

NAVIGATION

VHF Radios & EPIRBs: Why You Need To Register Them

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Memorial Day is fast approaching and the summer solstice is right behind. That means boating season is near with lots of activity on the water. Now is the time to check your navigation equipment and make sure it's good to go. It's especially important to prepare for situations where you or someone on your boat could be sick or fall overboard. Who knows what Murphy's Law will throw at you! At minimum, you'll want to be prepared with a float plan that includes information about your trip, plus registration numbers for both your VHF radio and Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon (EPIRB).

Float Plans

Do you file a float plan with someone remaining ashore? Most boaters do not, though they should. At a recent boat show, I overheard a few boaters say they planned on sailing away from the show in their new boat. When asked what their prior experience consisted of, they replied they had none. This is scary, and I hope, for their sake, that they filed a float plan just in case.

A float plan holds the following information: your vessel, communication equipment, safety and survival gear onboard, persons onboard, itinerary, and additional contacts. You'll want to make sure you include the Maritime Mobile Service Identities (MMSI) number for your vessel and the Unique Identification Number (UIN) on your EPIRBs and Personal Locator Beacons (PLBs).

The U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary provides a Float Plan form you can use at www.floatplancentral.org. Click on the green button at the bottom of the page to get the current version. Once you fill this out, give a copy to someone responsible ashore. Do NOT file it with the Coast Guard.

The final page of this form also provides a Boating Emergency Guide. Give a filled-out version to everyone traveling on the boat with you, and make sure it's part of the copy you give to your responsible someone.



EPIRBs

If you ask any captain who needed rescuing, they'll tell you to make sure the UIN for your EPIRB gets registered, which you can do at www.beaconregistration.noaa.gov. When registering, you will need to supply the beacon's information along with contact information for someone other than yourself, in case of an emergency.

Registration will also require details about your vessel such as its length and the vessel name as well as its home port. One optional field is for you to provide details about where you will begin your trip, approximately how long you're going out for, etc. (a float plan). Because this site and this process requires you to create an account with a username and password, you can always come back



and update your completed registration at any time (IE: to update your float plan)!

VHF Radios, DSC, and MMSI

Today's VHF-DSC radios come with a red "Distress" button on them. If set up correctly, holding this button down for five seconds will transmit your vessel's details and your position to any other DSC-equipped radio within range. Plus, it'll notify the U.S. Coast Guard of your need for immediate assistance. However, for this button to work properly, it must be a) programmed with an MMSI number and b) connected to a GPS.

In the United States, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) provides the MMSI number. A recreational boater—only boating domestically—can register for one through BoatUS, Sea Tow,



or the US Power Squadron. However, a US recreational boater visiting foreign ports (such as to Canada), will need to get a Ship Station license and their MMSI from the FCC directly. Canadian residents can obtain their MMSI number for free from any Industry Canada office.

The biggest advantage of a VHF radio with Digital Selective Calling (DSC) is that it hooks up to your GPS and automatically sends your location in an emergency. If you're drifting or waves take you further out to sea, it'll take the guesswork out of where you're at. This saves time in a search and rescue mission.

Connecting your VHF to a GPS is not difficult. However, it is an underutilized step or often overlooked. VHF radios come with instructions on how to connect the two, often a matter of a few small wires. Alternatively, manufacturers have since wised up to this problem. New VHF's come with GPS built in; removing this extra step.

If you don't have GPS such as a chart plotter or otherwise on your boat, you'll need to pay attention to your surroundings all the time and know that search and rescue could take longer as they attempt to triangulate your position. Also, if you don't register for an MMSI number and input it to your VHF radio, the USCG won't know who the boat belongs to or how to contact a loved one. Doing both is simply best practice.

Make Sure Your VHF Works by Doing a Radio Check

Sea Tow offers an Automated Radio Check service around the US, which allows for you to tune to the designated Channel for your area, push the button and say your information, and then hear it back automatically upon releasing the button. To find the channel you should use, visit www.seatow.com/tools-and-education/automated-radio-check.

BoatUS also offers a free radio check service with TowBoatUS. You can hail TowBoatUS on Channel 16 to arrange for a check, which is done on a different/non-emergency channel, or visit www.boatus.com/service/locator to find the nearest TowBoatUS and call them on your cell phone in advance.

In a recent survey, I asked sailors if they have a VHF radio on board and whether they used that alone or a cell phone. The results: 100% have a VHF radio on board. 93% use cell phones for personal communications with the marinas, family, or if they need to have someone walk them through a repair once they connect via VHF. Maintaining a functioning, reliable VHF is important; here's why...

Cell Phones

Once out on the water, cell service can be spotty. Additionally, relying on your cell phone in an emergency instead of your VHF can cause delays in your rescue.

Bob Frak, a longtime Lake Superior sailor out of Marquette, Mich., told me: "We were out sailing and came within a quarter mile of a powerboat anchored offshore. We turned 180 degrees and headed away. A short time later,

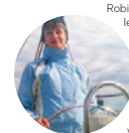
we saw smoke behind us and thought it was a beach bonfire. After the smoke turned black, we noticed the Coast Guard heading toward the anchored boat. It was on fire. The boat burned and sank. Luckily everyone was safe, though wet. They used a cell phone to request help and never made a VHF call. Had they used their radio, we could have reached them earlier and at least saved them time in the water."

Whether you're at the helm or someone else is, everyone needs to know how to use the VHF radio.

Reminder

Don't forget to update your MMSI and UIN numbers for your DSC and EPIRBs. These extra efforts help you arrive at your destination, decrease response time for rescue missions (G-d forbid), and float plans give loved ones peace of mind.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Robin is a passionate marine enthusiast and sailor who has interviewed countless industry experts, in the US and abroad. As a freelance writer and business strategist, she helps her clients create, replace, and update both technical and non-technical documents. Her articles include travel, suddenly-in-command, technology and boating secrets, to name a few. Robin is a member of International Travel Writers and Publishers Alliance (ITWPA) and Boating Writers International.

Robin's also the author of "Boating Secrets: 127 Top Tips to Help You Buy and Enjoy Your Boat". This interview series of 11 marine industry experts walks you through everything you need to know from buying a boat to selling it, plus making a living as a professional sailor. It is available in both print and kindle at <https://tinyurl.com/rbxomek>.

