

MARS Gets New Name As It Fine Tunes Mission

On Wednesday, December 23, 2009 the Department of Defense (DoD) issued an *Instruction* concerning MARS, effective immediately. This *Instruction* gives the three MARS services -- Army, Air Force and Navy/Marine Corps -- a new focus on homeland security and a new name: *Military Auxiliary Radio System*. The *Instruction* is the first major revision to MARS since January 26, 1988 -- as such, the first revision since the 9/11 attacks and Hurricane Katrina, two major events that changed the way Amateur Radio dealt with emergency communications.

The DoD defines a "military auxiliary" as "an organized body of volunteers prepared to supplement the uniformed services or any designated civilian authorities by provision of specialized autonomous services when called upon or when situations warrant," and gives the Civil Air Patrol and Coast Guard Auxiliary as examples of auxiliaries.

In the past, MARS had focused primarily on emergency communications and health and welfare support. The DoD's *Instruction* now directs the three MARS services to provide "contingency radio communications" to support US government operations, DoD components and "civil authorities at all levels," providing for national security and emergency preparedness events. MARS units will still continue to provide health and welfare communications support "to military members, civilian employees and contractors of DoD Components, and civil agency employees and contractors, when in remote or isolated areas, in contingencies or whenever appropriate." MARS must also be capable of operation in "radio only" modes -- without landlines or the Internet -- and sustainable on emergency power (when public utility power has failed); some MARS stations must be transportable for timely deployment.

The *Instruction*, however, does not mention which of the three MARS services will take the lead when responding to events. According to sources, this has been seen as a critical issue in conforming to the National Incident Management System (NIMS) that calls for "unity of command." As now constituted, the three separate MARS services are supposed to "interoperate," but command-wise, each operates independently. Some MARS members had urged clarification on this issue to avoid confusion during an emergency, sources said.

The Secretaries of the Army, Air Force and Navy are to encourage participation in MARS, the *Instruction* states, saying this may be accomplished "by establishing and funding an active MARS program within each Military Department, which shall then assign a MARS-licensed staff representative to manage operations, readiness, planning, procedural and technical development, documentation,

standards, training, equipment, program and membership administration, and other matters necessary for mission accomplishment."

The Secretaries are also tasked with bringing new personnel into their MARS services. The *Instruction* calls on them to establish programs "to promote civilian interest, recruit qualified volunteers, sponsor them for basic background checks and furnish them suitable training in contingency support communications."

The *Instruction* also dictates that MARS leaders will now report to three DoD officials; before this revision, they only reported to one person. The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Homeland Security and Americas Security Affairs (ASD [HD&ASA]) now has primary responsibility for the MARS Defense Support of Civil Authorities (DSCA) mission. In addition, MARS leaders will report to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Networks and Information Integration/DoD Chief Information Officer (ASD[NII]/DoD CIO) and the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Logistics and Material Readiness (ASD[L&MR]). In the 1998 charter, oversight of MARS was assigned to a single top official, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Command, Control, Communications and Intelligence.

This revision -- which was years in the making -- keeps the Navy/Marine Corps MARS intact; until now, members of this MARS service were concerned that their part of MARS might be terminated by Navy commanders.

The *Instruction* also gives some new perks to MARS members. Active duty military personnel who are affiliated with MARS may be able to earn Reserve points based on service in MARS and, in cases of permanent change of station, qualify for weight exemption for transportation of MARS communications equipment. All members may be considered for benefits associated with DoD civilian service, such as access to DoD morale, welfare and recreation Category C recreational facilities and access to DoD credit unions.

Membership in any of the three MARS services is open to qualified active duty, Guard and Reserve personnel, as well as those in civilian agencies who report to civil authorities or their supporting organizations (including nongovernmental organizations) and private US citizens who meet age, education and other criteria - - such as an FCC-issued Amateur Radio license -- imposed by a DoD Component MARS office.