

# CAPT'N KEVO'S

## Boating Tips

### Rescue 21

**T**he Coast Guard has implemented a major systems acquisition program titled Rescue 21 to address the limitations of the National Distress and Response System (NDRS), which is the current communications system.

By harnessing global positioning and cutting-edge communications technology, Rescue 21 enables the Coast Guard to perform all missions with greater agility and efficiency. The new system will close 88 known coverage gaps in coastal areas of the United States, enhancing the safety of life at sea.

The system's expanded system

frequency capacity enables greater coordination with the Department of Homeland Security, as well as other federal, state and local agencies and first responders.

When completed, this vital major systems acquisition will provide an updated, leading-edge Very High Frequency – Frequency Modulated (VHF-FM) communications system, replacing the NDRS installed and deployed during the 1970s.

Rescue 21 will cover coastlines, navigable rivers and waterways in the continental United States, Alaska, Hawaii, Guam and Puerto Rico. By replacing outdated legacy technology with a fully integrated



system, Rescue 21 provides the Coast Guard with upgraded tools and technology to protect the nation's coasts and rescue mariners at sea.

### Communications Center

It was a balmy 63 degrees in December when I arrived at the Coast Guard's communications center on Yerba Buena Island. Senior Chief Operations Specialist Doug Samp greeted me.

My mission was to tour the newly constructed command center and learn how the Rescue 21 communications system worked and what it means to all NorCal mariners. In addition, I wanted to talk to the folks running the show over there about doing a demonstration of the new system using my boat as "bait."

What I had in mind was to de-



From left to right: OS3 Justin Smith, OS2 Kayla Gamester, OS1 Cristian Vega and OS2 Amanda Torres. This is the team behind the scenes who monitors the Rescue 21 system and mans the command center on Yerba Buena Island.



Senior Chief Operations Specialist Doug Samp.

clare a false MAYDAY on my VHF radio from an undisclosed location and see if they could find me. They were not “amused.” But I was serious! To their credit, they did not say no outright. They just wanted to think about it for a while.

Following is the plan we agreed on:

This entire exercise would be coordinated by the command center at Yerba Buena Island. (Preparation included a 10-page PowerPoint presentation to all concerned.) The key to getting approval was using a different frequency than 16. At the appointed hour the Operations Specialists at the command center would monitor channel 83A and that is what I would use to make the MAYDAY call.

Operations Specialists perform a central role in the execution of nearly all Coast Guard operations as the eyes, ears and voice of the Coast Guard for the Maritime Community.

OS's perform functions ranging from search and rescue or law enforcement case execution to Combat Information Center operations or intelligence gathering. OS's operate the most advanced tactical computer systems the Coast Guard has, which include satellite communications, global positions navigation, electronic charting, shipboard navigation systems, and real-time target acquisition tracking and identification systems.

An OS will perform advanced operational planning applications, intelligence coordination and case management functions.

Just to make sure all went according to plan, they positioned Executive Petty Officer Brian Huff from Station Rio Vista on my boat.

I arrived at the boat on a cold winter day and fired up all the heaters before Brian arrived. Doug Samp called me on my cell. He had



**Executive Petty Officer Brian Huff of Station Rio Vista.**

just left CG Station Rio Vista and was headed back to the command center to supervise every aspect of this exercise. Brian arrived in an official CG SUV complete with a mobile command center installed in the back. The exercise would start when Doug gave the signal to broadcast.

Brian and I went down to the boat and prepared to travel about 100 yards to the guest docks at Moore's Riverboat restaurant. Did you know they are under new ownership? Joey and Kim are doing a great job and more and more boaters are returning to this Delta icon for breakfast, lunch, dinner and the occasional private party. But I digress...

We motored out to the docks and secured the boat. Now all we had to do was wait for our signal. Believe it or not, they “scripted” the entire verbal exchange beforehand so there would be clear communication. Every transmission started with “This is a drill...this is a drill” so that there would be no confusion as to what was going on. I reported that we were adrift, disabled and unable to anchor the vessel somewhere on the Mokelumne River between the entrance to the San Joaquin River

and the Mokelumne River Bridge.

The system worked perfectly. They were able to pinpoint our position and relay the GPS coordinates to the search and rescue (SAR) team, which was about to be dispatched from Station Rio Vista. All crewmembers had to don dry suits because the water was below 50 degrees. Never the less, the SAR team was underway in about 10 minutes from when they were given the command to launch.

The seas were flat calm and there was little or no traffic on the waterways between Rio Vista and the restaurant. By now it was late afternoon and the sun was fading. It took about 30 minutes for the SAR team to arrive. Mind you, they were the only ones who didn't know where we were. I told them we were “adrift” on the river so that's what they were looking for.

I saw the blue lights flashing above the tules as they went right by us. They slowed down to check their coordinates against Sector command's on Yerba Buena Island. But since they were looking for a vessel adrift, they didn't look our way. It took a few minutes and some



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last-minute VHF communication to get them to reverse course and locate us. Everyone involved in this exercise learned important lessons.

Before you get underway, leave a float plan with a reliable person who can be depended upon to notify the Coast Guard should you not return or check in as planned. If you have a change in plans after leaving, be sure to notify the person holding your float plan. The float plan greatly reduces the amount of investigation required by the Coast Guard to determine a reasonable search area to start looking for you.

Also, check the weather through the National Weather Service and monitor for changes throughout the day.

In the event of an emergency, a cellular telephone is a great backup and calling 911 will eventually get you to the Coast Guard. To communicate with the Coast Guard



directly and alert boaters in your area of your situation, the Coast Guard recommends all boaters carry a marine band radio and monitor channel 16, the hailing and distress frequency. Establish communications by hailing "Coast Guard Sector San Francisco" and be prepared to provide the "Big 5":

1. Your position (Latitude/Longitude & geographical),

2. The nature of the distress,  
3. How many persons are aboard the boat,

4. A detailed description of your boat including your state registration or documentation numbers, and

5. The on-scene weather (winds, waves, visibility).

## Kevo's Tip:

The Rescue 21 program is a much-needed improvement to the Coast Guard's ability to carry out their missions. Although primarily intended to locate stricken vessels at sea, it can be used in the Bay and Delta as well. Needless to say, the days of making false MAYDAY transmissions on a VHF radio and getting away with it are over. (Not that any of our readers would do such a thing!)

Be safe & happy boating.

As always, feedback is appreciated. I can be reached at 925/890-8428 or kevo@yachtsmanmagazine.com. ✍



From left to right: BM2 Max Shaterkin, SN Kari Morgan, BM2 Jeff Duran, SN Kristen Archard and BM1 Brian Huff.