

Telstra's New "Out Of Sight" Mobile Satellite Phone System



Special report by F&B Editor, Peter Webster

For the recreational boatowner, the Howard Government's worrying decision to close Australia's national network of professionally operated 24/7 HF radio bases has created a very large gap in coastal communications – and the pun is intended. However, just when we thought we had to start training our own pigeons, Telstra looks like it has come through with a genuine, 24/7, all-weather alternative.

Most boat owners (and especially regular gamefishermen and cruising people) believe the Federal Government simply walked away from its moral and legal obligations to provide all boat owners with a 24/7 marine radio coverage around the 12,000 km Australian coastline, when it finally closed down the Coastal Radio Service last year.

Located at all of the major capital cities and most of the commercial shipping ports, the long serving, professionally operated radio network formed the backbone of Australia's largely privately funded search and rescue (SAR) movement.

Many solutions have been tried and found wanting, but the new Telstra satellite portable telephone system looks to be capable of providing the badly needed, if different, solution to a serious communication issue.

Background When the Federal Government decided to shut down the HF radio network around Australia, they effectively nobbled the Australian search and rescue movement across Australia almost overnight.

The decision to close the HF (high frequency) network has been the subject of huge controversy and debate, especially in Australia's more outlying regions - and not just in the north, either.

Anywhere in Australia, where the distance 'back to base' from a boat offshore, is more than 30 or 40 miles, the need for HF radio is immediately apparent.

There is probably no group of people more affected by the Government's decision to close full time 24/7 radio bases than Australia's growing fleet of long range coastal fishermen and in a similar vein, Australia's fleet of coastal cruising yachts, powerboats and the big game fishing fleet.

Whilst the SAR organisations such as the Australian Volunteer Coastguard, (AVCG) Volunteer Marine Rescue (VMR) Royal Volunteer Coastal Patrol (RVCP) valiantly struggle on under 'normal' circumstances, they have now been 'volunteered' to carry the responsibility for the bulk of radio communications with recreational boats right around Australia.

Without exception, they are willing to shoulder that responsibility – but they haven't been given the cash resources nor the communication tools (base to base co-ax, computer switching systems, etc) to do the job effectively.

This is not what the Government promised in this very magazine, several years ago. Then, the theory was expounded that the Government would create a network of government funded VHF stations right around the country with repeaters and aerials located so that 99% of Australia's 750,000 recreational boat owners would receive effective coverage and backup when they travelled offshore to all but the most remote

locations.

This has not been the case – very few of the SAR organisations have received any additional resources; few have received any additional equipment and all are struggling to cope with the new communication nightmare – the use of 'mum and dad' mobile phones in offshore and inshore distress situations

Cell Phone Problems Obviously, 99.9% of Australian boatowners did not have HF-SSB radios fitted to their craft – and thus the Government has been able to argue that in fact, the "service" remains pretty much the same as it was. According to the government (both Federal and State) because those same 750,000 recreational boatowners are still working with their 27 MHz radios and VHF radios as always, there isn't a problem.

Would it be that simple! If all the boatowners had purchased a VHF radio it is true there wouldn't be too many problems around most of the capital cities. However, not only did most small craft owners refuse to buy a VHF radio, most now believe they are better served with their mobile phone.

"Why buy a VHF radio," they argue, "when I can dial home on my mobile phone, and let either my wife, my family, the local SAR group or the police (etc) know that I've got a problem?"

"Why do I need a radio at all – especially when most of the time you can't use the radio where I live, or it cuts out in the blind spot up the coast under the cliff which is my favourite fishing spot!"

Armed with this apparently sound logic, Australia's burgeoning small craft community are now increasingly going to sea equipped with just their mobile phone and the rarely effective 27Mhz marine radio transceiver.

Range Problems In a sense, the Government has brought this problem upon itself. They've actually promoted the use of mobile phones as a useful tool for boating, and whilst they probably didn't think it through from a search and rescue viewpoint, the concept of using your mobile phone as a safety net, has received wide spread acceptance amongst the small craft community.

Sadly, there is a very serious downside to this practice.

One of the fundamental principles of search and rescue at sea relies upon the universal use of the three international recognised signals of distress. At the highest level, it begins with

"Mayday, Mayday, Mayday",

(I/We have an emergency; a life threatening situation . . .) then the second highest level

"Pan, Pan, Pan"

(I/We are in a potentially life threatening situation . . .) and

"Securitay, Securitay, Securitay . . ."

(I/We have identified a potentially life threatening situation that others need to know about . . .)

All coastal shipping, search and rescue base radio systems, countless recreational craft (etc) all maintain a listening watch on Channel 16 (VHF) or 27 MHz (88) usually in conjunction with the radio's dual watch facility.

The spine-chilling call "Mayday, Mayday, Mayday" . . . brings immediate attention from all craft in the area of the call. On several occasions over the years, we've picked up a Mayday call whilst fishing or cruising along the NSW South Coast.

Immediately, our craft was brought to a halt, everything was shut down so we could maximise the incoming distress call's audio quality, and every particle of our being was focussed on the radio transmitter.

We had to ensure (indeed, it is an internationally recognised legal obligation) that we were able to pick up the contents of the 'Mayday' call and make sure it was immediately acted upon (as it was) or relayed properly (*Mayday Relay, Mayday Relay, this is . . .*) to the appropriate authorities.

This is not unique to Australia – this is an international practice. There is no question that the use of the Mayday protocols has saved thousands of lives of seamen and women (and airmen/women) for as long as the protocol has existed since the early 1900's.

Similarly, radio base stations around Australia, be they manned by amateurs or professionals, are similarly attuned to listening out for the Mayday distress call.

In a situation when literally seconds can be the difference between a life being saved or lost, the receipt of the Mayday transmission is central to the world's search and rescue protocols.

This is why the authorities and the men and women 'on

the coalface' of search and rescue, are adamant that the ordinary mobile phone is virtually useless as a communication tool in offshore emergencies.

Most offshore emergency situations are dangerous enough without the victim having to try and explain to a Triple-O operator or your wife (whose number has been programmed into your mobile phone) that you are drifting helplessly at sea (*"about 10 miles south of the entrance to the Macleay River"*).

If you think about the next series of operational stages (*"Can you tell me the name of the nearest city or town . . ."*) you can understand why the authorities are adamant that mobile phones (as such) are not the answer (*"Hold the line, please . . ."*) and this is when the mobile phone is in range, and will work!

In countless locations around the Australian coastline, once the boat is 5 or 6 miles offshore, most mobile phones stop working altogether because you've moved out of the cell's range.

So the problem is compounded twice over: not only are small craft owners in trouble in terms of basic communication and raising a distress call with someone trained in maritime rescue ops, the reality is that in many cases, the phone call won't 'get out' or be heard, anyway.

