

North & South Magazine

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GREAT BARRIER MARINE RADIO INC.

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Every summer, marinas disgorge hundreds of pleasure boats into the Hauraki Gulf. And when many of the skippers reach for their radio hand piece, chances are there's only one voice they want to hear.

From her home at Okupu, Great Barrier Island radio operator Emmy Pratt keeps contact with pleasure and commercial boat operators - from Bream Head near Whangarei to Whitianga and up to 150km east - over Channel 01 VHF marine radio, via a repeater station at White Cliffs.



The Great Barrier Island Marine Radio Association has about 600 members and Pratt reckons she talks to more than 200 boaties every season. "They let me know how many people are on board where they plan to spend the night, what their ETA is, or if they need something. One guy was halfway across the gulf when he remembered it was his partner's birthday and he hadn't got her anything. So he asked me to ring Interflora and send her some flowers," she says. "Some get their anchors stuck, so I get a diver in to help, or they lose their dinghies, or drag anchor while they're not aboard. But sometimes they just call to boast that they've caught a marlin."

Included in Pratt's 7am-to-10pm working day are twice-daily weather forecasts and regular navigation or public service warnings. "It becomes your life. This damn thing goes everywhere with me - to the garden, in the kitchen, even to the toilet," she says, ruefully hefting a hand-held radio. "The radio's always on."

Each call is meticulously logged for later reference and tracking purposes if anything goes amiss. Pratt, 60, has direct lines to the police, search and rescue authorities, DoC and medical services that can be called on to talk skippers through almost any on board emergency. Engineers and electricians are also available to help resolve technical problems.

Pratt describes the radio users as "my boaties", and she can match most boat names with those of their skippers. "Until they sell the boat -that can fool me for a while!" she laughs.

Some folk look her up at home with a feed of fish to show their gratitude, or to put a face to the voice they talk to daily.

The radio service was set up about 50 years ago to keep locals in touch with ferry arrival times. Pratt became involved in the mid-1990s while acting as caregiver for founder and long-term operator Constable George Mason. The present VHF setup was established in 1991. "I was a shy little thing back then - the thought of talking on a radio terrified me," she admits. "I hadn't had a lot to do with boats either and that didn't help."

Since then she's become a veritable maritime institution, earning several community awards along the way.

The kind of person who likes to keep herself busy, she also works as a home help, in property management, and as a volunteers at the island's community garden. "It's a busy old life on the Barrier; you've got to be able to turn your hand to anything."

"Unsung Heroes" a calming voice across troubled waters.

NZ Herald Wednesday Mar 25, 2009. by Vaimoana Tapaleao

She is regarded as the angel of the sea in Great Barrier Island, helping lost and distressed boaties find their way home.

Emma Pratt has been the comforting voice behind the marine radio on the Barrier for 16 years.

Acting as the first point of call for boaties, she starts at 7am, keeping watch and liaising with police and emergency services when there is a lost boat at sea.

"It's really neat knowing you can help somebody and for them to know that you're there at the other end of the line," she said.



Although her shift officially ends at 10pm, Ms Pratt is always on hand to deal with any emergencies after hours and is known to stay on the radio all night to comfort those distressed.

Ms Pratt said several cases where a major emergency has occurred - like an elderly man suffering a heart attack and another person threatening to commit suicide - have tested her nerves.

"You've just got to stay calm. You can usually tell in their voice that there's a bit of panic there and once they know that help is coming it calms them down."

Friend Joy Nicholson - who nominated Ms Pratt as an unsung hero - said her calming nature makes her ideal for the role.

"If you're out there on a boat in rough weather, lost, just lying there and you can hear her voice - just hearing that voice comforts you," Mrs Nicholson says.

"She's the angel of the sea."

"Great Barrier Radio, alive and well"

Professional Skipper Issue 22 (June/July 2001) by Keith Ingram

Over the last couple of years or so there has been some concern as to whether Channel one, Great Barrier Radio, would continue with the fine service which it has provided to Auckland's commercial fleet and recreational boaties who frequent the Barrier.

This privately funded, subscriber-based marine radio service operating on channel one from Whangaparapara on the Barrier was established by the island's renowned local identity, George Mason.

George needs little introduction to anyone in the marine industry who needs to know. He is after all recognised as an institution which developed from his early days as the island's policeman. Seafarers will remember many a night when trying to seek shelter when George would turn out, get into his vehicle, drive to a position which would give a safe lead, and shine his headlights to guide a storm-tossed vessel through safe waters to shelter.

Institution or not, humans are mere mortals, and age has a habit of taking its toll. Unfortunately George is no different, and in recent years his health has started to deteriorate, which in turn has caused concern to all seafarers who have relied upon or use the services of Great Barrier Radio.

On a recent visit to Great Barrier I took time out to visit this old and respected friend, only to be greeted with "Not so much of the old," which gave me heart that George, although a bit slower, is still in fine fettle, and so we shared the latest scuttlebutt over a cuppa.

"The control room is as it should be," he said, "but it is in the operations room that you need to talk." And so it was with much pleasure that I met Allison Cox for first time. At last there was a face to the cheery voice we had experienced on the airways for the past 12 months. Ali had taken on the task as radio operator of Great Barrier Radio.

What would make a young lady of the world want to seek isolation at Great Barrier, I pondered. As though reading my mind, she said she couldn't really explain exactly why she chose to move to Great Barrier Island. But she liked the style of channel one. She enjoys the lifestyle which Great Barrier has to offer, and she enjoys maintaining contact with the sea.

On delving further, we find that she is also no newcomer in the sea-going department, having spent five years with the Spirit of Adventure Trust sail-training vessels, particularly the Spirit of New Zealand. She has also amassed a fair amount of blue-water sailing, and has sailed around the Horn to the Falkland Islands in a small yacht. With a love of the sea and the need to take time out to complete her degree by correspondence, she saw Great Barrier Radio as a challenge, where she could maintain an active contact with the sea, continue her studies and enjoy a lifestyle while maintaining an important link for seafarers' safety and communication. From her own first-hand experience she has an excellent knowledge of the Hauraki Gulf, its islands, bays, nooks and crannies.

In talking with her, it is easy to understand why this young lady has already endeared herself to mariners from all walks of life by the many compliments she receives. When we ask what the key is to this success, Ali replies "Probably because I am a female, I'm friendly, and I can relate to the problems or difficulties, the good times, the humour, and the frustrating situations those at sea are experiencing.

"Men tend to treat me differently" she says, "probably because I am a female. There is no aggression or macho bravado which can sometimes prevail when men are explaining some problem or other with another male radio operator."

From a seafarer's position it has to be recognised that Ali has a very clear voice on the radio, she is unflustered and professional in the manner in which she goes about her duties on air. For the old hands who still want to have a chat with George, he is always available in the control room and maintains a listening brief.

Great Barrier Radio provides an excellent VHF coverage on channel one throughout the inner and outer Hauraki Gulf, across the Mokohinaus and up the north-east coast and south into the Bay, the Coromandel coast and the Mercury Islands.

At NZ Professional Skipper magazine we encourage all commercial operators operating this area, and the wider boating public who tend to use channel one, thinking it is a government-funded service, to consider joining Great Barrier Radio and support the fine service they provide. The annual membership fee is \$50, and payment may be made out to Great Barrier Radio, RD 1, Claris, Great Barrier Island.

As they have just upgraded their radio equipment at some significant cost, corporate donations and new members are welcome.