

EPIRB BASICS

Garry Schneider, 29 Feb 2008

The following are some basic EPIRB operating rules drawn from US Coast Guard, NOAA and manufacturer information:

- For maritime operation buy a 406 full size EPIRB with a built in GPS receiver or one that links to your on board GPS: Cat. I, (self releasing) is more expensive to buy and maintain, Cat. II must be manually released if stored in a bracket or kept below decks.
- Register the new unit directly with the NOAA using the form provided with your purchase as **required**. Web registration at www.sarsat.noaa.gov/beacon.html is quicker and allows web updating as needed. Filling in all of the information relevant to your vessel can mean that a search will start for you several hours earlier than for an unregistered EPIRB.
- Test the unit according to the manufacturer's recommended schedule and procedure. **DO NOT** activate the unit to test it.
- In the event of accidental activation, immediately shut off the unit, if possible. Then call the local Coast Guard and tell them of the activation or call the National CG SAR command center number: 1-800-323-7233. Even a very short period of EPIRB operation can be enough for a satellite to receive an initial burst of information and begin a search.
- Have the batteries replaced at a manufacturer approved facility every five years, or at the manufacturer's recommended interval, or immediately upon return to shore should the unit be activated.
- Once the unit is turned on in a rescue situation, leave it on until rescued.
- If the vessel carries more than one 406 EPIRB, do not activate more than one in the first 72 hours unless you have good reason to believe that the batteries or transmitter in the first unit are out of date or damaged.
- While a smaller Personal Locator Beacon, PLB, is an excellent safety item for each crew member to carry, it is not a substitute for a self releasing, water activated, Cat. I 406 EPIRB or a Cat. II 406 manually activated EPIRB. The PLB units have only half the battery life of the EPIRB, no flashing locator light, may not float upright, and can only be activated manually. They are also registered to the owner and thus their activation does not supply a number that brings up the vessel's description and equipment information.
- The new "Spot" units have not been as extensively proven in rescue situations as the 406 EPIRBs. They have neither a 121.5 locator signal nor a strobe light. They report your emergency to a private company which may not have all of the assets available that the CG can immediately call on. Perhaps the "Spot" system might best be carried as a back up until the SAR community has further experience with it.
- As of 1 DEC 2006 Inmarsat EPIRB service is no longer provided.
- As of Feb 2007 it is illegal to activate either a Class A, 121.5, or class B, 243 EPIRB. Not only will their signal not result in a SAR activation but the 121.5 signal is different from, and will interfere with, the 121.5 locator beacon in the 406.