

MISUSE OF VHF

CHIRP and MARS regularly record instances of VHF abuse in some shape or form – between them there are over 100 reports in our records. The misuse of VHF communications is well known. The problems and issues include:

- VHF assisted collision.
- Jamming the airwaves with chatter and even music!
- Requirement to monitor more VHF channels than it is physically possible to do, creating:
 - Distraction.
 - Overflow of information.
 - Noise pollution.
- Language barriers or problems with fluency.
- Inadequate communications protocols.

Of course, it is not unusual to encounter a combination of all the above, rendering the VHF virtually useless and sometimes resulting in the lowering of the radio volume control in order to eradicate distraction! There are times when several channels have to be simultaneously monitored, but there may not be enough available VHF sets, and often the various stations transmit at different power levels resulting in the irritating receipt of signals of varying strengths.

In heavy traffic with multiple developing situations, such as when transiting the Singapore Straits, the monitoring of VTS stations and pilot frequencies, as well as listening out for close quarter traffic and navigation warnings are a priority. A vital communication can be hidden in the melee of multiple continuous VHF noise, received at different audible levels as a confused incomprehensible babble.

Within the wider context of keeping a safe navigational watch, which involves monitoring radar and ECDIS alarms, internal vessel alarms, and constant situational awareness inducing mental fatigue and anxiety, it is not surprising that incidents occur and the misuse of VHF is found to have played its part.

So what actions need to be taken to stop this abuse of VHF?

Government authorities, ship managers, captains and bridge OOWs need to comply with IMO recommendations. Primarily the responsibility lies with the individual and the onboard line management, who could be assisted by placing more emphasis during training at maritime academies on the use of VHF in relation to the International Regulations for the Prevention of Collision at Sea 1972, as amended (COLREGS).

Proper Use of VHF Channels at Sea

IMO Assembly Resolution A.954 (23)

01.02 Listening

Listen before commencing to transmit to make certain that the channel is not already in use. This will avoid unnecessary and irritating interference.

01.03 Discipline

VHF equipment should be used correctly and in accordance with the Radio Regulations. The following in particular should be avoided:

- .1 Calling on channel 16 for purposes other than distress, urgency and very brief safety communications when another channel is available;
- .2 Communications not related to safety and navigation on port operation channels;
- .3 Non-essential transmissions, e.g. needless and superfluous signals and correspondence;
- .4 Transmitting without correct identification;
- .5 Occupation of one particular channel under poor conditions;
- .6 Use of offensive language.

01.08 Communications with other ships

1.8.1 VHF channel 13 is designated by the Radio Regulations for bridge-to-bridge communications. The ship called may indicate another working channel on which further transmissions should take place. The calling ship should acknowledge acceptance before changing channels.

1.8.2 The listening procedure outlined in paragraph 01.02 should be followed before communications are commenced on the chosen channel.

[IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases](#)

IMO Assembly Resolution A.918 (22)

The IMO SMCP includes phrases that have been developed to cover the most important safety-related areas of verbal shore-to-ship (and vice-versa), ship-to-ship and on-board communications. The aim is to get around the problem of language barriers at sea and avoid misunderstandings which can cause accidents. However, the Resolution states the phrases are not intended to supplant or contradict COLREGS. In fact, there is no mention or guidance on standard marine communication phrases for avoiding collisions, so do not use the VHF for this purpose.

The use of VHF radio for collision avoidance is against standard industry best practice and advice. Also be aware that, despite English being the recognised marine language, it may not be the first, second or even the third language of your listener. In the event a call is made and acknowledged, the policy onboard should require the listener to repeat what they have heard and for the speaker to then acknowledge that what the listener has just repeated was correct. This is generally referred to as 'Closed Loop Communication'.

For collision avoidance, it is better to make an early adjustment of course or speed than to spend too much time using VHF or AIS to help make an assessment. Confirm how much sea room you have. There is no need to be the stand on vessel from long range if you can take early action. Conversely, don't leave it too late. You can take action by altering course and/or making engine movements.

If you are the stand on vessel and there is a lack of clear collision avoidance by the give way vessel, which is making you uncomfortable about the potential risk of collision, then do something! The COLREGS provide all the freedom you need.