



Why Should I Become Aware and Consider Being A Member

By Major D.J.W. Bergeron, CFARS National Manager

This is my first article as the Canadian Forces Affiliate Radio System (CFARS) National Manager. I took over from Captain Hal Buller on 01 April 2011. My aim in this article is to quickly explain why I felt compelled to volunteer to be part of CFARS and why I think that readers should also consider this as a worthwhile hobby and contribution to national emergency preparedness.

CFARS has existed officially and unofficially in various forms since 8 August 1946 under the auspices of the RCAF, the Air Force Amateur Radio System (AFARS). I will borrow a quick paragraph out of the CFARS history. "This program operated successfully for 6 years until 31 August 1952, at which time a portion of the program integrated with the Civil Defence Communications Organization. AFARS was made up of approximately 500 licensed amateur radio operators from across Canada and carried out such roles as providing communication in the area of search and rescue, assistance during national emergencies, and operating weekly nets on a regional and national basis. The program was funded by DND, and operated on various frequencies allocated outside the amateur radio bands. It published an excellent quarterly magazine and provided various types of communications equipment on a loan basis to its members. Perhaps the most visible association and, as far as the military is concerned, the most beneficial service in terms of morale, provided by the amateur radio fraternity over the past 25 years or so, has been the provision of a person-to-person voice traffic link in the form of "phone patching" performed by ham operators for service personnel stationed in remote and isolated locations so they may communicate with their families at home."

I was interested in amateur radio and took up the hobby while serving at CFS Alert in the 1970s and 80s, running phone patches and backup emergency HF links for when primary unit HF links would fail.

Since the advent of satellite communications, the need for phone patches with conversations to loved ones that would sound like "I love you honey, OVER" gradually gave way to telephone like we know them today. This also gave way to the DND funding that was in place and the gradual disappearance of CFARS in our collective vocabularies. But since there was a CF component in the CFARS, there have been

temptations to formerly retire it on at least a couple of occasions. This would have happened only for the intervention of dedicated members both in and out of uniform who kept the heart beating through innovation and active engagement with government and emergency services such as Industry Canada, Public Safety Canada, Amateur Radio Emergency Services (ARES), the RCMP, Transport Canada, Civil Air Search and Rescue Association (CASARA) to name a few. Innovation in areas such as provision of internet accessibility over HF, with the ability to send and receive data such as e-mail, video, electronic images, etc., is now a reality. Phone patches are still possible, but are not a large part of what CFARS members do on a day-to-day basis. CFARS affiliate operators now own and manage five HF gateways providing access to the internet that allows anyone with a laptop computer, a radio and a modem (see figure 1) to access their e-mail via HF gateways.



Figure 1 - Basic Equipment for HF Data/E-Mail including laptop, TNC Modem, Radio, Antenna Tuner and Antenna

CFARS operates regularly with its US counterpart, the Military Auxiliary Radio System (MARS), which is sponsored by the Department of Defence. MARS also operates HF gateways, but the number is far greater than in Canada. Being associated with MARS can provide an operator with the appropriate equipment a far greater chance of success to fetch their e-mail when the atmospheric conditions are poor, due to the expanded number of potential HF gateways to select from. See figure 2 for example of how access to e-mail via HF is accomplished via HF gateways.

