

HOW TO Test the red button

Have you ever checked whether the red button works on your DSC VHF radio? Gilbert Park puts his own radio to the test

On a busy day in the summer in the Solent you'll hear countless voice radio checks on Ch16 and Ch67 to HM Coastguard and now also on Ch65 to the National Coastwatch Institution.

However, the RYA and all other bodies recommend that the first step in a Mayday call is to press the red button on the radio and send a DSC call.

The RYA website says: 'In the distress signal stage, the DSC or red button on your VHF is king. It is the first signal to the coastguard that you are in distress, but newer models will send your location via GPS too.'

This gives the coastguard essential information such as position, MMSI number of the boat (from which they can retrieve the details of the vessel) and, if selected in the menu, the nature of the distress.

The subsequent voice message enables the distress to be confirmed and further information to be obtained. It is also important to recognize that a DSC message may get through and a voice message may not.

Is DSC red button working?

Despite the DSC being so important very few sailors actually check that the DSC function of their radio is working!

There are two possible tests depending



You'll need access to two DSC radios to send and check a test message

on the make of the radio you have. They are usually found in the DSC menu.

The first is a self-test feature: you highlight the test and press enter and the test is done. If all is working then the radio will tell you so.

The Global Maritime Distress and

Safety System (GMDSS) recommend this is done daily. Not many VHF radios have this self-test function.

The second test GMDSS recommend to be performed weekly. It is to send a test message, again found in the DSC menu. All fixed DSC radios currently sold by Icom, Raymarine, Standard Horizon, Navico (Simrad, B&G, Lowrance) and Garmin have this feature.

For this test two DSC radios are needed. The photos opposite show how it is done manually with the ICOM HM195B radio on my boat (the radio is just over one year old) and also on the elderly Standard Horizon handheld radio I had when, six or seven years ago, I used to sail in small boats with no fixed radio.

If you do not have a second DSC radio, perhaps someone near you has one and you can share to ensure the check works in both directions.



Read your DSC radio's instructions before flipping the switch to test the distress function

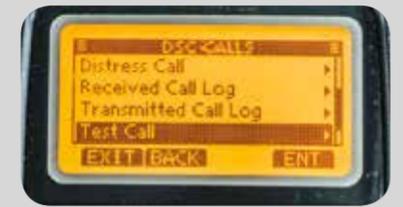
Manual DSC test: ICOM HM195B to Standard Horizon HX851



My ICOM radio in 'listening' mode.



The DSC Menu.



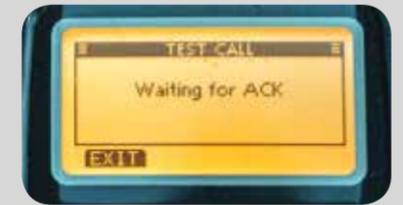
'Test call' selected in the DSC menu. Note 'Distress Call' is three above: DO NOT select this.



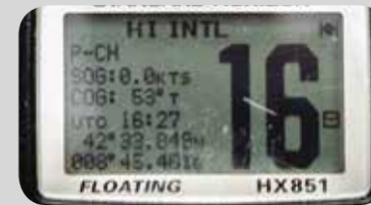
Here I have to select station to call. Either I put in a new station by selecting 'Manual' or select one from the directory. In my case I selected 'Mobile' > my Standard Horizon.



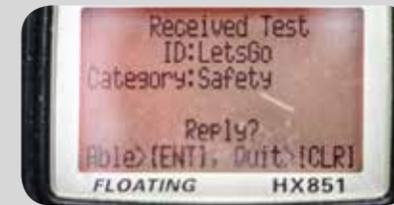
The radio shows me what I have selected and offers me the chance to 'Exit' (go back and perhaps use another number from my directory), or 'Call' (send the message).



Once sent, the radio tells me it is waiting for an acknowledgement.



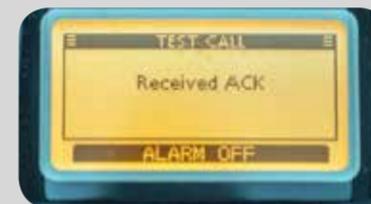
This is the Standard Horizon in 'listening mode'.



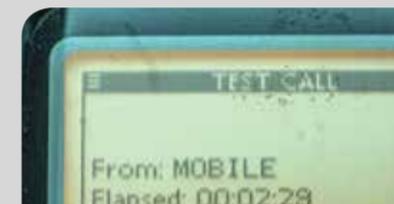
An alarm sounds. The Standard Horizon shows it has received a test call and asks if I want to reply? It also tells me which button to press.



The Standard Horizon tells me I have replied, and how to quit.



The ICOM sounds an alarm and says it has received the acknowledgement. Cancelling the alarm moves it on to the next screen.



The final screen shows that the ICOM received a test call from 'Mobile' 2 minutes and 29 seconds ago. I can now exit. The test call will be found in the menu under both the 'Transmitted' and 'Received' call log found just above the Test Call (see picture above top right).

If you do not have a neighbour then HM Coastguard has a test-call facility that is automatic and devoid of human input, so you needn't feel inhibited to use it.



You can make test calls to the coastguard using Ch16 or Ch67

Indeed, some radios allow you to select an automatic answer to a self-test call.

Before you do this test on your own radio, I'd recommend that you carefully look at the instruction book and find out what you have. It is very important that you identify where on the menu the distress part is – you do not want to send a distress signal by accident.

Acknowledgement: grateful thanks to



HM Coastguard Maritime Operation Controller K Beasley for his assistance with this article