OVER AND OUT

TAKING THE VHF COURSE

As technology has changed, so has the one course that almost every single boater has embarked upon. **Adrian Porter** decided to take on the latest VHF course.

A radio really can be your one and only lifeline to the shore. You can argue until your blue in the face that your phone is adequate, but with coverage only going so far off coast and batteries only lasting so long, the chances are, if you get into trouble, your best chance of survival will be the ability to make a radio call. Doing your VHF course will not only give you the ability and confidence to use your radio, but will also teach you about AIS, DSC, EPIRBs and SARTs, thanks to the course evolving along with the latest technology. I travelled down to Powerboat Training UK in Poole to take today's version of the course.

RULE ONE: DON'T BE PERFECT

"The first thing you need to realise" said instructor Paul Glatzel, "you will not get everything right. So relax, you're not going to be perfect" were our instructors words at the start of the course. This is as true as it is reassuring. There is also an awful lot of 'VHF etiquette' to remember whenever making a radio call, whether it be to a marina or making the dreaded Mayday call. But as long as you follow the rules as best as you can and remember, at all times, to exercise 'brevity, clarity and discipline', you'll be able to communicate the vital information in a succinct fashion, which is exactly what this course teaches.

VHF ELEMENTS

The VHF course will impart on you a wealth of knowledge and several skills, most of which we simply cannot fit into this article. This includes explanation of basic terms, what all the buttons on the radio actually do, the different channels to use, batteries, the capture effect and so on. In this piece I have selected a few aspects to focus on, the first is 'gain' and our love of raked antennas.

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GAIN

If you've got a RIB or a flash sports boat, or perhaps you're a Miami Vice aficionado, you may have chosen to place your radio antenna to a raked angle, because, well, it looks sort of cool. But by doing this you may be shooting yourself in the foot. Antenna 'gain' is the measure of how much of the energy is directed sideways. A very low (or no) gain antenna would emit energy in all directions, including above and below the boat, limiting how much energy is radiated sideways. The sort of vessel likely to use such antennae would be sailing yachts, who spend time keeled over on a tack. But us motor people have a love of staying upright and as such our antennas tend to be high gain, shooting the energy out in near straight lines for more reach. The problem is, when your antenna is angled, you could be shooting half your signal into the water and the other half high into the sky, which is sort of useless.

SEMI-DUPLEX

We also went into the complexities of simplex, duplex and semi-duplex transmissions. Lots of leisure craft have semi-duplex radios that will use one antenna, which will switch frequencies within a channel depending on whether it is receiving or transmitting. The importance of this? If another boat with a semi-duplex radio is communicating with, for example, a marina, you'll only be able to hear the marina's side of the conversation – but nothing from the other boat. This means unless you listen first, you may interrupt a conversation, so always bear it in mind. How did our teacher drum this in? With tin cans on string of course.

TWO TOP TIPS

- *Over and Out is an invention for TV, it is either over' or 'out', never both.*
- *When picking a boat name, it's worth thinking how well the name of that boat will transmit over radio. (calling your boat 'Hello', may be your downfall)*

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DSC

Digital Selective Calling has been the most important change to VHF in years. It allows you to send data digitally, and if you know the unique MMSI (Maritime Mobile Service Identity - think of it like a telephone number) of another DSC radio, you can call it without disturbing anyone else. You can also integrate GPS into some DSC radios which is a major advantage as in an emergency, pressing the DSC Distress button will automatically send your precise location out to anyone who receives the signal, letting them know where you are, vastly aiding rescuing craft. The course covered the different types of EPIRBs, SARTs, AIS and PLBs, showing the benefits of each.

THE MAYDAY CALL

Just before taking the compulsory exam, it was time to make a few radio calls. Using the special sets provided, which did not transmit outside of the classroom, we went through several scripted mayday calls. We then had to make our own non-scripted mayday call, where the 'Coastguard' (instructor) threw some questions in to make us think on the spot. Simply put, this was not only the most enjoyable part of the course, but the most useful – practicing your radio speak is incredibly important for when you actually have to use it.

THE FINAL WORD

Radio theory and practice is, lets face it, not the most exciting of subjects. But when you are blessed with a good instructor who can a) teach effectively and b) keep you awake, you end up enjoying the course more than you think. The radio really is an essential piece of kit and we recommend you own one – even if you see it as just a backup – and it is just as essential you know how to use it. This one-day course really is fundamentally crucial.

www.powerboat-training-uk.co.uk
www.rya.org.uk ■

My fellow students reflected the diversity of the people taking the course.

TAM BYRNE, 27

FROM: *Manchester*
REASON: *Looking to work on Superyachts*

TREVOR PICKARD, 58

BOAT: *Apache, Offshore racing powerboat*
REASON FOR DOING COURSE: *Needs VHF qualification now partner has changed boats.*

DAVID LEE, 47

BOAT: *17' Fletcher*
REASON FOR DOING COURSE: *"when my boat broke down, it was a wake up call to have the right equipment and lingo"*