

MARS 101.1--Unit 8

The Net Control Station

The Net Control Station function is one of the most important duties with Army MARS. That's the reason that we now require all stations to maintain their net control skills by running at least one net per quarter. The routines, scripts and prowords used by the NCS are all well defined in *the Standard Operating Procedure for Calling and Operating a Voice Net*. We will hit the highlights of the Voice SOP later in this lesson, but first let's first talk about what the NCS should be aiming to accomplish and why.

The NCS is a lot of things in a MARS Net. He/She is the traffic cop, the organizer, the referee, more often than not the teacher, and above all an example to other members of the net of exactly how things are properly done. If the NCS does it wrong, you can bet that others will be doing it wrong very soon. The NCS doesn't have to know it all--no one knows it all--but he/she should set an example for the net. More than anything else, it boils down to attitude.

An NCS that approaches the net with a positive, "can do" type attitude will have a vastly different net than the NCS that "stomps" into a net with an attitude that says "do it my way or get the h*ll off my net." Yes, these nets are based upon military procedures and discipline but that also has moderated over the years.

Style counts: NCS training tends to concentrate on getting the procedures right. Just as important is style. Speaking clearly and distinctly is important. So is adjusting the pace of speech to net conditions. The NCS needs to speak with authority, but that is best conveyed by confidence, certainly not by an overbearing tone. If a member questions the NCS's competence, the proper response is suggest he e-mail his superior, then immediately terminate the discussion, and move on. .As for displaying exasperation— that's an admission of defeat.

Above all, don't confuse the NCS task with a talk-show host. The NCS job is to facilitate traffic, not to deliver monologues. Keep it moving! The primary function of any Net Control is to make sure that the information that needs to be communicated during the net is delivered in the most efficient and expeditious manner possible, whether that's message traffic or training or other information.

The practices defined in the Voice SOP provide a platform for consistency and they must be followed, but the attitude of the NCS also plays a big part in how well the net progresses.

Now to the "nuts and bolts:" The basic procedure for getting a net underway is set forth in the three-service Voice SOP dated 22 NOV 2007. That document does not go into all the tools used by Army MARS net controls but provides in its Q-and-A annex that "if the [SOP] procedure does not cater for a specific situation, common sense and training experience should be used as a guide." The following scenarios include specific situations covered in the *Army MARS Basic Training Course and Operator Guide* SEP 2003 (amended 1 DEC 2003).

1. At one minute past the designated hour the NCS makes a Net Call [NET DESIGNATOR] TWICE, THIS IS, AND HIS CALL SIGN ONCE, OVER) and begins to take check-ins. Check-ins are made with a full call procedure [NCS CALL SIGN] THIS IS [YOUR CALL SIGN], [LISTING OF TRAFFIC], OVER. If the NCS feels that a “tuning period” or other procedure is required it can be authorized, per CAM 02-08 para 3 a.

3. a. As an example, a question has arisen regarding the "50 second clear period” for tuning on frequency. The joint procedure currently makes no provision for this situation as there is a presumption that stations will be pre-tuned for scheduled nets. However, it is understood that there may be situations where the net or portions of it are moved to other frequencies rapidly. In such a case the NCS may decide to create an opportunity for tuning on frequency in this circumstance. The NCS is authorized to do this. The NCS in general may supplement the Joint Radiotelephone Net Procedure to achieve a successful net.

2. If the scheduled NCS has not opened the net at the scheduled time, at two minutes after the hour the Alternate NCS should open the net. If there is not a scheduled NCS or Alternate present, then any member on frequency can and should open the net. Since we all need to log at least one net per quarter as NCS, members can use these situations to get their mandatory requirement fulfilled.

3. The NCS acknowledges the check-ins, in the order received, without acknowledging any traffic listed. The first group is simply listed because it is assumed that they follow the NCS.

After the initial group is checked in the NCS pauses to allow more check-ins. When these are recognized, they are told who they follow. ([CALL SIGN] , [CALL SIGN] THIS IS [NCS CALL SIGN] ROGER, YOU FOLLOW [CALL SIGN OF LAST STATION ON THE ROSTER], OUT).

4. When everyone has checked in, if an Alternate NCS is not already designated then one should be appointed. At this point it is the NCS’s option to give the Net Roster or not, using CAM 02-08 referenced above

5. In general, the NCS will follow the following order in running the net:

- a Form the net
- b Pass listed traffic in precedence order
- c Conduct training
- d Informal contacts
- e Close down.

Keep in mind that NCS can deviate from this order if there is a reason to do so.

6. The Joint Voice SOP makes no provision for recognizing listed traffic. If the NCS feels it appropriate, he/she can list the traffic after all check-ins have been recognized, or by whatever procedure he/she feels is best as a supplemental procedure.

7. Chief Army MARS CAM 06-2009 (20 Feb. 2009) states regarding Full Call Procedure:

The following procedures will be followed in Army MARS: When stations call into a net, either initially or to list additional traffic later in the net, they will use a 'full call' procedure. When two or more stations start up a series of communications, each of the stations must start this series with a full call procedure. Once each station has started a transmission with a full call procedure, each succeeding transmission in the same series must start with either a full call procedure or an abbreviated call procedure.

An example of a full call procedure > AAV9XX THIS IS AAV9NCS.
An example of an abbreviated call > THIS IS AAV9NCS.

Once that series of communications is concluded by one of the stations ending with an OUT, the next series of communications will start up in a similar manner with each station starting with a full call procedure on the initial transmission and a full or abbreviated call procedure on succeeding transmissions.

All call signs will be given phonetically. A call procedure is not required during break-in procedure. **So, bottom line:** Abbreviated call signs, such as 1DD, will **NEVER** be used in Army MARS. NCS's do not have the authority to allow use of abbreviated call signs.

