



Maritime and Coastguard Agency

MGN 167 (M + F)

Dangers in the Use of VHF Radio in Collision Avoidance

Note to Ship owners, Masters, Skippers, Officers and Pilots of Merchant Ships, Yachts and Fishing Vessels

This note supersedes Marine Guidance Note MGN 27 (M+F)

Summary

- Although the use of VHF radio may be justified on occasion in collision avoidance, the provisions of the Collision Regulations should remain uppermost, as misunderstandings can arise even where the language of communication is not a problem.

1. There have been a significant number of collisions where subsequent investigation has found that at some stage before impact, one or both parties were using VHF radio in an attempt to avoid collision. The use of VHF radio in these circumstances is not always helpful and may even prove to be dangerous.
2. Uncertainties can arise over the identification of vessels and the interpretation of messages received. At night, in restricted visibility or when there are more than two vessels in the vicinity, the need for positive identification is essential but this can rarely be guaranteed. Even where positive identification has been achieved there is still the possibility of a misunderstanding due to language difficulties however fluent the parties concerned might be in the language being used. An imprecise or ambiguously expressed message could have serious consequences.
3. Valuable time can be wasted whilst mariners on vessels approaching each other try to make contact on VHF radio instead of complying with the Collision Regulations. There is the further danger that even if contact and identification is achieved and no difficulties over the language of communication or message content arise, a course of action might still be chosen that does not comply with the Collision Regulations. This may lead to the collision it was intended to prevent.
4. In 1995, the judge in a collision case said "It is very probable that the use of VHF radio for conversation between these ships was a contributory cause of this collision, if only because it distracted the officers on watch from paying careful attention to their radar. I must repeat, in the hope that it will achieve some publicity, what I have said on previous occasions, that any attempt to use VHF to agree the manner of passing is fraught with the danger of misunderstanding. Marine Superintendents would be well advised to prohibit such use of VHF radio and to instruct their officers to comply with the Collision Regulations."

5. Although the practice of using VHF radio as a collision avoidance aid may be resorted to on occasion, especially in pilotage waters, the risks described in this Note should be clearly understood and the Collision Regulations complied with.

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