air Force officer in the MARS communications tent supporting the disaster relief effort after the Haiti earthquake (Photo courtesy Jack Satterfield)

JOIN AIR FORCE MARS

To join Air Force MARS you must meet the following minimum requirements:

- Be a U.S. citizen or resident alien
- Be at least 18 years old
- Possess a valid FCC amateur radio license
- Have digital capability
- Have the capability to transmit on MARS HF frequencies

To become a member of Air Force MARS or to request additional information or a membership application, contact:

Air Force MARS:

U.S. Air Force MARS Headquarters
AFNIC/ESLI (MARS)
203 W. Losey Street, Room 1200
Scott AFB, IL 62225-5222

Attn: Mr. Richard S. Jenson, Chief, USAF MARS
afnic.mars@us.af.mil



Pentagon MARS Station:

Room 5D1061A, The Pentagon
(703) 693-8423



The United States Air Force Military Auxiliary Radio System (MARS)



Providing contingency radio communications support to U.S. Government operations



WHAT IS MARS?

The Military Auxiliary Radio System (MARS) is a Department of Defense sponsored program, established as separately managed and operated programs by the Army, Navy-Marine Corps and Air Force. MARS members are volunteer licensed amateur radio operators who are interested in providing auxiliary or emergency communications to local, national and international emergency and safety organizations, as an adjunct to normal communications.

Today, MARS is an organization of some 5,000 amateur radio operators who volunteer their time and radio equipment to assist government agencies in the event normal communications channels are disrupted, either by natural calamity or deliberate hostile action.

MARS members represent an organized military auxiliary; as such, operators are trained to meet the requirements of any communications emergency. In recent years, greater interoperability between Army, Air Force, and Navy-Marine Corps MARS has facilitated accomplishment of this objective.

Individual civilian MARS stations operate throughout the continental United States, alongside civil agency and military MARS stations in the United States and overseas.

PROGRAM AUTHORITY AND GUIDANCE

MARS is governed by Department of Defense Instruction (DoDI) 4650.02, published in December 2009. The DoDI established MARS as an organized military auxiliary; integrated MARS more tightly into the DoD Components; invested a greater number of Office of the Secretary of Defense-level entities with equities in the program; and broadened the MARS mission, tasking it with providing contingency radio communications support not only to the Department of Defense but to civil authorities at all levels, in accordance with DoD's homeland defense responsibilities as outlined in existing DoD guidance.



WHAT AIR FORCE MARS DOES

In addition to providing high frequency (HF) radio contingency communications support to the Defense Department, MARS operators support other elements of the U.S. government. For example, they actively participate in the National Communications System Shared Resources (SHARES) HF Radio Program, which promotes interoperability between more than 100 federal, state and private sector entities in support of national security/emergency preparedness.

U.S. Air Force MARS members are experienced radio operators who communicate on military frequencies using both voice and digital modes. They voluntarily devote their time and resources to ensure the Defense Department has reliable contingency communications capability if needed, under all types of circumstances.

MARS operators provide support to individual military installations as well as the National Command Authority. For example:

- Air Force MARS radio operators – available around the clock and at no cost to the government – facilitate contacts and run phone patches between military aircraft and ground stations every day. Many of these phone patches are used to conduct official business, freeing up more sophisticated and costly military communications assets for other purposes.
- During the January 2009 Presidential Inaugural, MARS stations established continuous on-the-air liaison with the FEMA National Emergency Coordination Net (NECN), National Communications System SHARES network, and military and other communications centers for the purpose of disseminating information and passing emergency traffic as needed.
- Throughout the course of the space shuttle program, Air Force MARS operators activated an auxiliary HF communications network in support of space shuttle missions and have provided a contingency HF communications link between satellite launch sites and remote tracking stations.
- A team of Air Force MARS radio specialists has been assisting the 174th Fighter Wing of the NY Air National Guard with operations and maintenance of the Joint Incident Site Communications Capability system and on-the-air training of HF radio operators
- The MARS communications station at the Pentagon provides contingency communications to the Joint Staff and the National Military Command Center and participates in communications exercises with DoD airborne assets.

MARS HISTORY

In November 1925, the Army Amateur Radio System (AARS) was formed by a few dedicated pioneers in the United States Army Signal Corps. This organization continued until the start of World War II when operations were suspended. Army amateur radio was authorized to resume operations in 1946 and the Army Amateur Radio System was reactivated and functioned as such until 1948 when the Army and Air Force established the Military Amateur Radio System, later renamed the Military Affiliate Radio System (MARS). In 1962, the Navy-Marine Corps MARS program was launched making MARS a joint service program.

During the military conflicts in Korea and Vietnam, and again in Operation Desert Storm, MARS operators kept the troops overseas in touch with family and friends at home. Hundreds of thousands of "MARSgrams" and phone connections were handled without charge.

In 2009, MARS was rebranded as the "Military Auxiliary Radio System" and its mission was refocused on emergency preparedness. In addition to providing support to the Department of Defense, MARS now also works closely with FEMA, the Department of Homeland Security, and other federal, state, and local agencies.

Today MARS works with domestic civilian and emergency response organizations at the national, state and local levels to ensure reliable communications links during emergencies. This includes use of a global network of nodes to relay e-mail traffic via HF radio when Internet connectivity is unavailable. Several state and county emergency management offices also use MARS as the link between their civilian emergency management radio nets and military radio nets activated in an emergency.

Air Force MARS is currently headquartered at the Air Force Network Integration Center (AFNIC) at Scott AFB, IL.

