

NET-118
ARES Net Operations - tidbits

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Italicized portion added to original article

WHAT IS A NET CONTROL STATION?

A net control station is the NET's moderator, chairman, team captain, or traffic cop; take your pick. The NET Control Station exists for the purpose of exercising control of the NET as the name implies. The amount of control depends on the type of NET that is being run.

EMERGENCY RADIO COMMUNICATIONS

*Emergency radio communications nearly always use formal NET's, as do NTS traffic NET's. Casual everyday ham operation mostly doesn't. This DUTY IS PRACTICE on how to operate as part of a formal radio NET -- probably one where most operators are using handtalkies in unfamiliar locations. For the purposes of this discussion, a radio NET consists of several stations on one frequency (more if linked), following organized procedures, and directed by a NET Control Station. This arrangement makes for efficient use of the frequency, and helps ensure that urgent matters get handled before less urgent ones. **In short, the NET functions as a team to work towards the common goal of effective NET operations.***

WHAT IS AN EMERGENCY NET?

The word "Net" is short for "network." Networks can be defined as groups of equipment, individuals, and/or agencies acting together to increase efficiency and effectiveness through shared information and resources. The word "network" can be further broken down into its two components. "Net" implies a capture and holding effect. "Work" implies that something productive is to be accomplished. Ham radio operators and nets in emergency situations capture, record, hold, and distribute information so that others may work (produce results) more effectively.

"Emergency" may be defined as an accident or other crisis where people and/or property are in distress. Emergencies are nearly always recognized and declared by agencies or authorities outside of the Amateur Radio Service. Amateur radio operators and net control stations do not have independent authority to declare an emergency.

NET DISCIPLINE

- As the NCS, the level of net discipline is yours to set. You have to decide how tightly you want the rules followed. Describe exactly what you want in your net instructions. Most of the time, the net participants will sense just how much urgency there is by how you are reacting. If you push up the pace and become more clipped or terse in your responses, they will follow your lead. If you are laid-back and relaxed, they will follow. When you can, change the pace and have a little fun!

You are going to have the usual Bozo in your net. Count on it! Look forward to it! It's a challenge to your skills! Lead your Bozo back into proper procedure by example and gentle reminder.

- Conducting on-the-job training is part of your job.
- A good, non-sarcastic sense of humor is invaluable. If you did a good job on your net instructions, you can always repeat an applicable part of the net instructions as a general reminder to the entire net.
- Do not address that reading of the instructions directly at Bozo. Avoid direct confrontation with anyone.
- **NEVER** dress anyone down on the air for a rules infraction. If the problem persists, find a way to get Bozo off the air. Have him come in and log or be a courier for you . . . as a special favor. The rest of the net will be rolling in the aisles.
- You are going to be in charge of a frequency.
- Your first duty is to be sure that frequency is used in accordance with FCC Rules.
- Proper ID at the ten minute mark can be difficult to remember in the heated activity of a net but you and your participants have to do it.
- If you can grab 30 seconds, hold a round-table ID session or an ID roll call in which they answer you with their call sign. They will look forward to it and stay on frequency.

HANDLING REQUESTS TO "GO DIRECT"

These requests can be a very valuable tool. They can save a lot of valuable air time. They can also seriously disrupt the flow and control of a net when abused.

- Cover what you expect these requests to consist of in your net instructions. A good, quick response to one of these requests is simply: "Make your call."

NET INSTRUCTIONS - USING AND CREATING

When you go to a directed format, you should be prepared to give net instructions, or directives.

- Be specific. Practice writing exactly what information you want passed in your net and how you want it passed.
- Listen to other net controllers and pick up little goodies that they do. Net instructions are very important to you and to the participants. They give the net a defined purpose, content and method of operation. Again, nothing is chiseled in stone.
- Net instructions can, will, and should change with the intensity and duration of the net. Don't change a lot of little pieces of the net instructions.
- Inform participants that you are giving an updated set of net instructions and give entire set again.

Whatever your instructions are, **WRITE THEM DOWN!** You need to be able to refer to them for updates, as a personal reminder as to what you last told them to do, and for repeats of instructions as needed.

NET INSTRUCTIONS IN WEATHER NETS

Net instructions are *extremely* important in weather nets. You must be very firm and specific about what you want reported. If you don't, you will get "sunshine, flash-to-boom, and dewdrop" reports that don't mean anything to anyone. If you don't explain at the outset, that this is a thunderstorm watch ... we expect clouds, rain, thunder and lightning . . . and those things are not reportable unless rain accumulation reaches flash flood danger or lightning strikes a person or property . . . they will drive you nuts with weather drivel. If an inexperienced spotter reports these things, thank them and simply read that part of your instructions again. Start your reading with something like: "The net is reminded" They will get the idea sooner or later.

