

# How To Energize Your ARES / EMCOMM Group With Full Scale Exercises

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Many ARES(R) groups tend to stagnate and decline, perhaps because they don't offer the degree of challenge and stimulation that active and bright people need in order to stay involved. *Use it or Lose it* is well understood in the senior community and service/social groups are no exception!

Emergency communications groups are an oddity because what they do involves radios and any exercise worth doing is going to involve using real equipment – and likely deployment to one or more locations, characteristics that make it difficult to assign the exercise to any other category than a "full scale" exercise even though the participants may be only in one "ESF" function.<sup>1</sup>

I would strongly urge all ARES(R) and other associated groups to hold *two full scale exercises per year*, which can be of differing types. If possible, choose different (but motivated) leaders to head up each exercise and rotate leadership throughout the motivated personnel in your group. There is nothing like supervising a full exercise to teach people the true in's and out's of the ICS system!

This paper is intended as a guideline for carrying out such an exercise and might serve to assist those who've never headed up one before. It's important to recognize that a proper exercise needs to involve some connection to the local authorities with whom you would be working in a real exercise if at all possible. It can't be thrown together in just an hour or two by one person. It is very likely to take more than ten, and possibly more than 30 hours of planning and may best be planned by two volunteers working together to bounce ideas and thoughts between them to reach workable ones. Keeping track of time and staying on schedule is important!! If you don't keep on schedule, crucial opportunities to arrange assets, acquire interested volunteers, and get training done.....will disappear.

With that in mind, we start four months out from the intended exercise date.

## FOUR MONTHS OUT

- Pick a date when most of your people can participate. Ask them to clear out their calendars for that date. Be certain there are no important conflicts on that date.
- Announce the date as **certain**. Don't change it!

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1 Formal HSEEP doctrine written primarily for governmental agencies recognizes only a limited number of activities. None of them fits perfectly what amateur operators do when they deploy to the field with their radios in an unsupervised all-out exercise. A "Tabletop" is "discussion" and involves no equipment (doesn't fit). Operations-based exercises might fit, but the "Drill" subcategory is far too limited, and supervised, the example being fire department doing a decontamination drill. The Functional Exercise doesn't have any "boots on the ground" -- doesn't fit. The Full Scale Exercise involves boots on the ground, multiple agencies, and disciplines --- and may be the best fit to a well-planned amateur exercise involving as many served agencies, locations, groups and interoperability as possible.

- If your group has a traditional breakfast or other get-together, consider starting the exercise as a follow-on to the breakfast; you'll get more participants. A useful exercise time frame is 3-4 hours for the exercise and then an hour for lunch afterwards to conduct a 'hot-wash' feedback and learning session.
- Take the ICS-120c course to begin understanding how to put together an exercise. <https://training.fema.gov/is/courseoverview.aspx?code=is-120.c> (If you've never done online ICS courses before, you'll need to "register" with them and get a Student ID. Write it down and don't lose it!) You will also want to add injects or "change-ups" to your Exercise, which they don't go a lot into in that course, but can be done easily with sealed envelopes or new instructions given over the Command Net during the Exercise.
- Begin selecting locations and gaining permission for their use on the date chosen. If your group doesn't have liability insurance consider locations that don't require it. Look at members' homes, public parks, the local Emergency Operations Center (a good chance to improve your relationship with them) or the Red Cross office. Both the ARRL and private firms offer liability insurance to ham radio clubs. It isn't that expensive. You probably want it!! Many locations are going to demand not only that you HAVE the insurance, but also that you get an "event certificate" that lists THEM as co-insured for the time period of the event --- the advantage to both of your groups being that if someone is injured, the location owner can go directly to the insurer without having to drag your GROUP into court!
- Gain access to word-processor compatible copies of multiple ICS forms, including at a minimum the ICS-201, -205, and -206. Look here: <https://www.fda.gov/EmergencyPreparedness/NIMS/ucm268797.htm>
- If you don't know how to use a word processor with some skill, download the free Libre Office and begin learning! <https://www.libreoffice.org/> You're going to need to be able to create documents, edit documents, export them into PDF format, and send them out to people in your group.
- Gain an email system with addresses for at least key players in your group.

