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Charlotte RACES Goings On for the Week—

This has been a busy week for the organization.

The Emergency Communication Coordinators for West Central Florida met at the Desoto County EOC on Saturday. This was an opportunity for Charlotte RACES/ARES to reintegrate to this parent group. Dee Turner, N4GD@ARRL.org is the new Section Leader and this is also an opportunity for new beginnings for ARES units and individuals who have, for whatever reason, not been in contact with the ARES leadership. Dee is an approachable individual who wants to include members in decision making.

The EC's were briefed on the status of Charlotte RACES/ARES and were solicited to assist us in bringing the unit up to standard. Many of the EC's were involved in providing communications during Charley and I was able to get detailed feedback on our operation. Some of the EC's were on site at the staging area, EOC and/or were involved in emergency comm. in Charlotte County.

I found several discussion items of interest:

- There is a state tracking system where operators and other entities coming into disaster zones can (should) be cleared and tracked by this ID. This can control volunteers showing up without being asked. It also, if I understand it correctly, being issued a tracking number covers volunteers under workmen's comp while traveling.
- There is a message tracking system. There were close to 8000 messages re Charley. It is possible that there is a subset of these messages that could be searched under Charlotte County (although I am sure that it would not be inclusive as some messages were not tracked through this system). This might be pursued at some point.
- MARS did and can play a role in establishing HF contact to the state EOC as well as to military units and in areas requiring longer distance communication.
- The use of RACES as emergency communications varies from county to county. My impression is that Charlotte County reliance on RACES is the lowest as compared to other counties, with the possible exception of Desoto County. The belief in Charlotte County is that the in-house 800 MHz equipment would not need to rely on backup since it is so well engineered, redundant and robust. Some counties within our region with equally sophisticated 800 MHz systems utilize RACES/ARES officers and operators at the level of a trusted and valued employee without pay—to include use of emergency vehicles, and support taskings of considerable responsibility. Many EC's are included in meetings, training, and conferences. Why the differential? It is an open question at this time.

- One point that was made was the use of non-hams in RACES. This could include runners and admin people and the use of RACES as an umbrella group to manage volunteer communications such as SKYWARN, CAP, CB, (useful for truckers coming into disaster zones) and more (see the following paragraph on the North Port Exercise). This might something to explore within Charlotte.
- There was a technical presentation on being able to combine Echolink/IRLP data communications. At this point, I do not see much of a call for that in our county's emergency system.

I requested permission to observe a tactical exercise being held by Sarasota EOC which involved RACES in a support role. With the help of Al Sanders and Sarasota RACES ARES community I was assigned to tag along with Bob-KI4FJT, an avid RACES volunteer. We both rode with Lt. Sullivan, the Task Force Leader. The exercise involved an event that required a locality to respond to clear debris, power lines, and to find and provide medical services to victims. North Port was one of a number of task forces that were tested. The force consisted of police, fire, public works, transport(schoolbus), Search and Rescue, and electric utility folks and vehicles. The RACES operator was in contact with the Sarasota EOC and could be used to enlist or coordinate additional support; e.g., police helicopter. FRS (limited power handheld) radios were issued to occupants of all the vehicles. There were some problems here from a communication standpoint in that there was not an initial check to see if everyone could communicate. Our vehicle was lead in a convoy that needed to stay together. The Fire Captain was in the very next vehicle and was following too far and too slowly. The Lt. tried to call him but his FRS radio was not working and this slowed us up. On site it was the RACES operator's additional task to provide GPS data for victim locations. There was somewhat of a problem in the coordination of the use of the simplex frequency on site which was used to talk to the EOC base. If I were writing the after-action I would recommend that the RACES operator also carry a good quality FRS (which could have come in handy at one point), and that the RACES operator issue the FRS to the players and conduct an initial check to insure everyone is able to communicate. We should get some FRS radios ourselves here in Charlotte. I do not believe that Charlotte County holds such exercises. If they did it would be nice to see if there could be a role for RACES/ARES. This would be useful training. There may however be other exercises that we may be able to participate in. We need to be aware of any opportunities.

One of the reasons that the use of Charlotte RACES volunteers during an emergency is limited to shelters and hospitals is the strong feeling among EOC staff that county communication is so robust that the traditional role of RACES in providing essential communications in a backup role is superfluous. I accepted this justification at face value when I first signed on but I believe in old Ronald's dictum to trust but verify. In trying to learn the ins and outs of the RACES operation in Charlotte, I am meeting with numerous folks and gathering quite a bit of data. I am going to ask for more in a formal way in an upcoming email request, but I have enough information now to challenge the notion that "backup communication systems are unnecessary". It is quite clear that the 800MHz system did fail on a number of occasions, that public communications systems were saturated at times, that telephone communications was a problem for some

important players, that out-of-county communications and in-county communications between different communication systems were not working or adequate at times, CERT teams used marine radios (illegally), National Guard, public works, ambulances dispatched by runner versus instead of their radios, and even FEMA to FEMA exchanges all were problematical at some point—or so the data seem to indicate. I would like to ask the county staff to tell me of any communication difficulties they had and verify the reports of the hams. And, I would ask anyone reading this to provide any information that would contradict some of the foregoing and forthcoming declarations.

As I try to sort out the different versions of staffing and issues and problems during Charley, I am confronted with a repetitive theme: there was no central direction to allocate backup communication resources out of the EOC. The EOC RACES **was** handling message traffic—lots of it, and the folks in the field **were** responding, Englewood as a unit was doing quite a bit pretty well and were reportedly assisting law enforcement with traffic(unknownst to the EOC apparently), on this side of the river, a dozen deputies in a church off Ramparts Blvd. told a ham, “we can’t contact anyone, can you call and ask what we are supposed to do.” and it was handled by a ham as were many situations. I am curious about what kind of problems occurred when outside police agencies brought their own equipment online on the same frequencies as Charlotte County causing interference resulting in neither agency being able to communicate. Hams responded and solved problems but there appeared to be no central authority dealing with and documenting these problems systemically and centrally. I know, I know everyone was busy and early on the situation was "chaotic". What I seem to be getting though is the sense that information on communications problems and issues that could have been solved by the use of auxillary communicators was not flowing into and out of the EOC and/or not flowing between the EOC and the RACES people. If those channels cannot be established, credibly, through an enhanced working relationship there may indeed be, as Paul Winter (and I understand, Wayne Salade) have intimated, no real use for RACES as an organization (not that there isn't a purpose, rather there is not a willingness to let RACES play that role). (The utility of ARES, however, will remain regardless.)

I would also like to deal with some of the people problems encountered by our folks in providing communications: Denied access to repeater sites! Pulling the plug on our repeaters! Letting county generators (which also run the 800 system) run out of fuel. Telling our shelter and hospital volunteers they are unnecessary and to leave!(not thinking beyond the take-charge-personality that communications can be susceptible or saturated). There were many such situations and there appears not to have been an opportunity to hash this out with the county post-event. I will be working, whether I stay on as the RACES Officer or not, to develop a timeline of events and subsequently a report on communication and RACES which I hope to distribute widely.

Thanks to all who have made contact recently with info and offers to assist. On that end, it is coming together. Keep your fingers crossed.

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