

GMDSS – Group Call sign for the SOA

By Trevor Heritage (Shrimper 438), Winter 2000

Assuming that most of you glance occasionally at the 'yottie press', it cannot have escaped your notice that, over the past few years, VHF communications at sea has gone through a metamorphosis. The amazing growth in ownership of mobile telephones has already been the direct cause of the closure of our BT Coast Radio Stations. The Global Maritime Distress and Safety System (GMDSS) has transformed the way in which we utilise the frequencies allocated to the Maritime Mobile Service.

From 1st January 2001 fixed VHF sets could only be purchased and installed if they met the type approval requirements of GMDSS Class D standards. Happily, handheld VHF sets and current fixed installations on boats are not affected. However, as you will see, the benefits are such that it has become increasingly attractive to install a GMDSS radio. If you decide to change your boat you will certainly have to purchase the new type of set.

This is not as bad as it sounds. Although initially high in comparison to pre-GMDSS equipment, since 2001, when the system was first introduced, prices have slowly fallen and it is now possible to obtain a good quality set from one of the better manufacturers for less than £150.

The main feature of these new generation VHF sets is the use of Digital Selective Calling. Each vessel fitted with a GMDSS set is allocated a 9-digit call sign, which will be programmed into the set by the user. Once programmed the advantages are:-

- Instant and automatic alerting of a Coastguard station to a distress, safety or urgency situation by the press of a button.
- Instant alerting of all other GMDSS equipped vessels within VHF range.
- Instant transmission of the distressed vessel's position if the GMDSS set is interfaced with GPS.
- Ease of direct contact with other vessels or shore stations, by use of individual codes.
- Removal of the need to monitor Channel 16, with all its incessant chatter. The GMDSS set will let you know when someone is calling your vessel.

Of great interest to yacht clubs and associations is the availability of group collective call signs, known as Group MMSI. This facility will be invaluable to rallies, cruises and to race officers. A 9-digit Group MMSI can be programmed into a set by the user, in much the same way that a telephone at home can store frequently used numbers. Thereafter, all members of a particular group can be called simultaneously and with only one push of a button. The radio sets on the called vessels will automatically change to the requested intership channel and audibly alert the crew.

The Shrimper Owners Association quite obviously wishes to be at the cutting edge of this new technology, and has successfully applied to the Radio Communications Agency for a Group MMSI. This identification code may now be used to establish boat to boat communications during Shrimper Week and local area cruises and races.

- **The Group MMSI allocated to the Shrimper Owners Association is 023200003**

However, unfortunately there is a catch. In order to use the DSC element of the new radio equipment, you must be the holder of the new Short Range VHF Certificate, which has replaced the old VHF (Restricted) Certificate. For those who already hold the old certificate it will mean either attending a half day assessed conversion course, or reading up on the subject and taking a conversion examination.

For more information you might wish to obtain a copy of RYA booklet G22 ***RYA VHF Radio (inc GMDSS)***. This provides essential background reading for anyone taking a VHF radio course. It covers all radio procedures from routine calls to urgency and distress and includes an explanation of the new GMDSS (Global Maritime Distress and Safety System) requirements. Anyone embarking on an RYA VHF/SRC exam should also consider RYA Booklet G26 ***RYA VHF RADIO SRC ASSESSMENTS***. This booklet lists the SRC (Short Range Certificate) syllabus, includes practice questions, extracts from the Maritime Guidance Notes on guidance on the use of VHF at sea and dangers in the use of VHF radio in collision avoidance.

Advice is also available from the RYA Training Department on 02380 604181.