

GMDSS TASK FORCE INFORMATION BULLETIN

USE OF GMDSS EQUIPMENT FOR NON-SAFETY COMMUNICATIONS

The Problem

It has come to the attention of the Task Force that the Masters of some ships equipped for the Global Maritime Distress and Safety System (GMDSS) have instructed watch standers not to use GMDSS radio transmitting equipment except for Distress and Safety communications. This is contrary to the philosophy adopted by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) while formulating GMDSS principles. The purpose of this Information Bulletin is to remind Masters and others that GMDSS operators can and should use the GMDSS equipment suite for routine, non-safety ship's communications.

GMDSS Functional Requirements

GMDSS was designed to carry out nine separate functional requirements identified by the IMO as listed below. A properly chosen suite of GMDSS equipment can comply with all safety and distress requirements and also meet the ship's needs for routine operational and business communications. The GMDSS functional requirements dictate that ships at sea be capable of:

1. Transmitting ship-to-shore distress alerts by at least two separate and independent means, each using a different radiocommunication service;
2. Receiving shore-to-ship distress alerts;
3. Transmitting and receiving ship-to-ship distress alerts;
4. Transmitting and receiving search and rescue coordinating instructions;
5. Transmitting and receiving on-scene communications;
6. Transmitting and receiving signals for locating;
7. Transmitting and receiving marine safety information;
8. Transmitting and receiving general radiocommunications to and from shore-based radio systems or networks; and
9. Transmitting and receiving bridge-to-bridge communications.

Regular Use of GMDSS Equipment Assures Operator Competence

When operators use the GMDSS equipment on a regular basis, they develop familiarity with its operation in order to maintain proficiency. Competence becomes especially important when distress and safety communications are required. Cumulative operator experience through regular use of GMDSS equipment will also help to reduce false alerts, which have often been transmitted inadvertently by inexperienced operators. Moreover, all compulsory GMDSS equipment (other than Survival Craft Equipment (SCE) must be demonstrated functional on a daily basis. The GMDSS radio station log must contain: "A daily statement about the condition of the required radiotelephone equipment, as determined by either normal communication or test communication."

Regular Use of GMDSS Equipment Assures Availability

One of the principal reasons for making GMDSS equipment available for routine ship's business communications is to assure that the equipment is maintained in proper working order. There are relatively few occasions for a ship to utilize GMDSS transmitting equipment for safety and distress purposes and regular use for routine communications helps to ensure that it will be in proper working order when needed. This applies to Digital Selective Calling (DSC) on VHF, MF, and HF systems and to the Inmarsat C, Mini-C, Inmarsat FBB and (for the rest of 2020) Fleet 77 systems.

Beginning in 2020, the Iridium System is also certified for GMDSS Service using new Ship Earth Stations approved for GMDSS. Participation in the NOAA/Coast Guard free reporting services for weather observations and AMVER reports via Inmarsat-C is an excellent way to ensure proper operation of that system.

Duplicated Equipment Provided as a Maintenance Option

A ship operating on the high seas may elect "duplicated" equipment as one of the two required means of maintaining GMDSS equipment (the others being shore based maintenance and use of an on-board maintainer). The "duplicated" equipment concept requires an additional VHF-DSC transceiver and an additional long-range system such as HF-DSC-NBDP or one of the satellite systems (Inmarsat or Iridium). Duplicated equipment must be installed with its own dedicated antenna system and ready for use. This duplicated equipment should also be exercised daily for ship's normal communications or test calls to assure that it is in proper working order.

Testing of GMDSS Equipment on Ships Having Other Systems

Many ships with a high volume of business communications carry alternative voluntary systems in order to meet these specialized needs in the most efficient and cost effective manner. While these special systems effectively meet business needs and in some cases can even be used to transmit distress alerts, use of the GMDSS systems is the preferred method for reliable and timely alerting of the rescue network and is essential for interaction with other GMDSS ships. It is therefore recommended that these ships arrange to transmit selected regular messages or test messages via the GMDSS systems for operator training and to assure equipment availability. Use of the equipment in live 'on-air' transmissions is considered preferable as a more complete indication of proper operation of the entire system – rather than just 'internal diagnostic tests.'

The GMDSS Task Force

This Information Bulletin was approved on 14 October 1997 and updated on, 14 May 2020 by the GMDSS Task Force, a U.S. Coast Guard sponsored group established to coordinate problems, recommend their resolution, and disseminate GMDSS information.