

41) NUISANCE CALLS - The latest in a series of articles by Iain Gregory of Caithness CAB

At the height of the cold war I found myself spending a few weeks at a certain RAF Station learning some vital new skills. This involved much charging about in small fast aircraft and, once I accepted that sitting on a parachute is very uncomfortable, I enjoyed myself immensely, particularly when we flew upside down or did something else that would cause the Hi-Viz brigade to have an attack of the vapours. One day our mission was to do a "bandit" chase and, said bandit having been issued with a very fast car and a fair start, our three planes took off and our chase cars snarled out of the gates. Now, if you take a dozen hyper-competitive young men and set them up in a conflict situation, armed with some excellent toys, things get very serious very quickly and it was a close run thing. We finally got the cars vectored in and the bandit boxed up on a motorway slip road with minutes of spare avgas left. The only casualty was a Vauxhall Senator ("Snoopy") whose demise was reported with the unequivocal words "Excom. Peanuts. Snoopy is txxx up". Which it was.

During the debrief a phone call was taken by the Boss. The conversation was short: – "Sqd. Ldr. Biggles here". Outraged squawking. "Low Flying. Oh Dear". More outraged squawking. "Can you describe the aircraft? No? Ah". Further outraged squawking. "Tell me. Did you see any red stars or hammer and sickle symbols?". Brief squawk. "No? Thanks Heavens for that. Good day to you Madam".

And that is one way to deal with a phone call you do not wish to take. Sadly, today, about the only calls, which a lot of people, particularly the elderly, ever get are what we can safely describe as nuisance calls and it is driving everyone mad. You will no doubt recall that I wrote about scammers recently and this month we are having a campaign to raise awareness of the very similar (and often linked) epidemic of nuisance callers. We are working, as always, with our friends in Trading Standards and there is a lot of information on our website and Facebook page, but a good summary in the press is always the most effective, so here we go.

First of all most of this is of course preventable. If the telecoms firms would just put some effort into it and the Government made a similar commitment much of it could be killed off pretty quickly, but that doesn't seem to be happening rapidly enough so we need to look after ourselves. To deal with the more reputable firms always remember to "opt in" or "opt out" whenever you are asked to give your contact details for marketing purposes. Always read the small print carefully because sometimes you have to tick a box to opt-out and sometimes you must leave it unticked. Also you will need to actually find the accursed box, but take the time and that will wipe off a good number of calls. I believe legislation is on the way about this and not before time.

Talk to your phone company – caller display can be useful (but remember not to completely trust it because many lowlifes are now “spoofing” so their real number is replaced with a local code). Anonymous call rejection means you can block out calls from anyone who withholds their number and you might also be able to set up call diversion and call screening or blocking. Just make sure that you know what you are getting because some of the packages offered are of limited utility and – sadly – you have to pay for a lot of them. You might want to consider buying a “Call Blocker” of your own – either a phone with the tech built in or a standalone box. These are very handy indeed and allow you many options – in my view probably the best type are the ones which only allow numbers from your chosen list to get through, with everyone else being diverted to the screening system, thus allowing you to either accept or reject the call as you wish. These do cost money but just imagine your joy when some aggravating purveyor of snake oil wastes his money on a rejected call. As always, research is the key and you might want to have a chat with CCAB or Trading Standards. I see that www.which.co.uk/callblockers has some useful data, but you have to sign up for this. My own landline has many useful gadgets on it and I make sure that I have “permanent number withhold” set up – this means that if I call a firm they do not know my number unless I choose to give it to them – all you have to do if you want to reveal your number for a single call is key in “1470” and then dial the number.

You can also register with the Telephone Preference Service www.tpsonline.org.uk or 0345 070 0707 which allows you to opt-out of receiving unsolicited sales and marketing calls. And if you want this on your mobile phone simply text “TPS” and your email address to 85095. And once again, a word of warning, there are quite a few chancers out there who are themselves making nuisance calls, again often to older people – offering to set up just such a service - for a substantial fee. Under no circumstances engage. TPS is totally free and available to all and these callers are also at it. And if you keep getting spam text messages forward same to your network provider on 7726. Just bear in mind that if a call is coming from outside the UK then it can still get through so getting a call blocker as well is the best option.

You have now made a start, but how about causing some richly deserved stress to these people? Every single complaint you make helps. The maximum fine at the moment for phone pests is £500,000 (and the sooner that the individuals behind these calls, and indeed the telecoms providers themselves, start getting hit as well the better). Note all the details including time, date, number called from and the name of the company. You can report the call or text via which.co.uk/report-calls and they will pass it to the Regulator. Bother your phone provider as well – it might wake them up – and complain to the Information Commissioner on 0303 123 1113 or www.ico.org.uk/concerns/nuisance-calls-and-messages. And the infamous “silent” or “automated” calls should be reported to Ofcom on 0303 123 0000 or www.ofcom.org.uk

And a final word of warning – the latest money-maker is the “holiday sickness claim”. Firms are phoning people and asking if they have been sick whilst on holiday abroad and then getting the victim to sign up allowing a claim to be submitted - for a large percentage. Please never engage. These are highly dodgy and a minor head cold may well become a near-death experience with a fictitious claim following. The insurance firms are investigating rigorously and I see numerous attempted fraud cases cropping up before too long.

And now I must go to deal with a domestic crisis. Liz had just inquired how one removes masonry paint from fur. As she was painting, helped by the cats, I think I may be some time. And no. I have no idea.”