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Sounding Smart on the Radio

By Vincent Pica

There's a natural tendency to shy away from the unfamiliar, especially when you can't get the words back. Remember the first time you were faced with a phone message machine: "Leave your answer after the beep"...BEEP! Now what? Even today, that beep can strike fear into the hearts of some. Now, how about multiplying that a hundredfold to everyone tuned to Channel 16?

Some Basics



Unless you know the cell phone number of every boater in your vicinity, your only source of help is your radio. You don't have one, you say? Stop reading and check yourself in someplace, because that is simply nutty. Your radio is likely to be your only source of help and you go to sea without one? Over a couple of hundred dollars? And West Marine, for one, will give you a three-year warranty in the price. Come on, Bunky, where else can we skimp with such potentially disastrous results?

So, let's assume we all have a radio aboard, even if it's only a 5-watt handheld. Calls fall into three categories, and if you use the introduction properly, you will save essential time with US Coast Guard Forces. Tune it to VHF channel "16," and leave it

there.

Imminent Loss of Life Aboard

The all-familiar "Mayday, Mayday, Mayday" is the ultimate. It means that "I need help right now. There is imminent risk to lives aboard my vessel." (It comes from the French *-M'aider!* – for "Help me!") Would you use it if there wasn't imminent threat to lives? No. What then do I use?

Someone to Watch Over Me

You're taking on water but you have it generally under control – but you wisely want the USCG to keep an eye on you. Or you're coming in during a heavy storm, are struggling but maintaining steerage – but want the USCG to keep an eye on you. Don't be bashful. Get on that radio and have someone watch over you. The USCG will announce, through an Urgent Marine Information Broadcast or UMIB, that the USCG calling station has a very urgent message to transmit concerning the safety of a ship, aircraft or other vehicle or the safety of a person – yours. "Pan-pan, pan-pan,

pan-pan" (pronounced "pahn") is the introduction to indicate that a high level of concern exists (see "Skippering in Heavy Weather").

Someone to Look Out for Me

"Security-security-security" (often said with the French pronunciation – "secur-a-tay"). You are coming into the inlet at night, can't see anybody but worried, as you should be, that there might be somebody there... You're coming back from Montauk during a foggy day and you're on the rhumb line from the Montauk sea buoy towards the Moriches sea buoy. Someone going from Moriches to Montauk will be on a reciprocal course to yours – in the fog. Put out the security call!

All of these introductions, which immediately establish the level of the issue, are repeated three times, per above.

Now What Do I Say?

What you say next will save time and possibly save your life. Identify yourself (the name of the boat – if you don't have one, make something up right then, e.g., "motor vessel 'Charlie'"). Then, most important, identify the nature of your distress and where you are! For example, "Secur-a-tay, secur-a-tay, secur-a-tay, this is the motor-vessel Charlie. We are taking on water and are 10 miles due south of Moriches Inlet. Over." (I lead with "Secur-a-tay" to make my urgent message stand-out in all the traffic.)

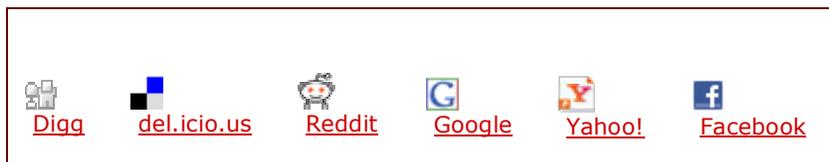
When the USCG hears that, they will come right back to you (if they don't within, say, one minute, hail them again). Note that I finished my hail with the word, "over." This means I am finished talking and hoping to hear back. (There is no such sign-off, despite the movies, as "over and out." "Out" means I am done talking and I don't want to talk to you any more. "Over" means I am done talking and I do want to talk to you some more. Which is it, Bunky??)

The rest will be pretty straightforward for the private boat captain. USCG Forces will essentially take over the conversational and situational control at that point. They will gather essential information (how many people aboard?) and direct you to take action consistent with the risk of the situation (get everyone in life jackets.) They will also put out an urgent call to all boaters in your vicinity to render assistance if they can, as Good Samaritans. And, if the risk warrants it, they will get under way within minutes of your hail.

Get a radio – and sound safe and smart out there!

About the Author: *Vincent Pica is a coxswain and the Commander of Flotilla 18-06 East Moriches. He was a navigator in a brown-water and blue-water sailboat racing crew for eight seasons. From the "iron sails" side, he is a licensed US Coast Guard Master of Steam and Diesel Powered Vessels, carries a Radar Observer endorsement, Unlimited, on his license and is certified in Marine Diesel Engine Operation and Maintenance.*

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