

VHF Radios - Join the VHF “Speed Dial” Set

Most of us have boats equipped with VHF radios. And, as safe boaters, we monitor channel 16 when underway. However, once in an anchorage or marina, we are faced with the unpleasant choice of listening to the noise on one of the working channels we monitor or being unavailable if a fellow boater wants to call us on VHF. Wouldn't it be nice to be able to call a specific boater on VHF, much as we do on the phone, without either of us having to listen to the background chatter on a marine VHF channel? Believe it or not, that capability is here now!

All marine VHF radios type-accepted after 2000 now have DSC, or Digital Selective Calling. When you purchase a DSC-VHF radio, the first thing you must do is obtain, and program into the radio, a 9-digit “MMSI”, or Maritime Mobile Service Identity code. If you have an FCC ship's radio license, this number is assigned as part of the license. If you are in the vast majority that is exempt from the FCC license, this number can be obtained free-of-charge from Boat/US at their website.

Once programmed, every DSC-capable VHF also has a feature enabling it to call a specific other boat digitally. The only thing needed is to know the MMSI of the other boat. It works like this: The MMSI's and names of your friends' boats are programmed into your radio's call list, much like the speed-dial list on your cell phone. To call another boat, you select a working channel like 72. Then, you scroll down the list to a particular boat and call it, according to the instructions for your particular radio. A digital call is sent out automatically on channel 70, targeted to that specific MMSI.

On the other boat, the VHF radio can have the volume turned all the way down and be tuned to any channel. When the digital call comes in, an alert tone sounds and the other boater's radio automatically switches to the working channel you selected. The other boater need only turn up the volume and answer. Note that the conversation takes place on the selected working channel, NOT channel 70, which is reserved for the digital calling information.

The advent of DSC and “speed dial” VHF calling makes it advantageous to know the MMSI's of your fellow boaters. Therefore, starting in the immediate future, we will be adding your MMSI to the information we collect and publish in our Pamlico Sail and Power Squadron Membership Roster. As this listing progresses, all of our members will soon be able to join the VHF “speed dial” set.

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