

All About Marine Radio Licenses

- by Tim Hasson

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For many items, especially single side band radios and some satellite terminal equipment, no installation is complete until a valid license is on board. The discussion below addresses most of the questions we field regarding when licenses are required and how to go about obtaining them. While this article is specific to U.S.-flagged vessels, the procedures in other countries are, to the best of our knowledge, very similar.

We can also guide your paperwork through the licensing process for a small fee. Just send an Email to thasson@techyacht.com or give us a call...

Do I need a license?

This depends on the type of radio equipment carried on board, where the boat will be traveling, and whom you will be communicating with.

A rule change in 1996 allows U.S. recreational boaters operating in domestic waters to operate marine VHF, EPIRB's and Radar without a license. This works as an incentive to encourage safety equipment, without the burden of a license and its associated fees. However, the operative word is *domestic*.

If your boat will be traveling internationally or communicating with foreign stations, or if you will operate HF single side band or a marine satellite terminal (such as INMARSAT) then a license is required. Note that radar is a form of radio communication, and the "international" considerations apply.

For U.S.-flagged vessels there are actually two licenses required: one for the radio station itself, called a *Ship Station License*; and a license for each person who will operate the radio equipment, called a *Restricted Radiotelephone Operator Permit*.

Who issues licenses?

Many of our clients are surprised to learn that it is not the U.S. Coast Guard. With respect to radios, the Coast Guard's role is only to specify which types of vessels must carry certain types of radio equipment. Generally, these Coast Guard requirements apply only to commercial shipping and fishing vessels.

In the U.S., the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is responsible for issuing licenses for both radio stations and their operators aboard

recreational boats. The FCC also sets standards and technical specifications for marine radio equipment, and establishes radio-operating procedures for vessels operating in U.S. territorial waters.

Is my license valid internationally?

Yes. In fact, one of the compelling reasons to obtain a license is to permit international operation. The radio frequencies used by everything from marine VHF to EPIRB's, radar and single side band are agreed upon among nations by international treaties. The coordinating body for these international agreements is the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), based in Geneva, Switzerland. Proper licensing paperwork from an authority such as the FCC will be recognized and accepted just about anywhere on the globe.

What do I get for licensing?

With the *Ship Station License* you will be issued a series of letters and numbers, called a *Call Sign*, along with a piece of paper certifying that those numbers are valid. Once issued, you should use your call sign when operating the radio to positively identify your station. The license paperwork should be posted or carried aboard along with other important ship's papers, and may be subject to examination by officials in foreign ports.

The *Restricted Radiotelephone Operator Permit* is issued as a wallet-sized card and can be kept on one's person or stored with the ship's papers.

Can I operate without a license?

If your situation is one where a license is required, then legally, no. Besides, to use the best features of your VHF-DSC radio, HF single sideband or INMARSAT terminal you need something called an MMSI number, which is issued along with your Station License if you request it (see below).

So how do I get a license? What fees are involved?

There are no tests or inspections required for either the Ship Station License or the Restricted Radiotelephone Operator Permit (RROP). The only requirement is to complete the necessary FCC forms and submit them along with proper payment.

The forms you will need are:

FCC Form 605 with Schedules "B" and "E": This is the application for a *Ship Station License*. Form 605 is the "main" form which collects basic information. Schedule B collects supplemental information to help with Search and Rescue, and Schedule E collects the information necessary for the Restricted Radiotelephone Operator Permit.

At this writing, the fee for a station license is \$155, and the license remains valid for 10 years. Note that licenses *do not* transfer if the boat is sold or the radio equipment is moved from one boat to another.

Every person aboard who will operate the radio equipment should have their own valid RROP. At this writing the fee is \$55, and the license remains good for life unless suspended/revoked.

Fees are outlined in FCC Form 1070y.

FCC Form 159: This is a remittance advice, which must be enclosed with the payment for each application.

How do I get these forms?

You can download them right here. The forms supplied via these links are .pdf files in Adobe Acrobat format, and will require the Acrobat Reader to open them .

[FCC Form 605](#) (Main Application)

[FCC Form 605b](#) (SAR Information)

[FCC Form 605e](#) (Restricted Radiotelephone Operator Permit)

[FCC Form 1070y](#) (Fee Schedule)

[FCC Form 159](#) (Remittance Advice)

Alternatively, you can write the FCC's Forms Distribution Center, PO Box 1050, Gettysburg, PA 17326, or call them at 1-800-418-FORM.

It is also possible to file for a license electronically, via the Internet, using the FCC's Universal Licensing System (ULS). Visit <http://wireless.fcc.gov/uls/> for more on online filing.

What is an MMSI Number, and should I get one?

MMSI stands for Maritime Mobile Service Identity. An MMSI is a 9-digit number that works something like a telephone number for your satellite and radio equipment.

Question #12 on Schedule B of FCC Form 605 asks if you want to be issued a new MMSI number for the equipment you are licensing. Generally speaking, the answer to this question is yes, especially if you are licensing equipment for the first time ever. If you do not have one already, you will doubtlessly want an MMSI number in the future. Getting one now saves the paperwork hassle of having to amend your license in the future, and the attendant \$55 license modification fee.

However, if you have already commissioned an INMARSAT B, C, or M satellite terminal thru COMSAT or another INMARSAT service provider, then an MMSI number has probably already been issued to you.

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