

# THE COXSWAIN SHACK

## *SURFACE OPS PATROL TIPS & TRICKS*

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# First Things First

By now, most SAR watchstanders know that the first two pieces of SAR data to get are: Position and Nature of Distress/Difficulty. "Position" should be obvious. We can't dispatch a SAR asset to a case without their location. Either a GPS latitude-longitude or a good verbal description will suffice; provided that the verbal description is definitive. "Under the bridge" won't work, since we have over a dozen bridges in the Bay and Delta areas. "Next to the red buoy" won't work either. You laugh, but in the stress of a genuine SAR case, reporting sources have supplied these exact descriptions!

Note also that while expecting a good description from a knowledgeable mariner is straightforward, not everyone reporting an incident on the radio knows what they're doing. Consider the not-infrequent situation where the experienced skipper falls overboard or keels over with a heart attack. Often the spouse or guest reporting the incident is inexperienced with operating the radio, let alone a GPS. You want to think twice before asking the reporting party to "switch the radio to channel 22A". Many will not be able to do it! They may end up on 22 international, or never leave 16! In that case you may have to take the critical SAR data over 16.

Even if they manage to get the radio successfully switched to channel 22A, they may have no clue how to read the GPS or even what or where it is. I once had surprisingly good success asking a panicky woman "Do you see a device at the helm that displays numbers like 37"? Without hesitation, she rattled off "Oh you mean these? 37° 51.2' North, 122° 25' West?" "Yes, those will do nicely!" Without knowing what a GPS was or how to work it, she succinctly read off their exact position, just off Angel Island's Point Blunt and we responded immediately.

Nature of Difficulty (or Distress) is second only to position in terms of importance. Showing up with extra fire extinguishers is of little value for a man overboard! That's why our watchstanders are

trained to ferret out the critical Position and Nature of Distress (NOD).

But there are two more pieces of information that SAR Controllers and Station Watchstanders are desperately waiting for. So let's shift our attention from radio watchstanders ashore, who are trained to doggedly pursue Position and NOD, and switch instead to the Coxswain of the first SRU to arrive on-scene. Those "managing a case" at the Sector, Group or Station are waiting for two essential pieces of SAR info:

1. SAR case managers consider it crucial to know when the first SRU (SAR unit) actually arrives on-scene. Not their ETA. Not when they have the distressed vessel in sight! But when they are actually on-scene. They want to learn how many people are in the water, how many are injured, what sort of assistance is required, etc. They know not to ask you for this info until you are actually on-scene.
2. The second question they want to ask you, for cases involving people in distress, is "are all personnel accounted for?" Especially for cases involving people in the water, and when multiple rescue units are on-scene, who may have recovered some people from the water, it is critical to establish if all people originally on the distressed boat have been recovered and are now accounted for. That phrasing is used because some may not be on your boat and some may be enroute to medical assistance ashore. But if a total of five were aboard the disabled boat originally, and three are on your boat, one on another SRU and the fifth remains unaccounted for, then more assistance must be dispatched.

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