

electronics

Playing *on the* Radio

By Bill Howard

About a month ago, while driving home to the beautiful hamlet of Pasadena, Maryland, traffic came to a standstill. Apparently, and unbeknownst to the hundreds of drivers affected, a large truck hauling a trailer with digging equipment hit three bridges in a row on Route 100 – leaving significant dents in the thick steel of the overpasses. Understandably, Police shut down the road so the bridges could be checked. Well what does that have to do with boating?

The connection is this: everyone caught in traffic tried to use their cell-phone, only to find that service was degraded because of overloading. What this means to me, is that one little incident, in one little part of the state pretty much shut down the major form of communication most of us rely on. The message is that our reliance on one form of communication may leave us with no communications when we need it.

Every weekend for the past month without fail, I hear kids playing on the marine VHF radio. Channel 16, 13 etc., they are everywhere – typically with some giggling sidekicks in the background. Most often if there is no response they will tire and move on to other more exciting things. In a couple of instances, I've heard people respond to them, who have "scary" voices (like the Captain of the Tug Boat Shannon Dan) who have moved the thrill-seekers right off the channel. This coupled with the epidemic of "open mics" and less than sober troublemakers makes it very difficult for responsible mariners to communicate effectively. I am thankful the Coast Guard keeps a watchful eye on channel 16 so that we can communicate at all on busy weekends. So here are some tips that I've compiled, that seem to help:

1. Never ask for or respond to a

"radio check" on channel 16. Never. I usually keep a second radio on channel 68 just for the occasional radio check. Channel 9 is also a good choice.

2. If you hear someone calling a bridge tender on channel 16, tell them to try channel 13.

3. Same for Annapolis, tell them the Harbormaster is on channel 17, and the inner harbor harbormaster is on channel 68.

4. You're first act after establishing communication on channel 16 is to "switch and listen to Channel 68" or some other recreational boat channel or some other system.

5. If you hear someone calling for assistance on channel 16, and the Coast Guard does not respond, relay the message, such as: "Coast Guard Sector Baltimore this is _____ relaying an urgent request from the _____ on Channel one six." Fill in the blanks and relay the message.

So what's the backup plan? If you are out of cell-phone range or an outage is occurring, and the marine VHF band is congested, what can you do? Four backup radio systems come to mind, that unlike marine VHF, they are also legal to use on land: Citizens Band (CB) radio, the Family Radio Service (FRS), the General Mobile Radio Service (GMRS), and Amateur Radio. Speaking of congestion, anyone who has used CB radio knows congestion — but CB radio and FRS remain unlicensed backup services that can be used when needed. FRS radios can be found in most marine supply houses in those plastic blister packs of two radios. They are little hand-held UHF radios with permanently fixed antennas that have a bunch of channels, call tones, privacy codes, no license requirement, etc. This is just what you need to keep the little ones off the marine radio and possibly for use as a backup for the family when needed. Some

communities have started using FRS Channel 1 as a means of sharing information quickly, and that's not a bad idea. GMRS and Amateur Radio require FCC licenses, but for those interested they offer excellent alternative communications.

For \$85 I purchased a GMRS license from the friendly people at the Federal Communications Commission (www.fcc.gov). With this license I joined the 80 thousand or so fellow licensees who use the 5 million or so GMRS radios that have been sold. GMRS is a UHF radio service for family communication that has a few advantages over FRS. For example, the FRS radios have those permanently fixed antennas, while GMRS can use external (read better) antennas and GMRS can also use higher power than FRS for a bit better range.

While Wil and I were trying out the new Tiki bar at the Hard Yacht Café last weekend, I noticed that Art Cox had a neat little handheld radio dangling by his barbecue pit. It is a combination marine VHF radio and



GMRS radio! Made by Cobra, this little thing is the perfect combination. It has all the features of marine VHF, including a "play-it-again" instant replay capability, NOAA weather with Specific Area Message Encoding (SAME) and as an extra added bonus — GMRS. Wil and I decided this is going to be our marine VHF handheld and our GMRS backup radio, all in one.

The radios arrived and we have been delighted. They have all the features that a gadget freak like me enjoys, and ease of use so that Wil can use it without having to pull out the manual. Having a backup is always a good idea. I think that's why Art has two bars. ⚓

Bill Howard is a retired Naval Officer. He and his wife Wilma live in Pasadena and keep their boat in Rock Creek (www.carver33.com). They enjoy cruising on the Chesapeake Bay just to make sure the dockside bars don't run out of their favorite drinks. Bill can be reached at bh@carver33.com.