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MARS Chiefs Draft Unprecedented Plan for Cooperation in Haiti

In a bold break with tradition, leaders of the three branches of the Military Auxiliary Radio System (MARS) have shaken hands on a plan that assigns specific responsibilities for communications support in Haiti following the 7.0 earthquake that devastated the country Jan. 12.

Volunteer MARS radio operators representing all three service MARS programs have been on the ground in Haiti, working with military and medical teams to provide communications support.

"The delegation of responsibilities among the three MARS services not only makes practical sense, but is an excellent example of interoperability in action," said Allen Eiermann, Chief of the Air Force MARS program.

Army MARS has been charged with coordinating "frequency authorizations and use of digital communications for MARS operations on the island, including the transmission of e-mail via radio links. This capability is especially useful in the absence of internet connectivity," according to a news release from David J. Trachtenberg, N4WWL, public information officer for Region III and Northeast Area of U.S. Air Force MARS.

Navy-Marine Corps MARS is responsible for recruiting volunteers for all three MARS services for MARS operation in Haiti.

Air Force MARS has primary responsibility for coordinating and releasing public affairs information on the activities of MARS radio operators assisting in the relief operation.

"This represents true unity of effort," said Jim Griffin, the Army MARS Chief. Bo Lindfors, Chief of the Navy-Marine Corps MARS program, noted that the success of the MARS operation so far "demonstrates the value of this contingency communications capability in a real-world emergency," the release said.

The joint response initiated by the three Chiefs' Feb. 2 decision could be seen as



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a routine enough operation but in fact represents a significant break with tradition, according to a MARS operator whose experience spans the last four chiefs' tenures.

Like the uniformed services themselves, the three MARS organizations have operated separately since their formation, each with its own command structure, membership qualifications, radio frequencies and net schedules. The result has been that in a disaster situation, it was hard to avoid duplication of activities and overt competition or inability to concentrate scattered assets where most needed.

A first breakthrough came a couple of years ago when a team of volunteer members from the three services compiled a joint Voice SOP (standard operating pro-



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cedure) for net operation, following NATO's lead.

Meanwhile two new communication modes produced collaboration at the specialist level. Navy-Marine Corps MARS took over development of the Automatic Link Establishment System (ALE) with members of the other services participating. Army MARS, which had adopted the Winlink e-mail-over-radio protocol provided training and frequency access to the others.

Collaboration at the member level goes back at least to the mid-1990s when Army MARS began reporting "Elements of Essential Information" (EEl)s on major accidents and disasters. It was the great Northridge Earthquake of 1994 in the Los Angeles area that gave EEl)s their first application, allowing the Pentagon to calibrate its response.

Air Force and Navy-Marine Corps members were soon contributing EEl)s to the Pentagon's Director of Military Support.

In a Jan. 1998 directive on MARS activity, the Defense Department called for the three military department secretaries to "Encourage inter-Service operation of MARS stations on a regular basis." But there was no call for interoperation until much later.

MARS is a Department of Defense sponsored program, established as separately managed and operated programs by the Army, Navy-Marine Corps and Air Force, according to MARS' press release. Members are volunteer licensed civilian amateur radio operators who serve as an

organized military auxiliary and provide contingency radio communications support to the Department of Defense and to civil authorities at all levels.

"MARS operators assist in establishing communications under emergency conditions, or when conventional means of communications are unavailable, or are likely to become unavailable," it said. "They also provide health, morale and welfare radio communications support to members of the Armed Forces, civilian employees and contractors of the Department of Defense, as well as to civil agency employees and contractors, when in remote and isolated areas, in contingencies or whenever appropriate."

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