### THREE MONTHS OUT

- It's time to write out the exercise scenario that you're going to use, and insert it into the ICS-201 that you learned how to capture and edit last month. By simply USING an ICS-201 you're going to teach your group a lot about the ICS system.
- In Section 7 of the ICS-201 list the "Objectives" that you're going to release to the participants at the beginning of the Exercise. These will probably be different from your wider list of Exercise Objective (discussed below) and are more like: "establish radio communications between 3 shelters and EOC" and "maintain command and traffic net" and maybe "deploy portable group to Hospital XYZ in support of emergency communications."
- Make a list of the Core Capabilities that you would like to have your group master. These might include things such as "passing emergency message traffic"; "setting up emergency antennas"; "having emergency alternate power" and similar important goals. Having this list is going to be key.
- Based on your chosen Core Capabilities, write down what strategic goal you're going to exercise within your Exercise to test or refine each of those Core Capabilities. For example, for "setting up emergency antennas" you might include the strategic goal of "Install Emergency VHF Antenna at 3 locations and Emergency HF antenna at the EOC" in your plans. With these

figured out and written down, you could now complete a written ICS-202 Incident Objectives [http://www.qsl.net/nf4rc/BLANK\\_ICS202\\_INCIDENTOBJECTIVES.pdf](http://www.qsl.net/nf4rc/BLANK_ICS202_INCIDENTOBJECTIVES.pdf)

- It's time to read the HSEEP document on how to report a Full Scale Exercise here: <https://preptoolkit.fema.gov/web/hseep-resources> <https://preptoolkit.fema.gov/web/hseep-resources> You don't HAVE to report your exercise in this format, but your group will become FAR stronger if you at LEAST create the list of things that didn't go right – and formulate a written improvement plan to fix them! This is Appendix A of a well-written up Exercise! See here: <http://qsl.net/nf4rc/2017AlachuaCountyCreateSpaceAfterActionReport.pdf>

A word-processor editable form of an amateur radio full scale exercise can be obtained here: <http://www.qsl.net/nf4rc/Tech/2017AlachuaCountyCreateSpaceAfterActionReport.odt>

Download the file and then go to work erasing our information and putting in YOUR information for your Exercise and it will be easy to complete a great report in the same (hated) format that your EOC Emergency Manger is already so familiar with! They will be amazed at your efforts!

- Figure out what frequencies, repeaters, and other radio systems (packet, winink, simplex, duplex repeater) you're going to use in your exercise. This information goes on an ICS-205. If you've never done this before, don't make it more difficult than it has to be. Just get it all down on paper, even if all the details aren't perfect, and indicate what is the PRIMARY command net and what is the SECONDARY (in case your inject or a real life event downs that system!) and if you have it, a TERTIARY system.
- Now is the time with your somewhat-completed ICS-201 and ICS-205 and Exercise Scenario, to begin approaching helpers to assist you, depending on what you think you need. You probably want to assign someone to be the Incident Commander for your group. And you might want to have a Public Information Officer as well. You might need someone to head up a command net, supervise the EOC team, be in charge of some logistical equipment such as generator or deployable repeater. Identify those people and get it down in writing – these people go in Section 9 of the ICS-201, and the resources (if any) that you plan to utilize go in Section 10 of the ICS-201.
- Finally, you need to begin to craft any messages that you want transacted in your scenario. Try not to have your participants have to "make it up on the fly". Its more realistic to model the situation that they are handed scraps of paper with messages to get out urgently. Messages can be of multiple types:
  - **Tactical messages** --- short sentences that don't have to be put into formal radiogram or other format, such as "Let the EOC know that your shelter has lost power."
  - **Formal Messages:** these can be Radiogram or ICS-213 messages, and if your group has some expertise or digital capability, don't hesitate to make them complex and difficult --- with things like prescription or medication orders, detailed delivery information for water, fuel or needed supplies, etc.
- If you have access to a section newsletter or other media, start putting out notifications and "advertisements" of your planned Exercise.
- Our group likes to pick a date for a "full-radio TableTop" --- a practice session BEFORE the actual exercise. We hold this in a large building or private home, and we literally set up all our radios and run through a "mini" version of the planned Exercise complete with a short list of actual messages to send. There are always foul-ups! This is where a lot of learning occurs!

My EC has always advised me that most of the learning in an exercise goes on in the PLANNING and the TRAINING for the exercise. Our group thoroughly enjoys these "full radio Tabletops" where we can lean over to the fellow in the next room and say, "did you get that? Did I send it right?"

