



TUNING IN THOSE TUGS!

by Ron Seymour

Ever have the feeling you were DXing yourself to death when all you had to do was stick your head out the window? Many times I would sit down at the old radio and try tuning in those far off signals when all I really had to do was get acquainted with local traffic -- where to tune, what to listen on (equipment) and when to listen.

Yep, you guessed it! The 3 W's of all pro monitoring: *what, where and when!* In other words, why strain your eardrums hoping for something, when all you really have to do is open your eyes (and ears) for interests which are far easier catches.

For instance, my home town is a bona fide river city -- St. Louis. For a long time I knew full well that this city was a gold mine of river traffic -- historically, commercially or any other way you want to look at it.

As an American history and government teacher, I was well aware that St. Louis abounded in marine interests. But, like so many of us, I thought the radio pasture was *always* greener somewhere else! When I purchased my scanner, I only intended to monitor the usual police, fire and medical frequencies.

Finally, I happened upon some articles relating to marine communications; fired up the scanner for Coast Guard, navigational and commercial traffic and... POW! Virtually continuous 24 hour communications relating to commercial shipping interests jumped out of my scanner!

Tugs in Action

Most of the river traffic you will hear in your area, if you are fortunate enough to reside in or visit a river town, is taking place between tugboats, their crews, the Coast Guard, or barge terminal offices on shore. Sometimes you can even find a good vantage point on shore to actually see tugs in action as they try to maneuver huge barges up and down the river to various docking facilities.

Matching up communications on board these tugs with actual sightings can be quite a challenge, especially if you can't see the names of the tugs as they communicate with each other. All is not lost, however; the more you listen to tug operators the more you will eventually unravel their approximate location on the river itself.

Mile Markers?

For all you land lovers and water phobic types, a few explanations are in order before you rush out for sea sick pills and life jackets! The rivers that cater to commercial traffic are well defined as to location points on their shores.

"Mile markers" are often referred to in the Coast Guard communications known as "Notice to Mariners." Transmitted on 157.100 MHz, these daily broadcasts by the Guard keep all river traffic posted as to dangers and general information connected with the waterways.

One of the first times I heard the "Notice to Mariners" broadcast, I was taken aback by a rather sad bulletin. Occasionally, but certainly not frequently, someone associated with barge crews falls into the river of "fails" to answer roll call.

One such victim of the deep was included in a river update along with a description and tugboat operated from. Two days later another Notice to Mariners broadcast gave a scant one-line reference saying, "subject's body recovered."

"Mile markers," as referenced earlier, simply pace off the river in miles and tenths of a mile from the river's mouth. Larger rivers like the Mississippi are divided into upper and lower portions. For instance, the Mississippi starts its zero mile marker at the delta in the Gulf of Mexico and continues upstream to a point at Wickliffe, Kentucky (Wickliffe Barge Point), at the 951.4 mile marker. The stretch in between is known as the Lower Mississippi River.

A few miles downstream from Birds Point, Missouri, at the 2.1 mile marker, the Upper Mississippi River begins and continues northward through St. Louis (167-188 mile marker) and further until no longer navigable.

Most rivers, like the Illinois and Missouri, though definitely huge rivers, simply start their mile markers at zero at their mouths. A few rivers, like the Ohio, are marked in reverse! So in these cases the largest mile marker begins at the mouth and the smallest at the source.

Some care will have to be exercised to learn the direction of the mile markers on your river so as to precisely place hazardous warnings or other reference mentioned by the Coast Guard or other mariners.

A good state or regional map is of tremendous assistance. You will know your map is good for your listening junkets if it has bridge names and lock and dam numbers identified. Many everyday navigational references to bridges, streets, parks, or other landmarks are made by boat operators to locate their whereabouts to others. Routine announcements such as these are brief and can be heard from time to time on the navigational frequency 156.650 MHz.

Typical Conversations

Listening to everyday conversation is everything from boring to humorous as the crews exchange views on operating technique, equipment repairs, taking on water ("got a bucket?") or just plain crabbing! You'll hear both sides of the conversation on 156.300 (safety related), 156.350 MHz, and in 50 MHz increments up to and including 157.000 MHz. Specifically, try 156.875, 156.975, 157.025, and 157.425 MHz.

The nationally-recognized frequency for distress announcements is channel 16, 156.800 MHz. The Coast Guard constantly monitors this frequency for trouble on the river. This channel is also reserved for callup -- one boat asking another to make contact on a certain stated channel. If you've programmed your scanner to include all the frequencies listed, you'll instantly know when contact has been made because the vessels will identify themselves by name.

The best teacher of all in such monitoring is your own personal effort and persistence. A visit to a well-stocked city library will help you find reference materials relating to river terminal operations and owners of tugs and barge lines. Don't forget the most rewarding trip of all: finding an area on your river infested with tugs!

Armed with your handheld scanner and a good visual vantage point to see up and down your river, you will start to pick up on the names of some tugboats. Bring along a camera and some binoculars, too! You'll want to record those tugs on film along with their names, if possible, so as to build up a file on your area operations. Oh, and one more thing -- save me a seat dockside, OK?



St. Louis Coast Guard; See "High Seas" for more Mississippi monitoring

VHF-FM Maritime Channels

Chan	Frequency (MHz)		Points of Communication
	Ship	Coast	
Distress, Safety and Calling			
16	156.8	156.8	EPIRB, Intership and ship to coast
Intership Safety			
06	156.300		a. Intership b. For SAR; ship and aircraft of the U.S. Coast Guard
Liaison, U.S. Coast Guard			
22	157.100	157.100	Ship, aircraft, and coast stations of the U.S. Coast Guard and, at Lake Mead, NV, ship and coast stations of the National Park Service
Port Operations			
01	156.050	156.050	Intership and ship to coast
03	156.175	156.175	Same
05	156.250	156.250	Same
65	156.275	156.275	Same
66	156.325	156.325	Same
12	156.600	156.600	Same
73	156.675	156.675	Same
14	156.700	156.700	Same
77	156.875		Intership
20	157.000	161.600	Same
Navigational			
13	156.650	156.650	Intership and ship to coast
67	156.375	156.375	Same
Environmental & Class C EPIRB's			
15		156.750	Coast to ship and EPIRB
State Control			
17	156.850	156.850	Intership and ship to coast
Commercial			
01	156.050	156.050	Intership and ship to coast
63	156.075	156.175	Same
07	156.350	156.350	Same
67	156.375		Intership
08	156.400		Same
09	156.450	156.450	Intership and ship to coast
10	156.500	156.500	Same
11	156.550	156.550	Same
18	156.900	156.900	Same
19	156.950	156.950	Same
79	156.975	156.975	Same
80	157.025	157.025	Same
88	157.425		Intership
Noncommercial			
68	156.425	156.425	Intership and ship to coast
09	156.475	156.475	Same
70	156.525		Intership
71	156.575	156.575	Intership and ship to coast
72	156.625		Intership
78	156.925	156.925	Intership and ship to coast
Public Correspondence			
24	157.200	161.800	Ship to public coast
84	157.225	161.825	Same
25	157.250	161.850	Same
85	157.275	161.875	Same
26	157.300	161.900	Same
86	157.325	161.925	Same
27	157.350	161.975	Same
87	157.375	161.975	Same
28	157.400	162.000	Same
88	157.425	162.025	Same