

# DISASTER

## . . . and MARS goes to work

by LTC William G. Mills

*The area is totally engulfed in flood waters. All utilities and public services have been swept away. How do you let the outside world know what's going on? How can you get prompt emergency relief with no telephone service? All the lines are down.*

Since 1925, military auxiliary communications have provided the necessary means to get the word out when a disaster might have precluded it. Like its forebearer of 1925, the Military Affiliate Radio System (MARS) remains a vital link to help people in need. Although its benefits are not like those of the Red Cross, for example, which sends personnel, clothing, food and the like, MARS could be the system to let such organizations as the Red Cross know that help is indeed needed.

The mission of the Army MARS is to provide auxiliary communications for military, civil and/or disaster officials during periods of emergency; to assist in effecting normal communications under emergency conditions; and to handle morale and quasi-official record and voice communications traffic for Army forces and authorized civilian personnel worldwide.

The "idea" of MARS was begun when the Army Amateur Radio System (AARS) was established at Fort Monmouth, NJ. Discontinued during World War II, the program was reorganized as the Military Amateur Radio System by the Army and Air Force in 1946. Finally, in 1956, the organization was renamed to its current title to describe more accurately the nature of the affiliate system.

Within 4 years of its renaming, the MARS program was well established within the Army. In October 1960, the commander of each area of responsibility and overseas command was made responsible for planning, programming and administering the MARS program within his area. Each Army and command headquarters overseas provided a MARS radio station facility for conducting the area MARS training program. In 1970, a Department of Defense directive formalized the composition,

mission, functions and organization of MARS and set forth policies concerning support for the program. Worldwide control and administration of the Army program was transferred from Department of the Army headquarters to the US Army Communications Command at Fort Huachuca, AZ, in August 1973.

### Civil Defense

The MARS program has become an important element in national civil defense. And the civil defense program, an integral part of the national security posture, is an essential element of the nation's deterrent posture.

All military units conduct training in civil defense to insure a capability to perform missions set forth in plans. Training at the unit level emphasizes the use of military skills in executing civil defense support tasks.

A vast reservoir of highly skilled, dedicated volunteer civilian communicators who are MARS members stands ready to provide rapid expansion of existing MARS radio nets in time of need. Tactical Signal units are ideally suited for providing communications support to civil defense operations, with the equipment and trained personnel capable of operating in existing MARS nets.

