International Boat Watch Net Locates Pleasure Vessels at Sea

By Mike Pilgrim, K5MP
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Yachtsmen who cruise the world's oceans for pleasure communicate primarily by HF radio. Of the many maritime mobile nets, only a small number are Amateur Radio nets. Nevertheless there is a volunteer service that employs Amateur Radio to assist the offshore sailor, ham or non-ham.

Mike Pilgrim, K5MP.

Three years ago while acting as net control operator on the Maritime Mobile Service Net I realized there was need for a wide-scale communication network to locate vessels at sea and communicate emergency and high priority messages to them. I developed a worldwide network of a dozen Amateur Radio networks associated with maritime mobiles. The net also includes:

· Non-ham groups that operate daily nets on Marine SSB HF frequencies.

· Multiple land-based individuals throughout the Caribbean, Central America, and the South Pacific.

· Approximately 2000 mariners around the world connected into the *WinLink 2000* global network.

The ground rules are that we deal only with messages of family emergency and occasions in which a vessel is reported as lost or severely overdue at a destination.

When notified of the need to locate a mariner, I send the details via e-mail to those members of my boat-watch net, requesting that I be notified once the message has been delivered. Upon receiving that reply, I close the incident and notify all participants.

I'm thrilled by the success rate of this linkage of members around the globe. Our record for 2001 shows that we successfully located and contacted all 38 vessels brought to our attention. Of this number, only two were equipped with Amateur Radio gear. In other words, we are not focused solely on locating ham radio mariners--we are maximizing the efforts of all these communication linkages.

Here are a few examples to demonstrate how well the net operates:

· May 31: Family members in Washington state desperately needed to contact a family member aboard a cruising sail boat last heard from near Mexico. Within 24 hours our friends on the Caribbean side of Central America notified me--through a 40-meter net--that the vessel was in a marina in El Salvador. Although the originator of the message was not immediately available, we were able to send a message to the family in Washington giving the crew's hotel address, room and telephone number.

· August 21: One of our members in the UK relayed a message to me that had originated in Gibraltar. The message concerned a vessel believed to be someplace between Bora Bora and Tonga. We distributed the message to our Pacific organization. Eighteen hours later the Pacific Seafarer's Net reported that the message had been passed to the vessel.

· August 25: A Pacific net member initiated a message to the S/V *C-Elise* that was somewhere off the coast of Venezuela. Within 24 hours of the initial request our Caribbean friends located the vessel in Margarita, Venezuela and delivered the message.

· In another incident a worried family had not heard from their son, his wife and two youngsters who were on a sailboat someplace between Panama and the Marquesas Islands in the south Pacific. Within 4 hours of being notified we had located the vessel at anchor near a remote island in the Marquises. This, too, was a vessel with no Amateur Radio capabilities.

Passing the baton: Retiring HWN Manager Jerry Herman, N3BDW (right), and incoming manager Mike Pilgrim, K5MP, at the National Hurricane Conference in Orlando.

We have located and/or contacted more than 100 vessels around the world. I recently created and activated a Web site--International Boat Watch--to inform people of our service and procedures. We provide a list of all known maritime radio frequencies around the globe--including ham and non-ham nets. Float plans can also be posted using the Incident Reporting Form on that Web site.

For those of you who have an urgent need to contact a private vessel at sea--anywhere on earth--send your message to the author. Include in your message as much descriptive information as possible on the vessel and its itinerary, and the name, phone number and e-mail address of requesting party.

Mike Pilgrim, K5MP, of Boca Raton, Florida, is the new manager of the Hurricane Watch Net. Pilgrim, who has been the net's second-in-command, takes over from Jerry Herman, N3BDW, of Bowie, Maryland. A long-time ARRL member and net control station for the Maritime Mobile Service Net, Pilgrim has been licensed since 1957. He retired from IBM in 1998 after 33 years. He can be reached at k5mp@arrl.net.