

411 on 911

Whether boating just off the beach or 50 miles out, make sure you can be heard

By Randy Vance

If your ham sandwich just floated by, you might need a rescue. Getting one in time to save your life will depend on advance preparation and having a life jacket already buckled firmly in place.

Being able to call for help at any range is the next hurdle. A VHF radio and a waterproof handheld for backup are mandatory but limited in range.

For years, Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacons and Personal Locator Beacons have been available to send an emergency message to the U.S. Coast Guard and U.S. Air Force from anywhere in the world via satellite. But until recently, these devices were expensive, easily ranging to \$1,000.

“One of our big hurdles in requiring people to carry EPIRBs is the high cost,” says Lt. Katherine Niles, a search and rescue officer in the USCG.

A private organization marketed through findmespot.com now offers a PLB that can also send messages to family and nonemergency personnel, as well as the SPOT 24/7 emergency-response team.

“SPOT offers a low-cost alternative for staying connected with others, including an international emergency coordinating center in case you have an emergency,” says Bob Bennett, vice president of product development and inventor of the satellite GPS messenger.

While the USCG is bullish on its EPIRB system, Lt. Niles has had some search-and-rescue (SAR) experience with SPOT devices and says, “It has made a difference.”

SPOT works much like OnStar but with added abilities. Say you’re late getting back to the ramp and don’t want your family to worry. Press “OK” and SPOT sends an “I’m OK” message along with your position



COST » \$149.99; \$99 annual service

BATTERIES/LIFE » Two AA's last 48-plus hours

WHAT IT DOES » Sends 911, nonemergency and “I’m OK” messages to 24/7 call center or predesignated non-emergency responders

PROS » Outbound nonemergency communication capability, can preregister brief float plan in OK message via online access. Offers trip tracking viewable by friends online; can self-test using OK message; can be used on land-based adventures

CONS » A required annual communications-service fee

pinpointed on a Google map to up to 10 cellular and e-mail contacts. Designate your favorite towing service to receive a “Help” message to initiate their services while your other contacts monitor the situation. In an emergency, press the “911” button to notify SPOT’s 24/7 emergency-response office. SPOT updates your position every five minutes while they begin the work of notifying the Coasties or other rescue workers to bring you home safely.

Both EPIRB/PLB and SPOT rescue devices initiate search and rescue in a matter of minutes. You might not even have to eat that soggy sandwich.

MCMURDO FAST FINDER		ACR EPIRB	
COST	\$299, no annual communications-service fee	COST	EPIRBs range from \$599 to \$1,000, no communications service needed
BATTERIES/LIFE	Internal batteries last 24 hours, need annual service	BATTERIES/LIFE	Internal batteries last 48 hours, need annual service
WHAT IT DOES	Attaches to person and sends emergency message to USAF and USCG via satellite upon manual activation	WHAT IT DOES	Attaches to the boat or person and sends emergency message to USAF or USCG via satellite upon submersion, or manual activation
PROS	Linked directly to USAF and USCG search-and-rescue personnel, small and lower-priced	PROS	Linked directly to USAF and USCG search-and-rescue personnel, fewer gaps worldwide
CONS	No self-test, short battery life and annual battery service is required	CONS	No self-test and annual service is required



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