



## VHF OPERATION

**A**s a boating instructor, I've always been surprised how little many boaters know about the operation of a VHF radio and how important it is to the safety of their boating experience. I think it's related to the abundance of cell phones and "instant communication" we all take for granted.

But think about, sometimes the cell service is spotty on the water. (This is especially true for lakes.) I've personally ruined three by getting just a little water on the keys. In addition, I've dropped one overboard! The point is cell phones are great — I can't live without mine. But one should not *count* on having it available 100 percent of the time. And you know Murphy's Law... Just when you need it, it doesn't work!

### Not A Toy

OK... The first thing you need to know about your VHF radio is that it is not a toy and should be respected. No profanity, false MAYDAY calls, rudeness or disobeying orders from law enforcement or the Coast Guard. (Take my word for it; in these days of *Homeland Security* you don't want to go there.) Children should not be permitted to *play* with a VHF radio.

Channel 16 is the most important one to get familiar with. This is the *hailing* channel. Law enforcement, Coast Guard, bridges, Vessel Assist, other boaters, (commercial/recreational) and many marinas monitor this channel. Once initial contact is made, both parties will switch to another channel unless it is an emergency. The issue here is that only one party can transmit at a time and you don't want to tie up this emergency frequency. The Coast Guard or law enforcement may ask you to switch to channel 22. A

bridge may ask you to switch to channel 9 (Drawbridges monitor 9). Vessel Assist may ask you to switch to channel 22, 68, 69, 71, 72 or 78.

When communicating with another recreational vessel you may initiate the communication on channel 16 and then switch to one of the following: 68, 69, 71, 72 or 78.

These are designated for non-commercial use. Better still, communicate with the Skipper of the other vessel before embarking and agree upon a designated channel thereby never interfering with traffic on 16.

### In The Know

Turn the radio on and listen to channel 16 for a while. You'll soon get the feel of how best to communicate walkie-talkie style. The first mistake most people make is not letting go of the "talk" button on the microphone. If you do this you will not hear the response of the other party. Release the button after talking. Practice what you would say in an emergency. Stick to the facts. Speak slowly and clearly. Don't feel rushed. If you're not sure of the answer, just say, "WAIT." Think through your response and then respond.

The following are *pro-words* that make communicating on VHF more effective. Keep a copy on board:

**OUT:** Communications are ended  
**OVER:** I have completed my message, now you respond  
**ROGER:** I received your last transmission  
**WILCO:** I heard your last, understood, and will comply  
**THIS IS:** Name of station broadcasting  
**FIGURES:** Numbers follow  
**SPEAK SLOWER:** I can't understand you, speak slower  
**SAY AGAIN:** I didn't hear/understand your last, repeat  
**WORDS TWICE:** Difficult to understand, repeat phrases twice  
**I SPELL:** My next communication will be spelled (phonetic)  
**WAIT:** Stand by for future communications  
**WAIT OUT:** I will pause for a moment and call you back  
**AFFIRMATIVE:** Yes  
**NEGATIVE:** No

## In An Emergency

MAYDAY calls are the most important communications on a VHF. A MAYDAY call is a true emergency call. When someone yells MAYDAY you can bet EVERYONE monitoring channel 16 will be listening. In the event of a true emergency order all on board to don life jackets and then say firmly and clearly:

### MAYDAY, MAYDAY, MAYDAY

When you get a response, be prepared to communicate the following:

**Who you are** (Name of vessel)

**Where you are** (Location)

**What your problem is** (What's wrong)

**What are you** (Description of boat type, color, trim, etc.)

**How many on your boat and any injuries** (children, etc.)

**Your seaworthiness** (Ability to travel)

**Help you need** (medical, mechanical, tow, etc.)

You'll be listening on channel 16 (be prepared to switch)

More than one person should be able to operate your boat and radio. Give your guests and crew brief instructions on how to start the engine, drive and how to use the radio.

### Case In Point

A friend of mine was out at a popular anchorage, enjoying the nice weather, when all of a sudden everyone around him took off. He thought to himself, "That's odd," and kept on enjoying his day. Later in the day he packed up and headed in. A huge weather front moved in and it started pouring. He got pounded and soaked. He called me and asked what those other folks knew that he didn't. The fact is on a VHF radio, channels 1, 2 and 3 are dedicated to weather. Every 30 minutes the National Weather Service provides weather updates from 60 miles west of the Golden Gate Bridge all the way to the west Delta. Just tune in to channels 1, 2 or 3. (These are "listen only" channels).

Be safe and have fun boating! You can reach me at 925/890-8428 or e-mail me at Kevin@pacificpowerboating.com. ☞