A little bit about MARS by Mark Sharef WQ8S / AAV5QK

It seems that MARS must be the best kept secret in Amateur Radio. Most amateurs must think were like the Masons or Skull & Bones. Sometimes I wish we were, and then perhaps it would be easier to recruit new people. Just think we could have passwords and secret handshakes.

For those who don't know, MARS stands for "Military Auxiliary Radio Systems" and has been around since 1925. In all those years our basic mission has been the same: to provide communications in time of emergencies, as does RACES ("Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Service") and ARES ("Amateur Radio Emergency Service"). What's different about us is we work with the Military on their frequencies and using their procedures. This is what we train for.

When I pass traffic, I can be on frequencies far removed from the amateur bands and might be talking to an Army or National Guard station. These stations could be just a few miles or halfway across the country. I could be operating at home or portable, just about anywhere.

With this in mind we are looking of Amateurs who have a General class or higher license and are at least 18 years of age. The reason for this is we found it was often necessary to go back and forth between the HF Amateur and Military frequencies. The 18 year age limit is for those who are willing to deploy in times of emergency.

Just like Volunteer Firemen, we train to be as professional as possible. MARS operators commit to a minimum of 12 hours per quarter, but most of us volunteer for more than that. Like RACES and ARES we have to take and pass the FEMA training for NIMS ICS -100, 200, 700 & 800.

MARS nets are very structured. We are, after all a Military organization. The Army has been moving traffic by radio and telegraphy since the Civil War and has found many things that work and don't work.

New things are always being tried. When it's truly found to be better, changes are made and passed on to everyone in the system.

A good example of this is WINMOR ("WINlink Message Over Radio"). PACTOR ("a modern radio teletype mode") was being used with great success, but the cost was slowing down everyone from using it. Experiments with WINMOR showed it would work about as well as PACTOR-II and could be loaded into any computer with Windows XP or newer operating system with 1Ghz or faster speed. Having a sound card mode, that worked this well, proved quite cost effective.

When you join MARS you are not left on your own. Several mentors are available to help you with different aspects of your training and getting your station up and running on MARS frequencies.

If this sounds like something you could commit yourself to, you can contact me at msharef@dishmail.net or you can go to http://michiganarmymars.net/.

When you finish your training I'll take you aside and show you the secret handshake.

A little bit about WQ8S:

Mark was first licensed in 1970 as WN8IOP and has been a MARS operator since 1990.