

Digital Ship April 2009

www.thedigitalship.com

Maritime GSM hotting up

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Competition in the maritime GSM market looks set to ramp up with the launch of a new service from Globe Wireless that will allow GSM calling and SMS for crews over Inmarsat, Iridium or VSAT connections – competition which could lead to lower prices for crew calling over GSM

Globe Wireless has launched its new GlobeMobile system, a complete GSM solution for vessels which will allow crews to use personal GSM phones for voice and SMS communications while on deep sea voyages.

GlobeMobile, launched at the *Digital Ship* conference in Oslo on March 10, can operate over VSAT, Iridium OpenPort and Fleet Broadband terminals, controlled by a custom-built Globe Wireless GSM network.

The system will also be compatible with the upcoming FleetBroadband 150, Inmarsat's sub-\$5000 antenna expected to be launched in the middle of 2009.

The network provides standard voice calls to and from the ship, full SMS message support, and onboard mobile to mobile calling, while also allowing visitors to the vessel to 'roam' onto the ship. Installation of the system is typically completed in one day.

Working with GSM

technology partner Zynetix, Globe Wireless says that this system will provide inexpensive calling rates for GSM users onboard the vessel through its purpose-built hardware and network solution.

"The basic GlobeMobile system is all below decks equipment. This includes a GSM router (which is a standard rack mounted component) and a GSM base station. The key with the installation is to identi-



GlobeMobile SIMs are provided free to the ship, allowing crews to purchase prepaid minutes and SMS

"GlobeMobile is a relatively straight forward installation," explained Shane Rossbacher, Globe Wireless' vice president product management. "Globe Wireless can handle the install for customers, and it is also customer installable."

fy the areas in the ship where GSM coverage is required."

"We have developed some guidelines for customers to use, and also can provide additional hardware (such as remote antennas) to extend the coverage."

Costs

All of the equipment needed to create the onboard GSM network is provided for a monthly fee of approximately \$200 per month, other than the satellite communications antenna which may be already on board or purchased specifically to run the mobile phone system.

Pre-paid SIMs are used for voice and SMS service while aboard the ship, and can also be used while on shore using standard GSM roaming.

"Our standard GlobeMobile prepaid SIM cards are provided for free to the ship," said Mr Rossbacher. "The captain is then provided with recharge codes for sale to the crew."

"These codes are given to the crew and are keyed into the GSM phone to load the SIMs. SIMs can be topped up at any time with additional recharge codes."

"The crewmember pays for SMS and voice calling. SMS is \$0.25 per message

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sent from the ship, and free for incoming SMS."

One interesting feature of the system is the fact that voice calling costs using a GlobeMobile SIM on a GSM phone are determined by the particular costs of the satellite system that is being used.

"A key difference with the GlobeMobile system is that the GSM handset that the crewmember uses is really just an interface device," Mr Rossbacher said.

"Really, it acts more like a cordless phone. Voice calls are not passed through the GSM network, and therefore are not subject to GSM roaming fees or other network surcharges. So, basically, the crewmember pays standard satellite rates."

"For our VSAT system, VoIP calls are very inexpensive - generally less than \$0.30 a minute to most popular countries. OpenPort can be as low as \$0.53 per minute. FleetBroadband is at standard rates, but keep in mind that crewmembers can use their GSM phones to access Inmarsat crew calling services and take advantage of Super Quiet time rates."

New technology

Zynetix has recently launched an updated version of its Ocean Linx GSM controller and added a Managed Core Services

(MCS) offering, which will both be a feature of the GlobeMobile system.

The Ocean Linx GSM communications platform includes bandwidth conservation and enhanced voice and text features over the satellite link, which the company says have been designed to meet both the market-specific and technical-specific

needs of maritime GSM.

The system is available in various configurations including voice over IP (VoIP) and FXO port, according to the preferred satellite backhaul mode.

The MCS aspect of the system is used to manage and run the GSM core infrastructure for Zynetix Maritime Service Provider (MSP) partners, allowing functions like prepaid platforms, alarm monitoring and multiple GSM partner interconnects to operate onboard the vessel.

Frank Coles, president and CEO of Globe Wireless, is excited about the potential of the technology, and believes it will offer a really attractive option to seafarers wishing to stay in touch with home.

"The solution is the result of extensive research and many months of work and significant innovation," he said. "The result is a solution that provides a flexible, high quality service. It is designed by mariners for mariners and thus is inexpensive and fits their needs."

"Using smart technology developed by Globe Wireless and Zynetix on the vessel, as well as shore, we have reduced bandwidth and costs. We offer free mobile to mobile calling on the same vessel, not something we have seen anywhere else."

"With the downturn in markets and the economic squeeze that is being felt globally we needed to release a product

that would be inexpensive to install for the owner and low cost calling for the crew."

Ian Taylor, CEO and co-founder of Zynetix, echoed these sentiments, and expects that the time when GSM will become a standard maritime fit is getting closer.

"GlobeMobile truly represents the next generation of GSM-at-sea services," he said.

"We're proud to partner with Globe Wireless and believe the introduction of GlobeMobile will move GSM-at-sea from an expensive niche service to a mainstream service that many more mariners can benefit from."

"The field of merchant-vessel maritime GSM is now moving from trials and first generation systems to the next generation of highly featured and lower cost platforms."

Competition

The GlobeMobile system looks set to compete head-to-head with the Blue Ocean Wireless GSM service, launched in the first half of 2007, which also operates via Inmarsat terminals.

Blue Ocean Wireless has seen some notable success already in its two years of existence, having agreed GSM deals with major shipping companies like Bernhard Schulte Shipmanagement and Wallem in the last twelve months alone.

The emergence of another competitor that can offer onboard GSM connectivity to seafarers at reasonable prices and with a low level of capital expenditure on sub-\$5000 antennas like Iridium OpenPort and the FleetBroadband 150, is sure to mean

good news to those working on ocean going vessels.

If this eventually results in even lower per-minute pricing for crews, and more extensive options in how to stay in touch with friends on family on shore, then the benefits will be felt by everybody in the maritime industry. DS