

Distress Calls

On-Air Training
Idaho Falls Bishops' Storehouse
2015-10-07

Welcome to the training. Our preambles promise valuable information during this portion of the net. I hope you find beneficial.

We are in the Southeast Idaho season where we are moving from summer to fall and then quickly to winter. Now would be a good time to check antennas and feedlines. A winter storm can wreak havoc on an antenna system. Make sure antennas are securely mounted, guy lines are taut and secure, and feedlines are in good connection and outside connections are weather proofed. 20 below temperatures with negative 40 degree wind-chills is not the time you want to be outside repairing your equipment.

Yesterday I drove from McKenna Washington, which is about 60 miles south of Seattle through Spokane, Missoula and then south along I-15 through Hamer. There were many stretches of highway where no cars could be seen, just desert wastelands, and no cell service—particularly in Western Washington and Montana. Gratefully, I had a two meter radio at my side tuned to 146.520 MHz and my GoKit with an HF antenna in the back. My trip was very uneventful and gratefully I did not need either one. However, I found myself thinking through some what-if scenarios. What would I do if the car broke down right now? What if that swerving semi sideswiped that passing sedan? What would I say on the radio? What if no one responded?

I want to talk tonight about distress calls. Throughout the course of the training, you may hear terms that should only be used during an actual emergency. I will periodically state “this is a training exercise” to inform those listening, both licensed and otherwise, that this is NOT an actual emergency.

Put yourself in a situation where you CAN offer assistance. When practical, scan local frequencies and repeaters, but particularly 146.52 MHz simplex, the national two meter calling frequency. If you have a dual band radio, you might also monitor 446.00 MHz simplex, the national 70 centimeter calling frequency.

When you are in a conversation on the radio, make sure to leave a couple of seconds between when the other operator stops transmitting and when you key the mic. That gives an opportunity for a third operator to “break” into the conversation. When using a repeater, listen for the courtesy tone and then wait a couple of seconds before transmitting. In that couple second space, listen listen listen for stations attempting to break in. Especially if you are operating simplex; stations may be weak.

Always acknowledge a breaking station immediately. Allow the station an opportunity to report emergencies or ask for directions or other assistance. This is particularly important during commuting periods and periods of bad weather when the need for emergency assistance calls are most likely.

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When receiving a distress call, acknowledge the calling station. Receive the location of the emergency and the nature of the needed assistance. Relay the information as accurately as possible to proper authorities by whatever means you have at your disposal. That may mean relaying the information from

a simplex call to a repeater, or using your cell phone or land line. If at all possible, you should remain on the frequency on which you received the call. If you are mobile, you should stop your vehicle in a safe location. A change in your position may result in losing contact with the operator in distress.

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If you are the one in distress, here are some guidelines for making a distress call. Start with a good frequency. If you can, use a local repeater or a national calling frequency, such as 146.520 MHz. If a conversation is already in progress, wait for a break and then key your mic and say “emergency” followed by your call sign. If the stations are following good operator practices (as outlined above) one of them should acknowledge you immediately. State again, “This is an emergency...” followed by your call sign. Transmit your location and the nature of the emergency. Describe the type of assistance you need—police, medical, fire, etc.

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It is important to remain calm. Speak clearly and distinctly. Although the receiving operator may be writing information down, you do not have to speak as slow as you would when sending a formal message, such as an ICS-213. However, speaking a little slower will help you to be understood.

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If you are not breaking in to the middle of an on-going conversation, but tune to a frequency, repeater or simplex, and hear no transmissions, key your microphone and say, “Mayday Mayday Mayday” followed by your call sign and the frequency you are transmitting on. Remember, other operators may be “scanning” and may not “see” the frequency you transmitted on. If you were using Morse code, send S-O-S three times followed by your call sign.

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If someone does not respond immediately, send the mayday again, your call sign, and then state your location, the nature of the emergency and describe the type of assistance you need. It is possible, depending on the circumstances, propagation, your location or any number of other factors, that you are transmitting just fine but are not receiving transmissions coming back to you. To be safe, repeat this whole transmission a couple of times, before trying a different frequency.

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At this point some of you may be running through a plethora of scenarios in your mind, wondering what qualifies as an emergency.

Part 97, section 403 states “No provision of these rules prevents the use by an amateur station of any means of radio communication at its disposal to provide essential communication needs in connection with the immediate safety of human life and immediate protection of property when normal communication systems are not available.”

Furthermore, section 405 states “(a) No provision of these rules prevents the use by an amateur station in distress of any means at its disposal to attract attention, make known its condition and location, and obtain assistance...[or] (b) to assist a station in distress.”

In other words, when normal communication systems are not available, you may use whatever frequency, verbiage, mode, radio, whatever at your disposal to attract attention to your situation or provide assistance. The condition of this exception to the rest of part 97 is “the immediate safety of human life or the immediate protection of property.”

Are there any comments or questions from the net? Please come now with your call sign, preferably phonetically.

This concludes tonight’s training. Thank you for your attentiveness and participation. This is N7TMS, back to net control.