

CELL PHONES

THE HIDDEN KILLER AT SEA

BY KEITH INGRAM

Cell phone use at sea has come under review by both the Transport Accident Investigation Commission and Maritime New Zealand because of a growing number of serious harm, or fatality accidents, attributable to cell phone use while underway at sea.

This developing trend is of concern especially when, for many boaties, cell phones remain the primary means of communication between the vessel and shore, not forgetting the growing trend by operators of recreational craft to use them to raise the alarm in an emergency.

Maritime New Zealand, in response to the most recent accident, issued safety bulletin No 20 in August, 2009. It was directed at all masters and skippers of commercial and pleasure vessels, ship operators and management. It's purpose was to alert the maritime community to the risks of masters and skippers using mobile phones, while in command of vessel navigation.

Now, do I hear the plaintive cry of 'what!' who came up with this stupid idea? And it could be said, yeah right! Bloody bureaucracy gone mad again. For most of the small boating community, cell phones are the primary communication tool when at sea. They are promoted and accepted by Maritime New Zealand as an important safety tool when they give away Maritime Safety branded plastic waterproof mobile phone bags.

Unfortunately, it's not the use of cell phones in an emergency that's the problem. The problem arises from a situation where a person might be having a long, deep and meaningful conversation that distracts him or her from maintaining a proper lookout when motoring at sea. Or worse still, when texting. In this situation, the potential to lose situational awareness is a very real risk and, more often than not, leads to a near miss, mishap or even an accident at sea.

On shore, we are all becoming very aware of the problems associated with cell phone use by voice or texting when driving a car. The same applies when driving a boat. The only difference being, if you survive the experience of an accident, you cannot just get out and walk for help.

So just what is the problem, and is it for real?

It's real alright. The most recent offender was the skipper of the small aluminium (under 6m) commercial craft *Shikari* which collided at high speed with the stationary, moored, 27m ex RNZN inshore patrol craft, *Flightless*, when the skipper became distracted by his cell phone. We won't mention that the vessel may have just travelled one nautical mile through a 200m, five knot mooring zone before the collision. Sadly two lives were lost and others on board suffered serious harm resulting in time in hospital and loss of income.

Quick Cat versus *Dr Hook* was another case resulting in loss of life. Here the distraction caused by mobile phone use was determined to be a contributing factor. The sad part in this was the tragic loss of lives and the high cost of months of recovery suffered by others from serious injuries. Other recent incidents include a recreational sailing catamaran colliding with a towed oil pollution barge and two recreational fishing craft colliding with terra-firma after both skippers became distracted by texts. Texting, or the reading of text messages while in command of

a vessel, has been identified as the most contributing factor to loss of situational awareness. This, and failing to maintain a proper lookout, is now seen as posing the greatest risks to small boat operators.

Maritime New Zealand advises all masters and skippers to note their responsibilities to ensure their vessel maintains a proper lookout at all times. They also note the skipper's responsibility to comply with the collision regulations and maritime safety rules at all times when operating a vessel. It is the master or skipper's responsibility to ensure that any safety risk associated with mobile phone use is appropriately identified and managed. In speaking with maritime safety officers they suggest that the rules are clear and that if you want to use a cell phone to either stop or hand over command of the vessel to a responsible person. Failure to do so, may result in the offender being prosecuted for breach of Rule Part 22 – Collision Prevention – under the Maritime Transport Act 1994, pertaining to masters' responsibilities. The penalties for which are quite substantial.

Essentially, the rules say that the operator of any vessel including a pleasure craft must maintain a proper lookout at all times when underway at sea, on our lakes or waterways. If the mobile phone rings, the person in charge of the boat has the responsibility to ensure that phone use does not compromise maintaining a lookout and the safe navigation of the vessel. If the call or text is for the person on the helm then either deal with it later, stop, or hand over command of the vessel to a responsible person.

Above all, think safety ... or you may die.

