

# KEVO'S BOATING TIPS & MORE

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## VHF Marine Radios Part II

Last month I wrote about some of the new features of VHF radios available in the marketplace today. This month, I'm going to talk about how to use a VHF radio.

As I mentioned last month, some would say a VHF radio is the most important safety item to have on your boat. In my opinion, a VHF radio is just as important as having life preservers onboard. Case in point: One day last year my wife the Admiral and I were traveling outbound on the San Joaquin River a few miles east of the Antioch Bridge. We had already discovered that our windlass anchoring system was not working that day (blew a 90 amp fuse). We were facing a 30-knot wind and a vicious current in a very narrow channel. All of a sudden without warning, both of our motors failed (air in fuel lines!). It was the Admiral's fault. That's my story and I'm sticking to it. (As long as she's not around!) HA!

Seriously, we had about two minutes time before the boat would run hard aground on the rocks. Luckily for us my first mate is an experienced offshore mariner and sprang into action. We had two (accessible) auxiliary anchors with rodes onboard in good working order. We managed to get the boat stopped and anchored securely with about 15 feet of space between the boat and the rocks.

After all of the excitement, I got on the radio and called Vessel Assist®. To my amazement, within five minutes I had not one, not two, but three sheriff's boats on the scene from three different jurisdictions (Contra Costa,

San Joaquin and Sacramento counties). From my point of view, this was truly amazing to have help arrive that fast. It was like calling 911 from my house and speaking directly to the police officer who was closest in his car.

OK... The first thing we need to be clear on is that a VHF marine radio is not a "toy" and must be respected as a safety/communication tool for mariners in distress. No profanity, false MAYDAY calls, rudeness or disobeying orders from law enforcement or the Coast Guard. Trust me, in these days of post 9/11 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. Channel 22 is the Coast Guard liaison channel. A bridge may ask you to switch to channel 9 (drawbridges monitor channel 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 channels are designated for noncommercial use. If you are going to cruise with a flotilla of boats headed toward the same destination, it is advisable to decide upon a recreational use channel for all vessels to communicate on before embarking on your trip, therefore not interrupting emergency transmissions on channel 16. Our yacht club does this on our monthly raftouts and it is very effective. (We use channel 72.)

### Walkie-Talkie Style

Turn your VHF radio on and monitor channel 16. Listen to the way the pros like Coast Guard, commercial vessels and law enforcement communicate effectively. You will soon get the feel of how best to communicate walkie-talkie style.

The first mistake inexperienced VHF users make in a "panic" situation is they don't let go of the talk button after ending their transmission. If you do this you will not hear the response of the other party. Release the talk button after ending your transmission.

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 onboard:

**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



Fixed-mounted VHF marine radio.

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**FIGURES:** Numbers to 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 transmission 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

**MAYDAY calls** are the most important communications on a VHF radio. A MAYDAY call is a true emergency. EVERYONE monitoring channel 16 will be paying close attention to any MAYDAY communication. In the event of a true emergency on your vessel, first order all onboard to don lifejackets. (Although it is not mandatory for recreational vessels to have their VHF radios

on while underway, in my opinion, it should be on and tuned to channel 16.) Get on the radio and 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 of vessel in distress

**DESCRIPTION OF VESSEL:** What does the vessel look like (color, size etc.)?

**WHAT YOUR PROBLEM IS:** What's wrong

**HOW MANY ON YOUR VESSEL AND ANY**

**INJURIES:** Children, etc.

**VESSEL SEAWORTHINESS:** Ability to travel

**HELP YOU NEED:** Medical, mechanical, tow etc.

During this communication you may be asked to switch to channel 22. More than one person should be able to operate your VHF radio while underway. Take a few minutes to explain to your

passengers how the radio works. A good way to do this is by simply monitoring channel 16 while your passengers can listen. You can interject the meaning of the transmissions and explain their significance. This will make the learning interesting and swift for your first mate, guests and crew.

### ***Kevo's Tip:***

The reality for most of us (experienced or not) is if the (you know what) hits the fan while you're underway, you are going to be totally stressed out and have very high anxiety. The higher your stress and anxiety levels, the lower your decision-making capabilities. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Learn how to use your VHF radio effectively and efficiently *before* trouble happens. It will be one less thing you have to deal with in what could be a life-and-death situation.

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

**Be safe & happy boating! ⚓**