

Coast Guard Asks Companies to Discontinue Cellular *CG Phone Number

By Kathryn Manzi



In an effort to improve Search and Rescue Response the Coast Guard has requested all wireless providers in states other than Alaska to remove the specialized keying sequence, *CG, used to reach the Coast Guard for maritime emergency assistance.

The *CG feature was introduced by some cellular communications companies in the early 1990's, but never developed into a nationwide service. As wireless providers moved to digital systems, some didn't migrate *CG to the new system and others even lost track of whether or not they were continuing the feature. This patchwork of service is confusing for the mariners who choose to use it, and may, in fact, prevent them from making a timely call for assistance should they find themselves in an area where *CG is not available.

The Coast Guard has found through research and experience, that with the multitude of wireless systems and the misalignment of cellular coverage areas with our regions for Search and Rescue response, the use of this specialized service has resulted in misdirection of emergency calls. This has often added significant delays in the Coast Guard response to those calls for assistance.

The Coast Guard has requested that the cellular companies reroute all *CG calls to the 911 Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP) nearest to where the call originated. As an added precaution, mariners should stop using the special keying sequence *CG and begin using 911 on their cell phones to notify authorities of a distress at the onset of a maritime emergency if a cell phone is their only means of communication.

The one exception to the discontinuance of the *CG specialized keying sequence is the Alaskan cellular phone region. Cell phone companies operating in Alaska all have the *CG feature available, and because the Coast Guard has a single number for routing those emergency calls, the cellular and Coast Guard regions are fully aligned; calls are not missed and cannot be misdirected. The *CG feature will remain active in Alaskan waters.

Mariners are encouraged to invest in a VHF-FM radio as their primary means of distress alerting on the water. Communication via VHF-FM radio provides superior alerting capabilities over cellular phones.

All maritime boaters should have a VHF-FM radio onboard their vessel to assure any calls of distress are heard immediately. Cell phones should only be used as a secondary means of communication. If the cell phone is the only means of communication available then remember, as with any land based emergency, the number to call rescue personnel is 9-1-1. *CG is no longer available. Have a fun and safe boating season.

VHF-FM Radio:

Superior Service in an Emergency

When a MAYDAY is sent out via VHF-FM radio it is a broadcast, not



just one party is receiving the distress call; any nearby boaters can hear the distress call and offer immediate assistance. Cellular phones are point to point; other boaters in the area can not hear the call and consequently will not be able to respond.

With the Coast Guard's Rescue 21 system improvements to the National Distress and Response System (which is monitored by Coast Guard Sector communications centers) any call, distress or otherwise, placed over a VHF-FM radio will have an associated line of bearing (LOB). This LOB significantly narrows the area in which Coast Guard or other responders must look to find the boater making the call. In many locations two or more LOB's will be associated with a call; the intersection of those LOB's will provide the position of the caller. A cell phone doesn't do this. If the distressed caller does not know his location, it is difficult and time consuming to determine a position through the wireless companies. This is often aggravated by low batteries and poor reception.

VHF-FM radios are manufactured today with Digital Selective Calling (DSC). This feature provides the mariner with an emergency feature that will send a distress with the vessel's information and Global Positioning System (GPS) location at the press of a button. It is important to note that the DSC radio must be properly registered with a Maritime Mobile Service Identification (MMSI) number through Boat U.S., and the radio must be properly interfaced with the GPS in order to send an accurate position to assist emergency responders to respond to the distress.