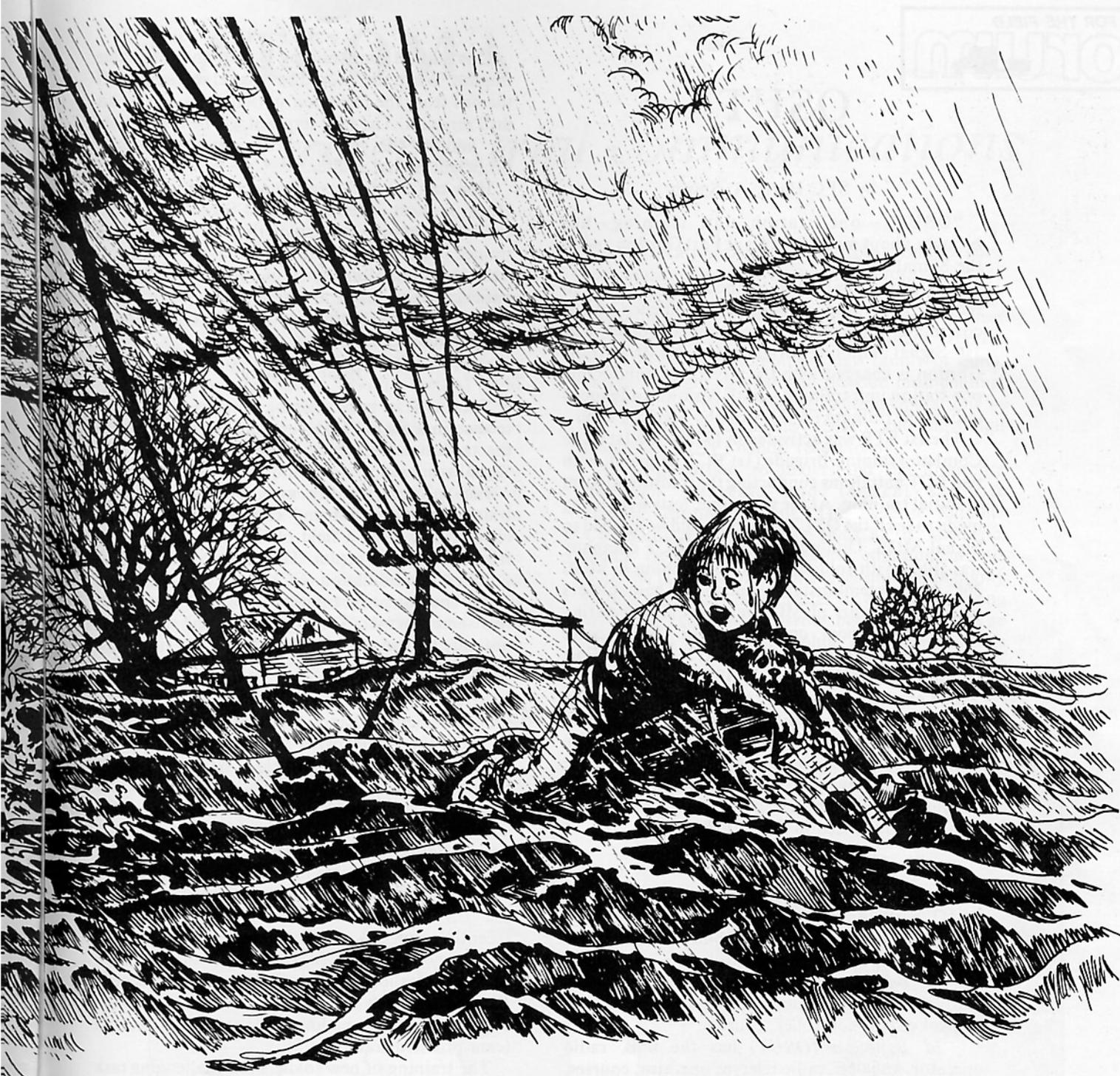
Generally, though, division and corps Signal battalions within active, Reserve and National Guard forces, do not establish MARS stations or enter in MARS nets on a routine basis, yet history has established a growing need for the Army to maintain a high state of readiness for civil defense operations.

Today, civil defense is preparedness to meet a vast range of emergencies and disasters in peacetime as well as preparedness against enemy attack. Very integral to this preparedness is communications. Training can be obtained and readiness tested by division and corps Signal battalion personnel participating in MARS radio traffic nets. With thorough working knowledge of communications procedures and constant training,



proficiency can be attained and maintained. In addition, field training exercises can add realism to training and sharpen radio operating techniques and procedures. Such was the case in 1954 when MARS stations participated in the Second Army's Exercise Tobacco Leaf III. This was the first official participation by MARS in military maneuvers of a major Army command.

Many division and corps units located throughout the United States have been called upon to provide personnel, equipment and communications support to support civil defense relief operations for



earthquakes in California, floods in Mississippi and Pennsylvania, and hurricanes in Texas.

The US Army Southern Command MARS station in the Canal Zone in December 1972 activated an emergency disaster higher frequency command/control radio net to support US forces dispatched to the Managua, Nicaragua, earthquake area. This net provided the vital, initial point-to-point communications link from Nicaragua to the Canal Zone, where the relief operations were being directed.

In the event of a major disaster and/or nuclear attack, the major key communications facilities, both military and civilian, will most probably be disabled. Through redundant communications networks readily available through the MARS program, though, the guarantee of communications survivability can be obtained.

In today's frugal budgetary environment, programs that are based on contingency plans/missions are often the first to be reduced and/or eliminated. The MARS

program has consistently proven to be extremely cost effective (dollars costed in volunteer manhours) considering the time and effort expended by the thousands of volunteers, who are immediately available to provide emergency communications support when needed.

The MARS communications system continues to be a vital link in civil defense preparedness now and for years to come.

The program deserves the recognition and support of the active Army, the Army Reserve and the National Guard to maintain MARS participation.