## **TWO MONTHS OUT**

- If there's any last minute training you need to do with your group now is the time to be conducting it. If you're utilizing any new techniques (FLDIGI, WINLINK, formal radiogram traffic) now is the time to demonstrate and train on those techniques.
- Announce the date, time, place of your full-radio TableTop if you're going to hold one.
- Notify the EOC of all your dates and plans on the hopes that it will go onto their official calendars.
- Finalize your ICS-201 and ICS-205.
- You're going to be shepherding volunteers who expect you to look out for their safety – you may wish to fill in the ICS-206 Medical Plan and keep it handy so if someone is hurt during the Exercise you and your leadership will know exactly how to get them help:  
[http://www.qsl.net/nf4rc/BLANK\\_IC206\\_MEDICALPLAN](http://www.qsl.net/nf4rc/BLANK_IC206_MEDICALPLAN)
- Create your full Master Event List that tells you, the planner, exactly what is supposed to happen in each segment of your exercise. In one of my exercises there were four different locations, and four different time slots, where each team endured different "handicaps".
- Create your handouts of sealed Injects and Messages that need to be transferred in each segment and have them ready for your participants. You probably want a different and simpler set for your Tabletop than for your actual Exercise. In one of my exercises I had literally seventy-five messages (of varying types) that teams were instructed to pass – they only made it through 50 or them, but they got a feel for being BUSY and having to deal with inject handicaps at the same time. Each team opened their messages every hour and learned their new tasks.
- If you're going to go whole-hog and have Evaluators for your Exercise, now is the time to approach them to volunteer to perform that duty. Create a paper evaluation form for them to use. This is a great way to get EOC personnel or other officials you'd like to be more involved, to take a role in seeing the actual and possible capabilities of your group --- the good and the not-so-good! One year I invited the Asst. Emergency Manager to fulfill this role and he was completely astounded at the capabilities our teams were displaying --- and he subsequently bought us \$ thousands of dollars worth of batteries and equipment, and even got his own ham license!
- Finalize all your deployment locations.

## **ONE MONTH OUT**

- Hold your full-radio Table Top to give people a chance to find out their strengths and weaknesses. Be enthusiastic! Now is the time to discover huge weaknesses!
- Write up a formal list of what didn't work (an After Action list) and Improvement Plans to fix them urgently before the actual Exercise --- get people to work on those fixes urgently.
- If you're going to work at publishing a full After Action Report, now is the time to have your Scenario section, goals and objectives section and Master Event List already finished.
- Set up your after-action luncheon at some location the whole group can fit, and be private enough to have frank and friendly discussion of the results of the exercise.

## **DAY OF THE EXERCISE**

Meet with all your folks, hand out (again) the actual ICS-201 and ICS-205 for the exercise (and any other documents you've prepared, if you're a more-advanced exercise planner), explain their initial deployments and objectives and send them off!

I'd advise to to try and take a somewhat "hands-off" approach to the Exercise, only stepping in when you realize you've made a planning goof, or when you see that your troops are hopelessly lost. Let your Incident Commander deal with some problems!

Call the End of the Exercise when it is appropriate and invite everyone to the luncheon afterwards and hold a "hot wash" feedback session with as positive a viewpoint as possible! Try to get everyone to list what went well, what went not-so-well and write it all down and take suggestions for fixes! This will form the basis for your Improvement Plans (Appendix A).

## **WITHIN A WEEK AFTER THE EXERCISE**

Get your After Action Report Appendix A written up with the recognized problems and suggested Improvement Plans. Prepare to present that to your group for confirmation / editing / approval and then start working on the areas you found that needed work!

If you're willing to go the extra mile and actually PUBLISH your report, CreateSpace makes it very very simple and you can get high quality bound copies of the report to hand out to authorities and others -- it will make a big impression. I just got off the phone with a Florida Forest Service official who passed our most recent written After Action Report up the line all the way to Tallahassee and it generated a CONSIDERABLE amount of interest and appreciation from officials who were impressed with the work our group was doing, and the absolute candor of our self-criticisms and improvement plans in the document --- all of which came from our Hotwash discussion at a Sonny's restaurant after the Wacassassa Wildfire Exercise headed up by John Troupe KM4JTE and Vann Chesney AC4QS.

Helpful References:

<http://qsl.net/nf4rc/2017AlachuaCountyCreateSpaceAfterActionReport.pdf>

<http://qsl.net/nf4rc/2017AlachuaCountyCreateSpaceSteinhatcheeAAR.pdf>

<http://www.qsl.net/nf4rc/2018/2018 AlachuaCounty Waccasassa Wildfire Excercise.pdf>