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Safety At Sea: Your Radio

Last week, I wrote the following in the column about sounding smart on the radio:

"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 Westmarine, for one, will give you a three-year warranty on the radio . . . Come on, Bunky, where else can we skimp with such potentially disastrous results?"

And I meant it. But you did install it properly, didn't you? This column is about that.

Handheld vs Fixed-Mount

A little like the debate between laptop computers and desk top computers, this debate is all about power. Handheld "VHF" (very high frequency) radios typically put out 5 watts of power while fixed-mount VHF's operate at 25 watts. When it comes to transmission power, more watts mean more power – to drill through weather and all semi-permeable objects on the way to the horizon.

A Straight Line To The Horizon?

Everyone has stood on their "tippy-toes" to see better. Height matters in getting to the horizon. For the math wizards, the formula to calculate the distance to the "true" horizon (the one you can see on a really clear day) is: to take the square root of the height of the observer, multiply by 13.

Remember my short-hand formula for converting meters to feet? Multiply the meters by 3 and add 10 percent. The reverse works, too, for converting feet to meters – take off 10 percent and divide the result by 3 – close enough. Say you're 6 feet tall and your floor boards are 1 foot over the water line. So, your eye is roughly 7 feet over sea level. Seven feet less 10 percent is about 6.5 feet and, dividing by 3 yields roughly 2 meters. The square root of 13 multiplied by 2 (or 26) is roughly 5. So, it is 5 kilometers to the horizon for the handheld VHF you are holding near your mouth as you speak – and it is pumping the signal out at 5 watts.

What are 5 kilometers in miles? Multiply by 60 percent (.60) to convert to miles . . . 3 miles.

How about putting in an 8-foot antenna and wiring it to your fixed-mount radio? You put the

antenna on the top-side (the roof) of your helm cover. Let's say that top-side is 7 feet over the water and the antenna is, as noted, 8 feet high.

Let's do the math. 13 multiplied by 15 feet = 195. The square root of 195 is roughly 14. What are 14 kilometers in miles? Multiply by .6 and you get over 8 miles . . . and you're pumping out the signal at 25 watts. If help is 5 miles away, your handheld isn't going to get your may-day to him. And heavy weather will clearly impact that 5-watter more than the 25-watter.

Oh, but you do know his cell phone number – don't you? You don't need to memorize the formulas or even look up in the answers in tables. You want to throw your signal as hard as you can (watts) as far as you can (height.) It is just that simple.

In the weeks ahead we'll dig into things like "gain" and Digital Selective Channels as well as the USCG's state of the art communication system now in testing "Out East" – Rescue 21. But suffice to say in here, when you are putting out a may-day, you want what every battle commander has wanted from the beginning of time – power and distance.

BTW, if you are interested in being part of USCG Forces, email me at JoinUSCGAux@aol.com or go directly to the DISR Human Resources department, which is in charge of new members matters, at DSO-HR and we will help you "get in this thing."