



By **Joseph P. Vermeren**

If you've ever wondered what goes on inside that little tender's house up on a drawbridge, you're not alone. It's a bit of a fishbowl up here, and everyone who walks by seems to look in. For those of you who haven't already cupped your hands to the windows, I'm here to spill the beans.

For starters, we like our jobs because we get to operate some really big equipment. The typical bridge control console has 18-20 buttons or knobs, roughly 50 indicator lights and 8-10 gauges. It takes about 18 steps to open a bridge, and two to three days to learn how to operate it. Bridgetenders must be tested and certified on each individual bridge they work because they're all different.

A computer monitors all our actions and locks us out if we miss a step or perform a step out of sequence. Otherwise, the step-by-step operation of a bridge is always manual because we need to watch out for and be ready to respond to any potential interference from boats, pedestrians, cyclists or vehicles. If necessary, we can run a bridge with a backup generator or bypass a malfunctioning computer.

In my home state of Florida, the State Department of Transportation (DOT) is responsible for operating bridges, and it hires its staff through sub-contractors. We work eight-hour continuous shifts without a break. Many of us are retired part-timers; the pay is low, so you seldom see a full-time bridgetender without another income. Most of us know port from starboard. Some of us live aboard boats, many of us are avid boaters, or have been in the past.

We stand duty in our little houses all alone and can use our time between openings as we please (hence the appeal of the job and the low pay). When you hail us on the radio, we may be chatting on the phone, surfing the web, watching TV, reading a book, checking the machinery or using the head. You need to have a little patience if we don't answer immediately. If you want to be sure to get our attention, hail us by the book, repeating the hail three times in a row.

Be sure to tell us your vessel's name, what type of vessel you're on (sail or power), your location and your direction of travel. Bridgetenders must log this information for every boat that passes. If your boat doesn't have a name, tell us "no name" and then give us the state registration or federal

documentation number instead. If your boat's name is especially cute or foreign, you'll probably have to spell it.

We make quick judgments as to your competence based on your boat handling skills and how you use the radio. So, let's review a few of the things we look for and discuss how we can make your bridge passage safer, more efficient and more enjoyable for both of us.

## What to Do

**Make sure you know the correct radio channel for hailing bridges.** In Florida it's channel 9; we do not monitor channel 16. Again, always hail a bridge three times. We receive a lot more radio traffic than you do (our antenna is higher, and we hear boats and other bridges for miles in all directions) and with all that radio chatter you need to work to get our attention.

**Try to use the right bridge name.** We'll answer to almost any relevant name—road name, highway number, island, town or body of water—but “Bascule Bridge, Bascule Bridge, Bascule Bridge” doesn't do it for us. If you don't know the approximate name, come up close to the structure and read it. If all else fails, you may have to describe your vessel and the direction from which you're arriving and ask us where you are. We'll be happy to give you the name and schedule for the next bridge in your direction. Just ask.

**Keep all bridge traffic communication on the bridge channel.** Don't discuss the order of passage or other bridge-related information with other boats on any other channel. The bridgetender needs to stay informed. While in our world, please stay on our channel. Only after you're clear of the bridge should you switch back to channel 16.

When communicating with bridgetenders, follow proper radio procedure and call from on deck whenever possible, **make direct radio contact with other vessels transiting the bridge on the same opening as you (on the bridge channel).** Vessels should pass port-to-port if the channel is wide enough. If you must pass one at a time, tide and wind direction should determine the order of transit. Vessels traveling with the wind, or the tide go first. Those traveling against the wind or tide go next.

**Keep your radio transmissions short and professional.** We only have one channel and need to keep it as open as possible. Yes, you can be

polite and put a little personality into your transmissions. But try to keep “Chatty Cathy” or “Laborious Louie” off the microphone.

**Know your air draft.** If it’s possible, you can get through much faster without an opening. Unnecessary openings can provoke a serious fine, up to \$25,000, under federal law.

**Check the gauge on the bridge’s fender for vertical clearance.** Look for other signs that may tell you there’s additional clearance in the center of the span. Many bridgetenders are instructed not to give you any navigational or clearance information. If any signs are missing, please notify us.

**Wait to hail us until you’re in clear sight.** You’ll get our attention in plenty of time, and we’ll be less likely to forget that you’re out there. Most bridges open on schedule (bridges that operate on schedules often open on demand in the evenings, on holidays and on weekends) and your calling before a scheduled opening is a courtesy we really appreciate.

**Always call to request an opening.** We do not open (or hold an opening) without an explicit request. We may close the bridge if you’re approaching, and you haven’t told us your intentions. If you need an opening, you need to tell us. **If you’re unsure about opening times or clearances, look for signs and get close enough to read them. Come as close as safety allows so we can shorten the opening.** We want to keep the road traffic flowing and appreciate your being close to the bridge when the horn blows and the gates fall.

**For extra credit after passing the bridge:** state the name of your vessel, that you’re clear, thank us for the opening and announce that you’re switching back to channel 16.

## What Not to Do

**Do not try to sneak through without talking to us.** You often can't see if other vessels are approaching, and you don't know when we may close. Even if we see you approaching, we don't know if you intend to turn or anchor before you reach us. It doesn't matter if the bridge is open for another boat, or if you can see around the structure. You still need permission to pass.

**Do not pass in a group without giving us the names of all vessels.** If you're traveling in a group, have the lead boat hail the bridge and give the total number of vessels needing an opening and the names of all of those vessels. You can each check in individually, if you prefer, but we need every name.

**Don't ask a bridgetender to hold an opening.** We don't want to open any more often than we have to. If we know your intentions, we may hold an opening briefly to let you through, but don't expect more than an extra 60 seconds or so. We need to keep the road traffic moving.

**Don't use your radio on high power (except in an emergency) and keep the microphone out of the wind.** We need to hear you clearly, but there's no need to be obnoxious about it.

**When we will not open:** if there are vehicles, pedestrians or cyclists inside the gates; if 911 has called alerting us that emergency vehicles are on the way; or if the wind exceeds 40mph, which creates a danger to the movable spans. We will also not open a bridge if there is a special event, like a *marathon or a parade passing, that has been approved by Coast Guard.*

**We will open immediately for:** Coast Guard Vessels, a tug and barge, a boat being towed or a vessel in trouble.

Finally, let's say you've tried everything I suggested. You've been polite, patient and professional, and yet there's still no radio response from that somnambulant bridgetender up there. *Now* is the time to press that high-power button on your VHF. Go ahead—**wake me up!**