

FIRST BOAT

Vincent Pica
Chief of Staff, First District, Southern Region (D1SR)
United States Coast Guard Auxiliary

[New Federal Boating Regulations On The Horizon?](#)

Vin Pica reveals a law that may require the use of EPIRBs for recreational boaters...

Guest blog by [Vincent Pica](#)



U.S. Coast Guard photo/PA3 Barbara L. Patton

Buried deep within the US Coast Guard 2011 authorization bill (Section 618 (the emergency beacon provision), H.R. 3619) is a short paragraph enabling the US Coast Guard to require emergency locator beacons, if it believes they are warranted and to decide how to do it, on pleasure boats when they go offshore. What is “offshore?” The section essentially defines “offshore” by authorizing the US Coast Guard to require the beacons on pleasure boats when they venture three nautical miles (nm) or more from the U.S. coastline or from the shores of the Great Lakes.

Advocates say that the measure could save lives while also saving millions each year in search costs. Why? Because, when the perfectly calm skies that you left under turn into a snarly, life-stealing beast,

sometimes, all your skill isn't going to get you home. And sometimes the boat itself is what betrays you as she threatens to slip away beneath you. You are going to be hard to find – unless you are sending a signal to the satellite who will call the USCG for you.

This column is about that...

Recap: What's an EPIRB or PLB?

A couple of weeks ago, we wrote about the various locator devices ([EPIRBs](#), [PPIRBs](#) and [GPIRBs](#)) and how they have evolved. The main contender is the boat's Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon (EPIRB) but the business of search and rescue keeps evolving. One of those evolutionary devices, the "PPIRB" (pea-purr-b) is a Personal EPIRB. This is what we now call a "PLB" or Personal Locator Beacon. You wear it on your person. Like the more modern EPIRBs, it has a built-in GPS. When you attain a coxswain rating in the USCG Auxiliary (the person responsible for the boat, the crew and the mission), the USCG gives you a PLB. "Even if you go hiking, take this with you. If you get lost, we've got too much invested in you not to come get you."

The State of the Art...

Interestingly, while the USCG mandated a couple of years ago against using the old 121.5MHZ frequency for emergency notification in favor of the far-superior 406MHZ frequency, the 121.5MHZ frequency is favored for close-in radio direction finding (RDF). So the newest EPIRBs now transmit simultaneously on 406MHZ and 121.5MHZ. The 406MHZ reduces the footprint to 1 square nm (from the old 12 square nm). And the 406MHZ is heard by satellites all over the world and, within an hour, a USCG Regional Control Center will have initiated the coming of aid to you. And the rescuers will also be looking for your EPIRB's 121.5MHZ signal with their RDF gear. In heavy seas, that may very well be the difference between passing right by you while you are in the trough – or knowing that you are just over the next wave.

Do I Need a PLB If My Boat Has An EPIRB?

Yes! Just hope that you don't fall off the boat... Also, hope that your EPIRB battery, which you dutifully replaced (as I just did!) by shipping it to the lowest-cost provider of battery replacement services that could be found on the internet, doesn't fail at the time that it is most needed – as you grab it in an abandon ship scenario...

Redundancy will look very cheap and very smart, if/as/when... and PLBs fit in your pocket.

Cobbled-Together EPIRB?

In a recent advisory, the US Coast Guard noted that it would exempt vessels equipped with a "GPS-enabled VHF radio" if the vessels stayed within 20nm of shore. What is "GPS-enabled VHF radio?" Ever notice that VHF radios have come with a "red button" for a number of years now? That button, when pressed, sends your MMSI# - your Maritime Mobile Service Identity # (which is free and refers to you and your boat solely) – and, if it is hooked up to your GPS, where you are to all DSC-equipped radios (Digital Selective Calling) within "line of sight", including the USCG. Essentially, your GPS and DSC radio can be combined to become an EPIRB or PLB. In fact, such a configuration gives you 17nm of more leeway than if you had "just" an EPIRB or PLB. Go figure...

BTW, if you are interested in being part of USCG Forces, email me at JoinUSCGAux@aol.com or go direct to the D1SR Human Resources department, who are in charge of new members matters, at [DSO-HR](#) and we will help you "get in this thing..."