Also, since an abbreviated call procedure is authorized by this CAM any time after initial contact has been made, there should **not** be a need for the NCS to announce (ABBREVIATED CALLS ARE AUTHORIZED) (ABBREVIATED CALLS PROCEDURE IS AUTHORIZED) .

8. After everyone has checked in, the first order of business is to pass any traffic. The NCS directs the station with the traffic to contact the receiving station and send the traffic (AAV9XX THIS IS AAV9NCS, CALL AAV9ZZ PASS ONE PRIORITY OUT).

AAV9XX then calls AAV9ZZ (AAV9ZZ THIS IS AAV9XX, ONE PRIORITY, OVER)

The response is (AAV9XX THIS IS AAV9ZZ, OVER)

The message begins with a full call procedure. Once the communication has already been established, an abbreviated call sign procedure is allowed. (AAV9ZZ THIS IS AAV9XX, MESSAGE, RELAY {if needed, etc.}, PRIORITY,The rest of the message then OVER).

If fills are required, break-in procedure may be used and neither calls nor call signs are required, such as: (SAY AGAIN WORD AFTER HUACHUCA). The response would then be (I SAY AGAIN WORD AFTER HUACHUCA, I SPELL ALPHA ZULU).

9. When the receiving station is sure that the message has been copied correctly, the message is acknowledged. (THIS IS AAV9ZZ, ROGER, OUT). The OUT at the end is changed to an OVER if there is another message waiting to be transmitted between the two stations. A message can be acknowledged with a full call procedure but it is not required.

Although the Voice SOP no longer requires message numbers, messages sent by digital means on either digital or multi-mode nets still require numbers. For this reason, it is recommended that numbers be used on messages.

10. Stations may check in while a net is in progress on an "OUT." with the following exceptions:
 - a. When NCS directs a station to send traffic or comms
 - b. When a station says WAIT OUT
 - c. When all but the last station are responding in a multiple station response.
 - d. When the net is closed down.

Since stations may enter a net following most transmissions of the word OUT, the NCS must allow five seconds for them to do so. If a station does call in after an OUT, the NCS must wait five seconds after the last station to call in. The proword OUT should not be used in transitioning between stations, just pause and call the second station.

If the NCS wants to make a check to see if there are any further check-ins waiting then he/she should give a call (AAA9RD/A THIS AAV9NCS, additional stations for the Net, OVER).

11. All Army MARS Nets are Directed Nets, which means that the NCS maintains control of the net at all times. No communications are made without the knowledge and permission of the net control. When all MARS business (traffic, training, etc.) has been completed, the NCS has the option of getting a short comment from each member of the net, but the net is still a directed net under the direction of the NCS. During the comment period and, if the Trainer so desires, during training, the Chief has authorized the use of first names. There are no longer a "Formal" and "Informal" periods of MARS Nets. The phrase "THE NET IS INFORMAL" is no longer appropriate on MARS Nets.

12. Army MARS nets are normally scheduled for one hour time slots. If all MARS business has been completed and time still remains in the hour then the NCS may declare the net FREE. Two stations can engage in communications without permission from the NCS but stations need to request permission to CLOSE DOWN from the NCS so that the NCS know who is still available should a station with traffic check in. During free mode the NCS retains control of the net even if nothing is being transmitted.

13. The NCS may occasionally encounter a situation not covered by a specific SOP provision, or else in the pressure of the moment he/she may forget the designated procedure. In routine circumstances the question could be referred to a director or staff member on the net. Or in the absence of such authority and the situation calls for immediate action, it would be quite appropriate for the NCS to apply commonsense and reason and make his/her own decision. What's absolutely not appropriate is an on-the-air debate of what to do. In any case, the decisions and actions of the NCS are final and all corrections and disputes should be handled off of the net.

Preparing to take a net: You need to read the Voice SOP a couple of times if only to get a sense of where to look for the answer if a question comes up while you're NCS. But don't think that studying the document is sufficient training in itself. There's really only one way to develop NCS skills and that's to get on the air in actual charge of a net. Does the thought of that make you nervous? Welcome aboard! Even members with years of experience behind them still feel shaky (or worse) about broadcasting a mistake in procedure on any net, whether it's local or from coast to coast. There really is something called "mic fright" . But like public speaking, net control loses its capacity to frighten after determined practice. There's no need to worry about what other members will think of your performance. They've been that road! In fact, it's a matter of pleasure for lots of members to be a part of a new NCS's emergence.

The minimum NCS duty required of each member every quarter isn't sufficient for building confidence. We're talking about a knack more than a procedure, somewhat comparable to riding a bicycle--including a probable spill or two on the first few tries. For that reason, it's advisable to take every opportunity you get to assume net control. And if a weekly net assignment becomes available, grab it. You never know when it might fall upon you to take control of a net in an emergency situation. Even without an emergency, a well-run net is exhilarating.

It's not just a chore: If operating a radio in the public service is what attracted you to MARS—the skill it takes, the sense of accomplishment, the very real importance of communication—then you're not likely to find a more satisfying duty than NCS. Consider the reality of communicating in the midst of an actual disaster. Confusion is rampant, tension high, pressure building and real lives depend on getting the message traffic delivered. On that field, the NCS is the quarterback.

This lesson just hits upon the high points of what the Net Control duties are. There's really only one way to become an effective NCS and that's to do it. As each member completes the required duties as NCS, it should be remembered that being a Net Control only four times a year just gets you started. Being a Net Control gets a lot easier after you have done it for a while. As each operator gets more comfortable with the NCS routines the job gets easier and easier. It is earnestly recommended that each member takes on the duty of NCS as often as possible. You never know when it might fall upon you to take control of a net in an emergency situation. Every member needs to prepare themselves for just such an eventuality.