

You're In a Tactical Net!

How would you answer this request from your local civic club leader, school principle, or police chief?

“Say... You're one of those ham radio guys, right? Well, could you and your buddies help us out with some communications problems we've got with a big event that's coming up? We need a way to keep everything coordinated across a large area, like a bunch of folks with radios. Is that the kind of thing you do?”

For the last few years on July 4th in my little home town a group of young amateur radio operators from the local boy scout troop has volunteered to provide radio communications for the civic club that runs the town's Independence Day Parade. It's a big parade for a small town, usually with well over 100 parade units. Getting it all lined up and keeping it all running smoothly and safely on narrow streets crowded with families, dogs, and bicycles is a real challenge. These young amateurs provide the communications glue that holds the whole operation together. In recent parades they have helped ensure the event stayed on schedule, served as the eyes of local law officers for automobile traffic flow dangers and emergencies, expeditiously found lost children, and provided seamless distributed communications to coordinate parade operations along the several miles of the route.

How did they do it all? These scouts have honed their skills as *tactical radio net* operators, learning to listen, transmit, and distribute information with remarkable efficiency even under busy and stressful conditions. Their skilled volunteerism provides a valuable service to our community, and you can do the same for your local area along with your radio club or informal group of volunteer hams. Let's introduce you to some of key characteristics of a tactical net and define some important related terms.

Radio Net: Several stations on the same frequency following some agreed procedures, and usually directed by a single *net control station*. A net can be a general social forum or convened for a specific purpose. Tactical nets usually are convened for a specific purpose or function.

Net Control Station: A single station that moderates or directs the net transmissions and discussion, ensuring prioritization of transmissions and reducing simultaneous transmissions by net stations. The net control may be relaxed in some “open nets” where communications are sparse, allowing stations to freely call directly to one another. Tactical nets are usually heavily “directed nets,” in which strict control is enacted, and every station must receive permission from net control before transmitting or “passing traffic.” A busy tactical net, heavy with communications needs, must be a directed net with disciplined operators. A skilled net control station is a *must* for effective operations!

Tactical Call Signs: A tactical net will use tactical call signs to designate specific station positions or functions. For example, the parade net mentioned above uses tactical call signs associated with station positions along the parade route, such as *Parade Start, Parade End, Announcer's Booth, and 2nd Street Rover*. Combined with this are tactical call signs of stations shadowing parade officials or civil officials, such as *Parade Marshall and Fire Chief*. Each station must also comply with FCC identification requirements, and the easiest way to do this is to simply tack on your FCC call sign at the end of your last transmission in a series of transmissions.

Operating Efficiently: Critical to the success of a busy tactical net is efficient transmission! Learning to be efficient takes some practice and experience, but you can do it if you think first, formulate your message, and only then push-to-talk. Do not ramble and consume valuable frequency air time. This is where developing good radio skills and maintaining good discipline becomes important. Follow these simple principles for efficient tactical net operations:

- Keep your transmissions brief and to the point – be succinct!

- Avoid making unnecessary transmissions. Push-to-talk only when you have something relevant to contribute to the net.
- Speak clearly and distinctly using common language appropriate to the net's purpose in order to avoid confusion or the need to retransmit your traffic.
- Answer questions directly and succinctly. Do not include unnecessary elaboration, details, or explanations. If such information is needed, net control or other stations will ask for it.
- If you have not been monitoring net traffic temporarily due to side duties or conversations, listen for several seconds before transmitting to ensure you are not interrupting other traffic flow.
- Avoid overuse of FCC call signs and language not directly associated with the net, such as stating "clear" after transmissions. (But be sure to comply with FCC call sign identification requirements!)
- Before keying your microphone to respond to a call, pause for about one second to allow any potential higher priority or emergency traffic to be injected, if needed. Don't consume air time on the frequency non-stop, as other traffic may be urgent. Allow opportunities for important calls to break in.
- Stay alert! Keep your ear to your radio and respond to calls promptly.

Calling Net Control: When you have traffic to report to the net you should call net control for permission to report it. All you do is briefly transmit your tactical call sign and perhaps include very brief information about your traffic. For instance: "Parade End, emergency," or "Parade Marshall, announcement." Net control will respond to you with directions to transmit or to stand by. For instance, net control may say, "Parade End, go!" meaning that Parade End tactical position should transmit its emergency traffic.

Doubles: In spite of strict control and discipline on a tactical net, sometimes stations will transmit simultaneously. For example, you and another station may call at the same time for net control recognition. You will not hear the other station, so you may be unaware of the double transmissions. Be sure you receive net control permission before continuing with your traffic report, and do not assume that net control must have just confused your tactical call sign when he is responding to the other station with which you doubled. You'll only make worse the doubled transmissions by continuing without proper permission!

Calling Other Net Stations: Do not call directly to another station without net control permission. Contact net control and request permission to "go direct" with the other station, and await net control confirmation that you may do so. Then, call for the other station just with its tactical call sign followed by your own, and firmly establish two-way contact before any additional transmissions. The other station should confirm contact with only a brief response.

Third Party Traffic: Many times it may be more efficient to allow third parties to speak on the radio than to try and relay third party traffic yourself. While the frequency should not be tied up for an extended time with a lengthy chat between third party communicators, it is often more efficient to allow an individual with special knowledge of a situation to speak on your radio to relay traffic of a specialized nature.

If You Must Leave Your Station: Be sure to notify net control before you leave your station, even temporarily. When you return, check in again with net control. This will avoid net control wasting time attempting to contact you with multiple calls.

Local public service opportunities are a great way to get introduced to tactical nets. Tactical nets are also used for emergency response operations, such as RACES and ARES activations. While the character, intensity, and seriousness of tactical nets can vary widely, it is a good idea to develop the skills so you can put them to use when your community calls. Check out your local club, RACES or ARES organization, and get started honing your tactical net skills. 73!

~ HRS