Staying in Touch Via the VHF Radio

Still a vital and useful piece of equipment

A VHF radio onboard a boat is not required safety equipment. However, I would never head out without one. Sure, cell phones are useful, but for reasons we'll discuss, they cannot substitute for a VHF radio. Perhaps the best example is that you can neither receive nor send a MAYDAY broadcast with a cell phone. It is this ability to communicate quickly and effectively with boats in your vicinity that truly distinguishes a VHF radio from other forms of communication.

There are other uses for the radio that make having one onboard and turned on worthwhile:

- Weather reports and special weather broadcasts about things like thunder storms moving into an area.
- Staying in close contact with other boats or shore parties you may be traveling with.
- Monitoring Vessel Traffic so you know when a freighter is about to come around the corner.
- Reporting safety hazards to (or getting reports from) other boaters in the area.

The intent of this article is to help you get the most out of your radio. Here are some of the things I have found to be important and/or helpful:

Access: In most sailboats the main radio is mounted at the nav station. This means they are hard to hear from the cockpit and someone has to go below to use it. And, for these reasons, the radio may not even get turned on. There are two ways to have better access to the radio – a hand-held or a RAM mic (Remote Access Microphone, a unit wired directly to the radio providing controls, microphone and speaker). We have both on our boat. The RAM mic provides convenient access to the main radio from the cockpit and the hand-held plays back-up and can be carried off the boat by the exploratory team. The main advantage of the RAM mic is that it provides access to the full power of the main radio (25 watts) and its antenna. Hand-held units transmit at around 5 watts but have the advantage of being portable. Either one can be purchased for around $200.

Vessel Traffic Services: The VTS provides tracking and guidance for commercial shipping in a manner similar to what the FAA does for airplanes. The major difference is that the FAA tracks all airplanes and the VTS only tracks large commercial vessels. Those of us in pleasure craft can voluntarily join in the VTS but this should be limited to unusual situations such as fog. Most of the time monitoring the VTS channels can provide very useful information – this is especially true in conditions of limited visibility or when we are approaching a blind corner. Freighters and ferries are fast, so it is best to know when they are in the area and what they are trying to do; monitoring the VTS channel is the best way to do this.

Seattle Traffic is our local VTS provider and they use channel 14 south of Whidbey Island and channel 5 in the Strait of Juan de Fuca and San Juan Islands. Victoria traffic covers much of the area west and north of the San Juan Islands, they use channel 11. As you travel to other areas be sure to get the local VTS channel.

Monitoring and Playing Tag: Most people leave their radios set to channel 16, which makes sense as it is the hailing channel. But most modern radios are capable of monitoring more than one channel through their scan function. This function allows the user to 'tag' several channels wherein the radio will scan all of them, stopping at the first channel that becomes active. This is an important feature that I use

Common VHF Channels**

Channel Number	Use
05A 11 12 14	Port Operations or VTS
07A 08 10	Commercial
09	Boater Calling. Commercial and Non-Commercial
13	Intership Navigation Safety (Bridge-to-Bridge)
16	International Distress, Safety and Calling. Ships required to carry radio, USCG, and most coast stations maintain a listening watch on this channel.
18A 19A	Commercial
22A	US Coast Guard
26A 83 83A	Canadian Coast Guard
63A 65A 66A	Port Operations and Commercial
67	Commercial
68 69 71 72 78A	Non-Commercial
73 74 77	Port Operations
79A 80A 88A	Commercial

**Please note: this is NOT a complete list, channels not listed are generally not available for public use. For a complete list visit wireless.fcc.gov/marine/vhfchanl.pdf

religiously. I normally 'tag' channel 16, channel 13, channel 22 (or 83 when in Canada), the VTS channel if we are near shipping lanes. And when we are traveling with another boat, we add in a side channel. Here is my thinking on these choices:

16 This seems self-evident as it should always be monitored.

13 This is the bridge-to-bridge channel frequently used to call from one vessel to another to negotiate safe passage.

22 or 83 These are the US and Canadian Coast Guard working channels respectively. They are used by the Coast Guard to take non-Mayday calls off 16. By monitoring them it is possible to get the full picture without having to constantly switch channels.

VTS Channel – I don't always monitor these channels as there is a fair amount of traffic on them. But ,when I am near a busy area, say Elliot Bay or around Victoria, I will monitor the respective channel. One important piece of information – most ships in the traffic lanes DO NOT monitor channel 16, so you will need to call them on the VTS channel if you need to talk to them.

Side Channel – When we are traveling with another boat we usually arrange to monitor a side channel so we call each other directly. This keeps traffic off 16 and saves us time.

Weather: It is a good idea to get a weather report at least once a day and the VHF provides a convenient way of doing so. Most radios have a button marked with WX or the like which needs to be pressed to access the weather channels. The Sailing Tips article published in the July 2009 issue covers this subject in more detail; it can be read on-line at *www.48north.com* – just click on Article Archives, then the Past Issues icon for that month.

Low and High Power: VHF radios have two transmission power settings; usually 25 watts and 1 watt (note: for most hand-held units these settings are 5 watts and 1 watt). If you are nearby those you are calling, say when calling a harbor, it is a good idea to switch to low power. This saves the ears of the person you are calling and limits your transmissions to a smaller area so the channel can be used by others elsewhere. Note that some channels, like 13 and 67, will transmit only at the 1 watt setting as they are intended for use at a short distance.

Hopefully these ideas and/or knowledge will prove useful. But I would like to leave you with two final items: The first is a list of the marine VHF channels – see Figure 1. Please note this is not a complete list, it contains only the most commonly used channels. If you want a complete list an online search for"Marine VHF channels" will quickly lead you to many. This last item is a thought – by having your radio on you may someday be able to save a life – or someone else may save yours; assuming they are listening.

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