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Albright

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(54) **RESCUE METHOD AND SYSTEM FOR AN OVERBOARD PASSENGER**

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(52) **U.S. Cl.**
CPC ***B63C 9/0005*** (2013.01)

(58) **Field of Classification Search**
USPC 441/80, 36, 38
See application file for complete search history.

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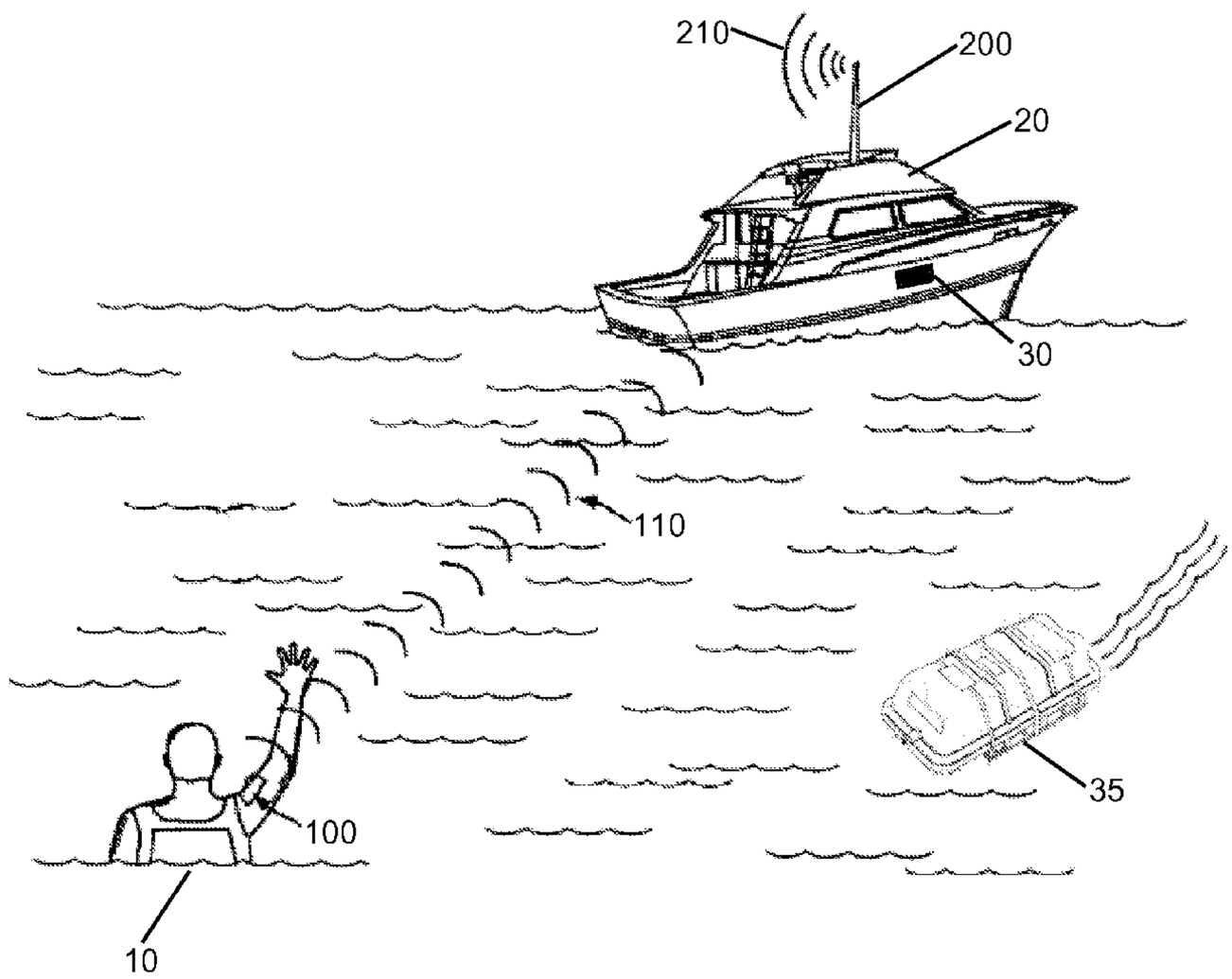
(57) **ABSTRACT**

A system and method are used for dispatching a rescue flotation device to an individual who has fallen overboard from a ship. A water-activated transmitter is carried or worn by each and every passenger on a given ship. Upon detecting moisture, the transmitter is activated to send a data signal to a radio signal receiver on the ship. The contents of the data signal may be the location and/or coordinates of the victim, as determined by triangulation of the signal, a GPS receiver and/or radar. Upon transmission of the data, a rescue flotation device or vessel is automatically deployed from a portion of the vessel into the water. The rescue device may be dispatched from a portion of the ship nearest to the determined location of the victim, and/or the rescue device may be self-propelled such that it navigates to the approximate location of victim.

