Coast Guard Blames Unknown Man for 7 Phony Mayday Calls

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One man went to prison in August and two more were indicted this month on charges of making false distress calls about boats in danger on the North Carolina coast -- but that has not ended the U.S. Coast Guard’s expensive problem of mayday hoax callers.

A fourth man, unidentified, is suspected of making seven phony distress calls over the past two years in the New Bern area. The Coast Guard posted a $2,000 reward Tuesday and asked the public for help in identifying the voice on two recordings.

"We have struck ground, and we are taking on water," a male voice said in a marine radio distress call recorded Dec. 12, 2012. "We are out front of Dawson's Creek. Mayday, mayday."

Coast Guard officials believe it was the same man who called on Sept. 8, 2013, to say: "Mayday, mayday, mayday. This is Hook Line and Sinker."

All seven calls, most recently on Oct. 16, came from the same area near the U.S. 17 bridge over the Trent River. In response, boaters in the area were asked to search for disabled vessels.

In each case, the Coast Guard dispatched either a helicopter crew from Elizabeth City or a boat crew from Hobucken. Sometimes Marine Corps or local fire department search teams also went out on the river, and ferry boats were asked to help. The Coast Guard says it spent at least $150,000 responding to the seven false calls.

"If we have one hoax call, it's too many," Lt. Lane Munroe, command center chief for the Coast Guard in Wilmington, said Tuesday. "We're putting our lives at risk and using our resources unnecessarily."

A Holly Ridge man went to prison in 2010 for a year after being convicted on similar charges. In August, Homer Lewis Blackburn of Atlantic Beach was sentenced to 18 months in prison and ordered to pay more than $288,000 in restitution for a distress call he made in October 2013 from the balcony of his apartment.

Witnesses said Blackburn later bragged about watching from his balcony as three helicopters and five boats searched through the night.

Brandon Garner and Charles Dowd Jr., both of Beaufort, were indicted on Oct. 14 by a federal grand jury in Greenville on charges of making false distress calls, a felony, in 2013. If convicted, each man could be sentenced to up to five years in prison.

"We're seeing a spike in these cases," Munroe said. "This year we've had nine suspected hoax calls."

Munroe said the Coast Guard has fielded 2,845 distress calls on the North Carolina coast in the past five years, and 23 of them were determined to be phony.