

# Using Your Boat's VHF radio

Your VHF radio is one of your boat's primary safety tools. Since a 1996 change in the law, most pleasure vessels under 65 feet do not require a license. Like all good tools, there is a right way and a wrong way to use it. Let's look at the primary ways to effectively use your marine VHF radio:

## I. Emergency situations

The Coast Guard defines three different types of *emergency use* for your VHF:

A. "MAYDAY" - to be used ONLY in situations of "grave and immediate danger" where "there is immediate risk of loss of property or life" - literally, a life and death situation. The Coast Guard *will deploy rescue vessels and helicopters* if it deems it necessary.

The calling procedure is as follows:

1. Be sure the VHF radio is on.
2. Select channel 16 and listen to be sure the channel is clear.
3. Press and hold the transmit button (generally on the microphone).
4. Clearly and slowly say: "MAYDAY - MAYDAY - MAYDAY"
5. Then give:
  - Vessel name and description (e.g. "this is the sailing vessel Zaphod II, a 30' white boat with blue canvass").
  - Position or location (e.g. "we are located 1/2 mile east of sea buoy at the Beaufort inlet")
  - Nature of the emergency (e.g. "we struck a submerged item, are taking on water and are in imminent danger of sinking.")
  - Number of people on board and their health (e.g. "there are three adults and one 6 year old child on board. One adult shows signs of heat stroke.")
6. Release the transmit button and wait 15 to 20 seconds for a response. If no response, repeat the "Mayday" call.
7. Follow instructions when the Coast Guard responds.

B. "PAN-PAN" – (pronounced *pahn-pahn*), to be used when your vessel is in danger, but sinking or loss of life is NOT imminent. The calling procedure is the same as for Mayday, but in step 4, you repeat "PAN-PAN, PAN-PAN, PAN-PAN".

The PAN-PAN call might be used if a power boat hit a submerged log, lost its prop and there was no anchor. There are no injuries and no immediate danger of sinking, but tide may be carrying you out the inlet or on the rocks.

C. "SECURITE" - (pronounced *Securitay*), to be used to announce a navigational hazard or safety concern.

The calling procedure is as follows:

1. Be sure the VHF radio is on.
2. Select channel 16 and listen to be sure the channel is clear.
3. Press and hold the transmit button (generally on the microphone).
4. Clearly and slowly say: "SECURITE- SECURITE- SECURITE-"
5. Then describe the issue (e.g. "there is a large, partially submerged log in the channel by red buoy #14 in the Pamlico river")

## II. Vessel to Vessel Communications

To contact another boat, the appropriate procedure is to 1<sup>st</sup> hail the other boat on Channel 16. Once the other person acknowledges your call, immediately switch to one of the non-emergency non-commercial ship to ship channels (68, 69, 71, 72 or 78). Remember, Channel 16 is for EMERGENCY and Hailing, ONLY.

The calling procedure is as follows:

1. Be sure the VHF radio is on.
2. Select channel 16 and listen to be sure the channel is clear.
3. Press and hold the transmit button (generally on the microphone).
4. Clearly and slowly identify the vessel you are calling and yourself: (e.g. "Zaphod II, Zaphod II, Zaphod II, this is Beeblebrox. Over")
5. Release the transmit button and wait for a reply. (If no answer in 1 to 2 minutes, try again. If still no reply, assume the other boat is not monitoring the VHF and try again in 30 minutes.)
6. The receiving boat will acknowledge your call (e.g. "Beeblebrox, this is Zaphod II. Over")
7. The calling boat will tell the responder which channel to switch to in order to continue the conversation (e.g. "Roger, Zaphod II. Switch to channel 72. "Beeblebrox to Channel 72")
8. The receiving boat will acknowledge the channel switch. (e.g. "Zaphod II to Channel 72")
9. Both boats will switch to channel 72 and continue the conversation. REMEMBER; keep your conversations short. The VHF is meant for necessary marine communications, not extended discourses.
10. When the communications is completed, both boats should return to monitoring channel 16, the emergency channel.

## III. Vessel to Shore Communications

Most marinas, fuel docks and some shore side restaurants monitor the VHF radio. You use the same protocol to contact them as you would another boat.

Some notes to remember about your VHF:

- For communications in a marina or anchorage or where the other boat is within sight, use the LOW POWER setting for transmissions.
- Whenever you are on the water, it is a good idea to monitor channel 16.
- Remember, channel 16 for hailing and emergencies ONLY.
- Bridges and locks on the ICW generally monitor channel 13.
- Use channels 68, 69, 71, 72 or 78 for general conversation.
- In an emergency, the Coast Guard may ask you to switch the channel 22A, their "working" channel. (note: 22A is the United States designation for channel 22. International channel 22 is a different frequency. Most VHS receivers meant for the US are set so channel 22 is the same as 22A)
- False distress signals are no joke. Since 9/11, the Coast Guard has taken significant measures to find and prosecute people who misuse this tool.