

GPS + DSC/VHF & Your Safety

By Dick Lappin

Editor Note: Dick has done a great job of researching this article. He describes a simple method of quickly getting emergency help. We think of SPOT or EPRIBs for this for emergency help but this method may get quicker response and is uniquely suited to the Great Lakes environment in which we sail. I have had the GPS and DSC radio sitting just 3 feet apparent for several years but have never hooked them up. This is a project for this winter!

My purpose in writing this is to encourage the use of radio and GPS equipment that most of us already have to provide a superior method of summoning emergency assistance if required.

The USCG developed the "Rescue 21" Program which is now active; reference- Lt. Kennedy (phone: 216-902-6029), communications officer for the 9th USCG District in Cleveland. The system gives near real-time information, has coverage in all five Great Lakes and extends well into Canadian waters, if not all the way to their shores. Rescues in Canadian waters are coordinated with the Canadian Coast Guard.

With the Rescue 21 Program, a vessel initiating an emergency "mayday" call on standard VHF radio is automatically located by triangulation. Better still, a vessel with DSC (Digital Selective Calling)/VHF radio, connected to GPS and registered with an MMSI (Maritime Mobile Service Identity) number, is immediately identified and located for potential rescue by the US or Canadian Coast Guards (and other vessels similarly equipped, within radio range) with the push of the single emergency button on the radio. All new VHF radios sold since 1999 have the DSC function.

An MMSI number can be obtained at no cost by going to www.boatus.com/mmsi. A number obtained in this manner is (theoretically) good for US waters only. For international waters, go to www.fcc.gov/Forms/Form605/605.html and complete schedule B to get an MMSI number; a FCC ship station license and operator license are also required for international use.

An MMSI number is assigned to the boat and covers all radios including fixed, handheld and AIS (with transponder). Once an MMSI number is written into a device, it must be taken to an "NMEA master dealer" to be changed.

The following information was obtained from the Boat US webpage concerning US and Canadian boaters:

- 1) US boaters in Canadian waters - Canada is not enforcing US regulations requiring an FCC license. Canada has also de-licensed radios for recreational boaters. Boat US and the Global Maritime Distress Safety System or GMDSS are working to lift the FCC rule for Canada and the Bahamas.
- 2) Canadian boaters in US waters-Boat US cannot grant MMSI numbers to a Canadian vessel. Alternatively, Canadians may complete the form to obtain a free MMSI number through Industry Canada by going to http://sd.ic.gc.ca/pls/engdoc_anon/sd_pages.mmsi_forms . Note-spaces in preceding web-address are underlines.

Connecting a GPS unit to your DSC/VHF radio can be challenging, but checking the manuals and possibly contacting their technical service reps should help get the job done. The small effort involved could save your life some day.