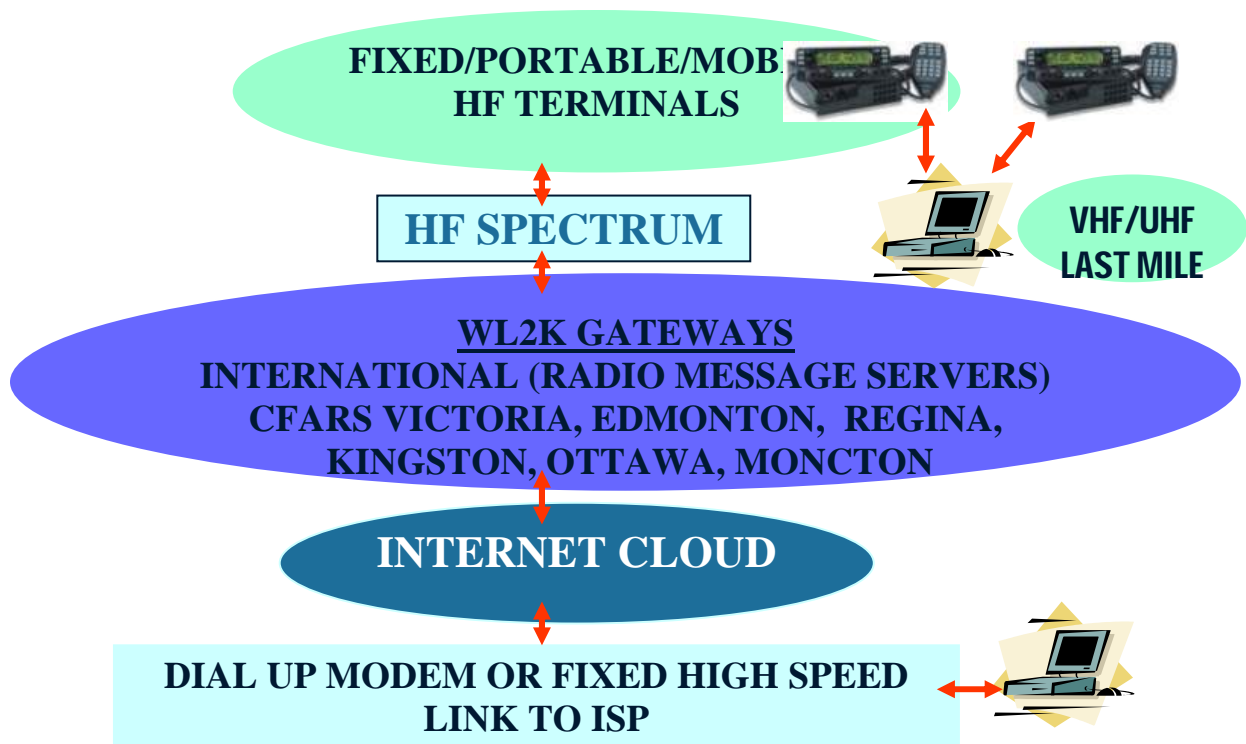


Figure 2 - Access to E-Mail via HF Gateways

Having said that, the technology advances on HF and the innovative use that CFARS members and members of the Amateur Radio community as a whole have made on the HF band, are quite remarkable. However, it is the dedication of those who have spent countless hours in developing a meaningful purpose for CFARS and their willingness to step up during emergencies such as major flooding, fires, earthquakes that have impressed me the most. Recently, the Anik F2 satellite failed resulting in many communities in the arctic left without communications. Within one hour of being notified, the majority of CFARS operators (of approximately 100) were activated, monitoring known HF frequencies for any signs of operators in Northern locations requiring assistance. The outage lasted only 12 hours, but had the outage lasted longer, the potential for serious ramifications was there with no other quick means to get the word out to the rest of Canadians. It is also important to note that once CFARS was activated, it also resulted in a notification sent across the amateur radio world to listen for signs of distress, and the number of licensed amateur radio operators in Canada alone number in the thousands.

The potential for CFARS as a viable back-up emergency service for the CF is obvious. This is even more evident in the arctic where satellite communications coverage is limited. Considering that the community of operators within CFARS spans every province and territory within Canada, many of which are members of municipal and provincial emergency services, excellent situational awareness on local emergencies is also a valuable service that can be provided. These two factors have been recognized by Canada Command and on 17 November 2011, a meeting was held between the CFARS Executive and Canada Command J6 Ops to create a Memorandum of Understanding

(MOU) that will once again reinvigorate the CF part of CFARS. With an MOU in place, CFARS will be looking to expand their membership and recruit interested members with priority in the North. Canada Command will also be looking at hosting training sessions in the North for potential new members.

To conclude, why am I part of CFARS? Because of its members, the innovations and the value I know CFARS can make to the Canadian Forces and national emergencies when other primary means of emergency communications have failed. There are immediate openings for licensed Canadian Amateur Radio operators in areas of the Northern provinces and territories as well as both the Western and Eastern coasts. You can get more information on the CFARS Web site at www.cfars.ca. Being a volunteer service, there is no pay, but the camaraderie and the rewards are superb!