Removing “Search” from Search and Rescue

Story by Lt. Cmdr. Rob Warren, Sector San Juan, Puerto Rico

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico -- The skies were clear, and the cool ocean breeze blew out of the east at 15 knots. The 47-foot sailing vessel *Morito’s* bow cut easily through the choppy 4-foot seas. It was Oct. 25, and the two American and three French mariners taking the voyage together had settled into the evening routine as night fell. The 15 percent illumination associated with the thin moon was now gone as the moon set. It would prove to be a dark night.

They were on the south side of the Islands of Turks and Caicos, well into their voyage from Fort Lauderdale, Fla., to Martinique. Perhaps there was nothing particularly special about the *Morito,* except for the fact that is was equipped with required safety gear and a Digital Select Calling (DSC) radio. The radio was programmed and linked to the *Morito*’s GPS, in the event calamity struck.

It was well into the night when the mariners’ worst nightmare was realized as the *Morito*’s hull slammed up against Mouchior Bank. The crew, sustaining only minor injuries, knew that *Morito* would not survive long as the seas pounded the hapless hull onto the rocky bank. In that remote place, 40 miles from the nearest inhabited island, *Morito*’s crew activated their DSC emergency distress alert.

Automatically, and virtually instantaneously, the radio responded -- transmitting the digital emergency distress signal with *Morito*’s GPS position and nature of distress -- continuously until it was received by the motor vessel *Seaboard Caribbean* and relayed to the United States Coast Guard. Moments later the vigilant watch standers at Coast Guard Sector San Juan’s Command Center acknowledged the distress signal and the rescue efforts began.

Lt. Brian Betz, search and rescue controller on watch that night at Sector San Juan and Petty Officer Homar Barrera, assistant controller, immediately set out to establish communications with the distressed vessel, known to be almost 300 nautical miles away. Using *Seaboard Caribbean* as a relay vessel, they verified the condition of the vessel and crew and quickly drew up options to affect the rescue.

The Global Maritime Distress Signaling System (GMDSS) had worked exactly as had been designed.

Due to *Morito*’s remote location and corresponding distance from all available surface rescue assets, an air rescue would have to be made. Working through District Seven Command Center in Miami at 3:55 a.m., a Coast Guard rescue helicopter crew from Air Station Clearwater, Fla., temporarily deployed to Great Inagua, Bahamas, launched to rescue the grounded survivors. The crew of the *Seaboard Caribbean* continued to relay information by shipboard e-mail until the Coast Guard helicopter was in radio range of *Morito*. At 5:38 a.m. the CG helicopter CG-6039 and its crew, commanded by Lt. Cmdr. Jen Arko, was on scene and hoisted all five people to safety while their 47-foot, French-flagged vessel broke apart on the rocks below.

Digital Selective Calling (DSC) is an International Maritime Organization-specified technology that communicates distress information over maritime radio to provide distress alert information to Rescue Coordination Centers. DSC distress calls may also be electronically relayed to the Coast Guard by any vessel that has a DSC compatible radio.

As with most Coast Guard rescues, there was not any one person, technology or decision that single-handedly made the rescue a success. The proactive CG response across hundreds of miles was well planned, coordinated and executed. *Seaboard Caribbean* played a critical role in facilitating communication between the Coast Guard and the vessel in distress. But just as importantly, *Morito* was equipped with a DSC radio that played a critical role as part of the larger Global Maritime Distress Signaling System (GMDSS). This system, properly utilized, notified the Coast Guard hundreds of miles away of their distress, their position and helped make the difference between life and death.