Net instructions for weather nets should contain strong discouragement of storm chasing. It is a very dangerous practice for professionals. It is potentially deadly for the average spotter; who

believes he is above average. Spotting and Driving do not share a common meaning. The author is about to the point that he will refuse to recognize a spotter who is deliberately chasing. It makes for an impossible safety program for the NCS when he doesn't know exactly where everyone is. Part of the job of the NCS is to keep spotters out of harm's way. This is impossible when eight or ten hot-dog, stupid spotters are driving willy-nilly into the active center of a storm. Park them and keep them parked . . . or refuse to use them. They too, may get the idea sooner or later.

SAMPLE WEATHER NET INSTRUCTIONS

This is not something you should copy and use directly. It is only a sampling of content possibilities.

"This is KB4ABC, and I will be acting as net control for the duration of the weather event that is current in our coverage area. This will be a directed net. All communications are to be addressed through net control. The NWS has issued a severe thunderstorm watch for the following counties _____, _____, _____. At this time we are condition green.(yellow, red). Is there any Emergency or Priority Traffic that needs handling? Hearing none, your check-in instructions are as follows:

1. When checking into the net, say "This is", release your mic, wait for the courtesy tone, key your mic and give your call sign, name, location, mobile or stationary status, direction of travel if mobile and how long you will be available.
2. If you must leave the net for any reason, please notify net control
"I will now take check-ins for this weather net."

AFTER CHECK-IN

Attention all net stations!! This is KB4ABC, net control please stand by for net operating instructions."

"The instructions for this net are as follows: This is a Severe Thunderstorm Watch. We expect rain, thunder and lightning, wind and low cloud formations. The following items are the only reports that net control wishes to hear from Spotters; please use only the suffix of your call when calling net control:

1. Report all hail . . . regardless of size.
2. Report only winds measured or estimated to be over 50 MPH.
3. Do not report lightning unless it hits a person, building, electric services or causes damage resulting in blocked roadways.
4. Rainfall is NOT to be reported unless accumulations threaten flash flooding.
5. Wall Clouds with confirmed rotation are to be reported.
6. Funnel clouds are to be reported.
7. Tornadoes are to be reported.
8. Thunder is not important and is not to be reported.
9. If you are stationary, do not move without notifying net control; unless you are in imminent danger.
10. If you are mobile, do not engage in Storm Chasing. Mobiles that must remain moving will please report their location to net control every 15 minutes.
11. Do not go mobile unless it is to go to your pre-assigned stationary viewing area.
12. If you are in a convertible, please do not observe from inside your vehicle. Seek a shelter from which you can observe safely.
13. All reports should follow the TEL (Time, Effect, and Location) reporting procedure.
14. Priority and Emergency transmissions must meet standard definitions and will be handled immediately by Net Control.

15. Consider your own safety at all times.

16. Only your direct observations are reportable. Commercial radio or TV weather reports, radar descriptions, or police and fire department transmissions that you hear on scanners, are not reportable on this net.

"This concludes net instructions at this time. I will repeat the net instructions from time-to-time. Please listen carefully to the net. Instructions can change quickly with events. This is KB4ABC, standing by for Spotter reports."

Time permitting; you can take more check-ins to the net. Each time you take in a new group of Spotters, you should repeat the net instructions.

The above is only an example. Tear it apart. Modify it. Put it back together. Embellish it. The important thing is that you practice writing examples like it; so that you get used to thinking ahead about what you want from the net participants. The better your instructions are, the smoother the net will run, the more professional it will appear to the world, and the more control you will have

THE UNTRAINED OBSERVER

The untrained observer can be a lot of fun. He/she will test your patience, communications skills and teaching abilities to the max. The untrained observer will, most commonly, be found somewhere in a weather net. They really don't know that they are supposed to know exactly where they are, what they are seeing, what they are supposed to report, how to report it, how a net works, that the rubber duck on their HT is really just a dummy load on a stick, or that their spare battery pack needs to be charged once in a while whether it gets used or not.

Be gentle with them. Teach them by prefacing all questions and comments with something like, "KZ4ABC, thanks for your input . . . on this net we usually . . . OK?", and proceed to teach them without them knowing it. If things are going hot and heavy in the net, tell the station to stand by and go back to him when you get a little break. If you are clever and have the time, you can entertain and re-educate the entire net regarding proper operating procedures; without hurting the newbie.

THE IRATE/UPSET PARTICIPANT

This is one of the toughest things you are going to face. If handled incorrectly, it can cause net participants to "take sides" and erode the morale and effectiveness of your net. People get their feelings hurt over nothing, especially when they are tired and under unusual, stressful circumstances. Your first reaction may well be to retaliate in an upset manner. This will blow the net. **Here is a formula to cure the problem:**

- **Slow up. Don't respond instantly.** Take a deep breath.
- **Do a quick personality review of your assailant.**

DO THE NEXT THREE STEPS ALL IN ONE STATEMENT.

