

DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
MILITARY AFFILIATE RADIO SYSTEM
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Free Fathers' Day Messages for Soldiers Overseas

If Jeff Hammer gets his way, he'll be an awfully busy soldier in the run-up to Father's Day June 15. Captain Hammer represents the Army Military Affiliate Radio System in Iraq, and he has appealed to the families of troops deployed overseas to shower down with holiday messages for their loved ones.

These free messages—called MARSgrams—date back to the Korean War when many thousands were delivered. The service continued in Vietnam and the first Gulf War, but had fallen off with the advent of e-mail and cell phones.

As the military's Middle East operations continue, however, responses from the area have indicated soldiers treasure the printed MARSgrams as mementos of their deployment, not just a greeting. E-mail just isn't the same. MARSgram traffic spurted last Thanksgiving and Christmas. As for Father's Day MARSgrams, "I am 100 per cent set up to deal with them," Captain Hammer said. "Request you do a media blitz."

Army MARS is a Defense Department-sponsored organization of more than 2,700 amateur radio operators who provide emergency communications backup for government agencies in times of civil calamity. Active-duty service personnel may also join. Parallel MARS units serve the Air Force and Navy-Marine Corps.

A National Guardsman from Indiana, Hammer arrived in Baghdad this spring. He previously served in Afghanistan. In addition to volunteering for the MARS assignment, he is acting as station custodian for the Baghdad Amateur Radio Society. He shipped in his own low-power ham station and began direct receipt of messages May 25. Hammer has to shoehorn his volunteer amateur radio activity into off-duty hours.

Sunday night (June 1) five soldiers including Hammer gathered for a meeting of the Baghdad ham club. The subject was preparing for the hoped-for Father's Day traffic. After a period of instruction on MARS procedure during which the participants wrote their own MARSgrams, Hammer took the members to his personal MARS station to attempt transmission despite difficult propagation conditions.

"We are only running 5 watts on a Yaesu 817 [a small portable shortwave transceiver], but we wanted to give it a try if for no other reason than to see the equipment and demonstrate the procedure," Hammer messaged afterward. "God must have been smiling down on us because after only a few attempts we connected to AEN3QT (Qatar) on the 40 meter band and got all the messages through without any problems."

"I am proud to announce," said Hammer, "that we, Army MARS, are on our way to making some history here."

Family members can easily send free MARSgrams overseas by entering their message on the web site www.mymars.org. The Army MARS WinLink system automatically relays the Iraq-bound messages to Hammer and his helpers, who produce printouts and envelopes and hand them on to the Military Postal Service for final delivery. A MARSgram travels much faster than ordinary mail and can be delivered wherever American troops serve.