

Experience From a Recent Communication Unit Exercise

By KD5BJ

I recently attended as AuxComm operator the (Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency) CISA Exercise involving COML, COMT, ITSL (International Technology Service Unit leader), INTD (Incident Tactical Dispatcher), RADO, and AUXC teams working together. CISA personnel were ops and valuator in this exercise.

Please be aware that AUXCOM is not another organization, but a training standard for amateur radio operators affiliated with a local, regional, state, or federal governmental emergency response organization. (CERT, btw, is also one of the public service agencies.)

The mission of the exercise was to support a municipality or county in response operations following a complex incident

Responders of EACH branch worked in three teams and were expected to help with any communications needs that would come up during operations, as well as to respond to new problems as they were presented through injects throughout the day exercise.

The objective of the exercise were to:

- Provide opportunity for players from all disciplines and agencies to work together on a complex incident
- To provide opportunity to advance or complete players' task book
- To observe the ability of each player and provide a critique
- To observe the equipment deployed by each player and provide a critique
- Enhance NIMS skills and capabilities
- To observe the response to 104 unexpected injects sent to players at high rhythms
- To learn new tasks and ask questions
- For COML and AUXC to create ICS 205 together
- For COML and AUXC to facilitate operations and to cooperate with the EOC or RADO/dispatchers
- For COMT to show their skills in repairing equipment
- For AUXC operators to install and repair their equipment
- For ITSL to respond to lack of phone service and internet
- For everyone maintain safety for all players during the exercise

The scenario was to support the City of Granger, TX in response operations following a complex train derailment caused by a collision of a passenger train and a freight train which had pushed a school bus on an adjacent highway. Several cars were tipped over and few ruptured, releasing chemicals in solid, in liquid, and vapor form that formed a chemical cloud. Fuel of the

locomotives also burned, causing also a large smoke cloud. About 90 passengers in the train were trapped or missing. Regular means of communication were overloaded by calls, and failed. The cause of the disaster was under investigation. Players had to deal with angry public and all sorts of witness reports (including UFOs), in obvious absence of a PIO. Players had also to deal with personnel not following agency SOP

We players were divided in Red, White, and Blue teams, each working in their own universe (not interacting with one other, but only with the EOC.) The teams operated each from a Command Communication Vehicle which were provided two by Texas Department of Public Safety and one by Blanco County Emergency Management.

CISA personnel inspected all the radio equipment in my truck, and all the personal go-kit including extra dry food, first aid kits, licenses, certificates, and the like.

AUXC operators such as myself were expected to use unfamiliar equipment; to put together an RMS station and to use it during the exercise by sending winlink messages; We were also expected to solve unexpected problems. In particular I dealt with an unconnected cable and lack of internet while using equipment unfamiliar to me.

I had also a real-life issue as the radio was totally deaf to any signal. The VARA FM sound card was showing no fountain nor audio. Eventually, I had to call Tom Whiteside to solve the issue, which was related to the PTT. It seems that after an automatic Microsoft update, the PC kept defaulting to the wrong settings.

I was expected to work ICS form 205 with COML and explain to him the importance of auxiliary communications. This was crucial as the COML person had never worked with ARES/AUXCOM personnel and was surprised that he needed to add RMS stations and amateur radio repeaters on a 205. It was a good ARES PR as he showed much interest in what I was doing.

I was asked to make voice and winlink contact on VHF/UHF and voice contact on HF. My exercise task consisted to deploy AUXC trained personnel to Granger Junior High, Taylor Middle School, and to send amateur radio operators to search another stranded bus south on HWY 35, whose passengers needed medical attention. The operators had to be equipped with APRS to give GPS location.

I was tasked to check with my operators on the welfare of person needing medical attention at Taylor Middle School

I had to respond to what looked like a couple of bogus requests by a volunteer fireman.

My White Team had to deal with a suspicious package left at their door.

I was supposed to use also three GRMS repeaters, besides ham radio repeaters for use of non-ham radio personnel, but were not available.

As my operating plan I chose as my AUXC primary repeater the 443.300 repeater, situated in Granger, TX., and the local RMS Station on 145.61, and as HF contact the 7.290 Traffic Net. Also listed on the EAP were the Williamson County Primary repeater (147.08), and the ARES secondary repeater (146.64).

The exercise started in reality the week before with a formal request for deployment for the incident in Granger. The IC said that I was the only one to follow procedure by calling in, confirming my coming, asking if there was a radio frequency to travel and/or a frequency assigned to AuxComm; if they had already a ICS 205 or an EAP I needed to be aware of;

if there were any other incident conflicting with this one I needed to be aware of, and a phone number to call for any reason while traveling to deployment. These are standard operating procedures during pre-deployment, and they are in the taskbook. I did not ask for the location and incident name and number because I had received them in the deployment email.

Like Rudy said for his real-life deployment, just loading the truck and preparing was a great training per se, like thinking about any gear that might be needed, rain gear (with this heat? What works?), first aid, food, water, sun protection, forms, and equipment (I traveled with two antennas and two go-kits, just because one is none and two is one. This was very much appreciated by the CISA evaluator).

I had multiple copies of needed ICS forms and was able to supply them to team mates, who greatly appreciated them.

I benefited greatly from this exercise. I learned how the "other side," the agency side, work, and what kind of cooperation I could expect; I was able to see other go kits that amateur radio operators working in Law Enforcement or CISA, or Emergency Management had; the CISA evaluator explained the different gear he uses when he travels by vehicle (he takes also the kitchen sink) versus when he flies (no matter how diligent he is, he will need something he does not have once on the deployment site);

I learned the advantage of GETS cards versus FirstNet (Gets card work with and to any provider; FirstNet only on AT&T); I learned about and downloaded the Public Service Library App (on your phone search for PULibrary app), which offers many guides for anywhere in the USA and offers a multitude of frequencies and talks group to choose from for an ICS 205. It was all together a very friendly atmosphere, I was able to get things checked off my task book, and we amateur radio operators were well taken into consideration.

I did, after the exercise and the hog wash was over, express the desire for more AUXCOM classes for us. It seems that they are getting more instructors and that there will be a class offered in Houston for Harris Co ARES in the fall. I asked to keep a few spaces for us. Talking to Terry Jones K5LGV, I expressed the desire to have an AUXCOM class for Lee, Williamson, and maybe Travis Counties as well.

I did not realize, but the IC of the exercise is an amateur radio operator, member of WC-ARES, and he listens without participating to the Williamson County training and SKYWARN nets. He thanked us for all our service to keep everyone safe. He is willing to come to talk to us in Lee County to one of our monthly meetings, and I gladly welcomed him.

This was training for tonight,

This is KD5BJ back to net.