- **Acknowledge the problem.** Give in to the "Problem". Whether they are right or wrong! This acknowledges that there is a problem and that you are recognizing that fact. It also throws them off balance. They are not expecting this. Once you agree that there is a problem, the "fight" is gone.
- **Empathize with them!** Whether you understand or not, tell them that you can understand how they can feel that way and that under the same circumstances, you would probably feel the same way.

- **Ask them for a quick and simple suggestion for a solution.**
- **Listen intently!** This is where they will reveal the real problem. Everything they have said up to now may have been a loud smokescreen. Somewhere in their suggestion, they will tell you what they really want from you.
- If their suggestion/solution is something reasonable, tell them that you will try to put it into play. If it is not, make a counter-suggestion that will satisfy the real problem that they have revealed to you.
- If the problem cannot be resolved quickly and reasonably, quietly send someone to replace this individual and relieve him from his post. If there are no posts involved in the operation, give up ... let him win . . . politely explain that the net must continue, thank the person for his services, and tell him he doesn't have to stick around. You tried to solve the problem reasonably and he refused. He wins the fight and you won the battle. The rest of the net will respect what you did and morale will remain intact.

WHAT CALL GETS YOUR ATTENTION FIRST?

- "Emergency Calls" have the highest priority of all calls you may receive.
- "Priority" calls have the second highest.

Whenever you hear a call on the net that begins with the words "Priority" or "Emergency", you must stop the net cold in its tracks and give your undivided attention to that call. No routine transmissions are allowed until you announce that normal net activity is to resume. Say something like: "Please hold all routine traffic until emergency traffic is cleared." The "Emergency" call is the only call that is authorized to interrupt the handling of a "Priority" call. If by some weird circumstance you should ever be involved in handling a Priority call and you should receive an incoming Emergency call, tell the Priority call to stand by and handle the Emergency call immediately. Then go back and finish up with the Priority call.

Here is the difference:

"**Emergency**" calls mean that if the call is not answered immediately, there is a definite, severe and "RIGHT NOW" condition or hazard that *will* result in death or serious injury to a person or people.

"**Priority**" calls mean that if the call is not answered quickly, a possible and probable hazard or condition exists, or is developing, that *could, might, or may* result in loss of life, injury to people, or severe damage to property.

THINGS THAT YOU NEED TO PRACTICE

Copying call signs

One of the greatest fears for a new trainee to overcome is that of copying that flurry of check-ins at the beginning of a net. Ear-to-hand coordination is difficult to master for some people. As NCO, you can ask for a slow pace and lots of space between check-ins.

~~Studying for your Morse Code Exams will help a great deal.~~ It's all Ear-to-hand coordination. Another way to practice is to listen to all the nets that you can. Copy the call signs as best you can as they come in to the net control. Don't worry about getting all of them. Get what you can. Just keep going. If you have access to an HF receiver, some of the hottest, fastest, nastiest check-ins that you will ever hear are on the various traders' nets. When you can copy ten or fifteen call signs out of a "Big Guns" check-in in 15 seconds, you are almost a master! The first time you hear one, it's guaranteed to blow your mind!

Another source of practice is to tune into a contest on the weekends. Listen to how an experienced contester handles a pile-up. He will copy as many stations as he can get down out of a burst of calls that fly at him, he will say "I've got a group" and then quickly list, verify and work those calls in order. If he missed one, so what? They will try again and he will likely get them on the next burst of calls. Copy right along with him. Get all you can. The noise and multiple signals all jammed up together will make it difficult at first but not impossible. It will make it a piece of cake to pick out both sides of a double or triple when you go back to that nice clean FM signal on the repeater.

Writing it down

When you are NCS, you are always writing something down. You are taking an NTS message, writing your next announcement, making notes, logging net activities, taking check-ins/outs, making lists, etc.

While you are listening to any net, practice taking notes of what is going on. Your own brand of shorthand will emerge. This will help you immensely when it comes time for you to take on your first NCS assignment.

Some prefer to do their notations on a computer. That is OK. But . . . you should always plan and train for a worst-case scenario. What if you don't have power for the computer? How good are your ear-to-hand skills? Running a pencil at twenty words per minute is a whole lot different from typing at fifty words a minute. The personal shorthand will change.

Practice listening.

Sounds kinda dumb? Bad signals abound in amateur radio. Even on FM repeaters, the rubber duck signal and fringe area propagation noise is abundant. You need to train your hearing to sort out the message from the noise. Try detuning your 2 meter rig by moving 5 hz off frequency and listen to the traffic on your favorite repeater. Try to make sense out of that "bad" signal. You can do it!

Sit and listen for periods of time to any conversation on HF during a distant weather disturbance. After a while, with concentration, you hear right through the noise like it isn't even there. With some practice, you can turn this new- found ability on and off at will; and with more practice it becomes automatic. You can suddenly hear those marginal stations on the repeater. Your ears only get part of what is said . . . your brain will fill in the blanks.