20 Claims, 5 Drawing Sheets



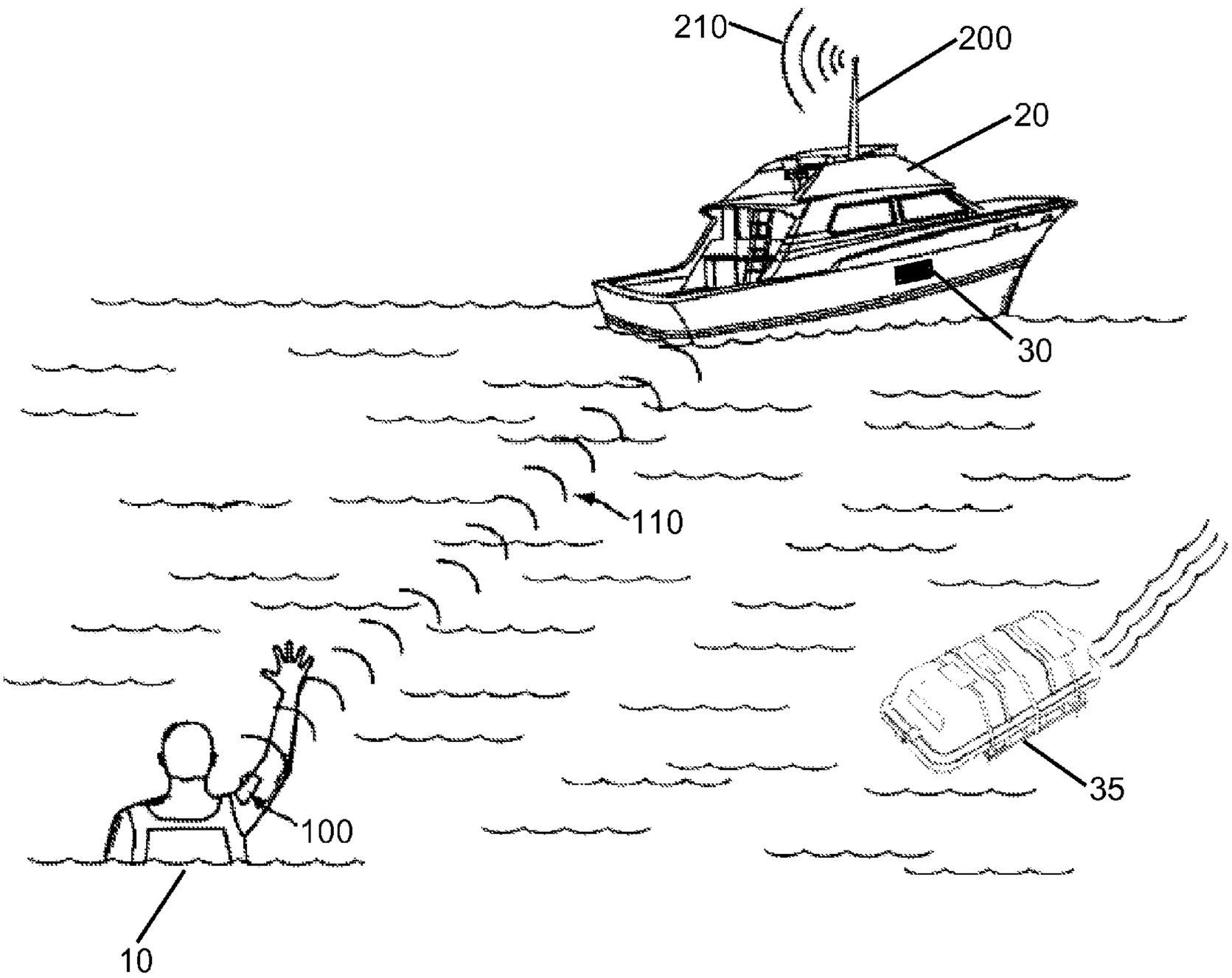


Figure 1

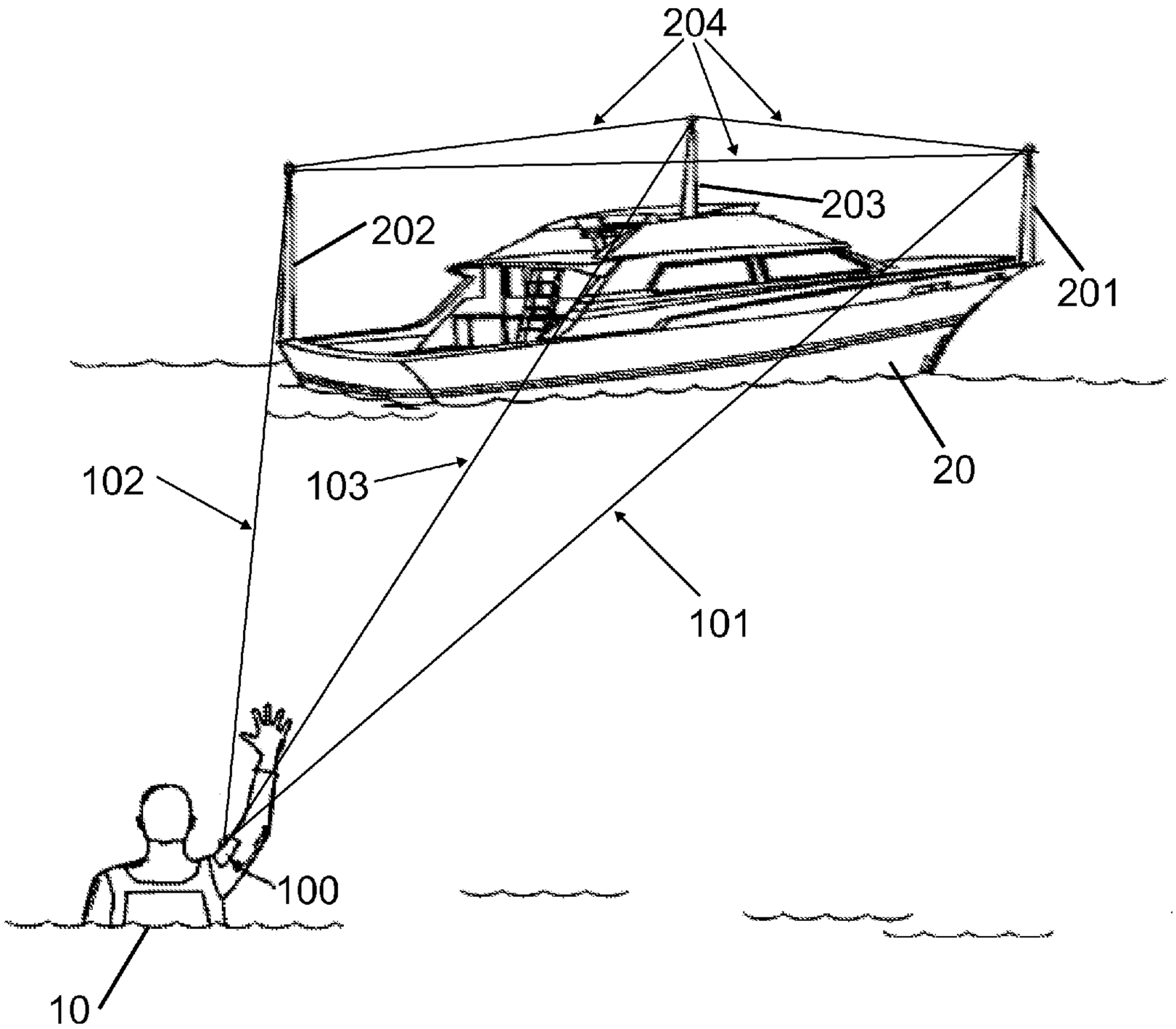


Figure 2

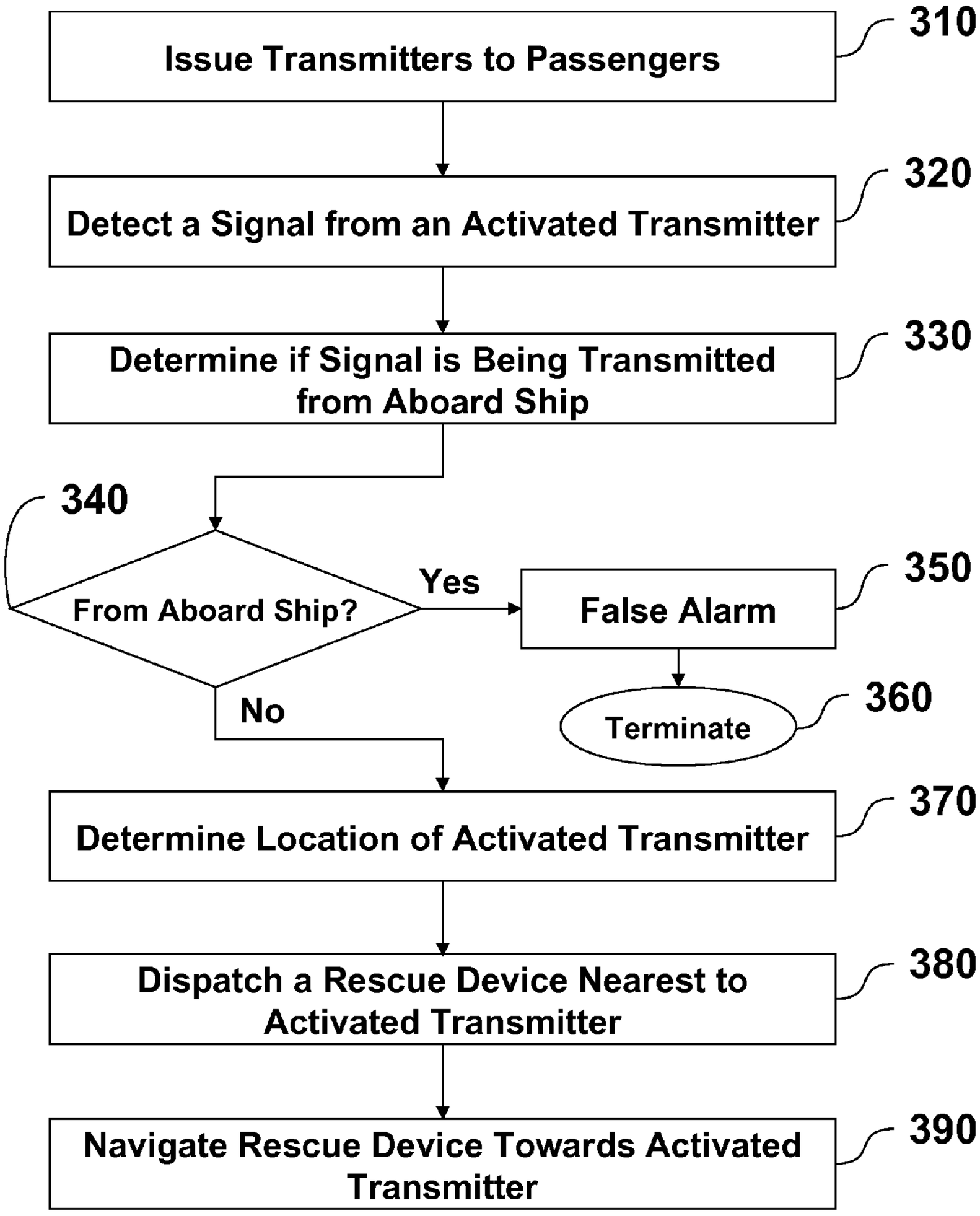

Issue Transmitters to Passengers
310
Detect a Signal from an Activated Transmitter
320
Determine if Signal is Being Transmitted from Aboard Ship
330
340
From Aboard Ship?
Yes
False Alarm
350
No
Terminate
360
Determine Location of Activated Transmitter
370
Dispatch a Rescue Device Nearest to Activated Transmitter
380
Navigate Rescue Device Towards Activated Transmitter
390

Figure 3

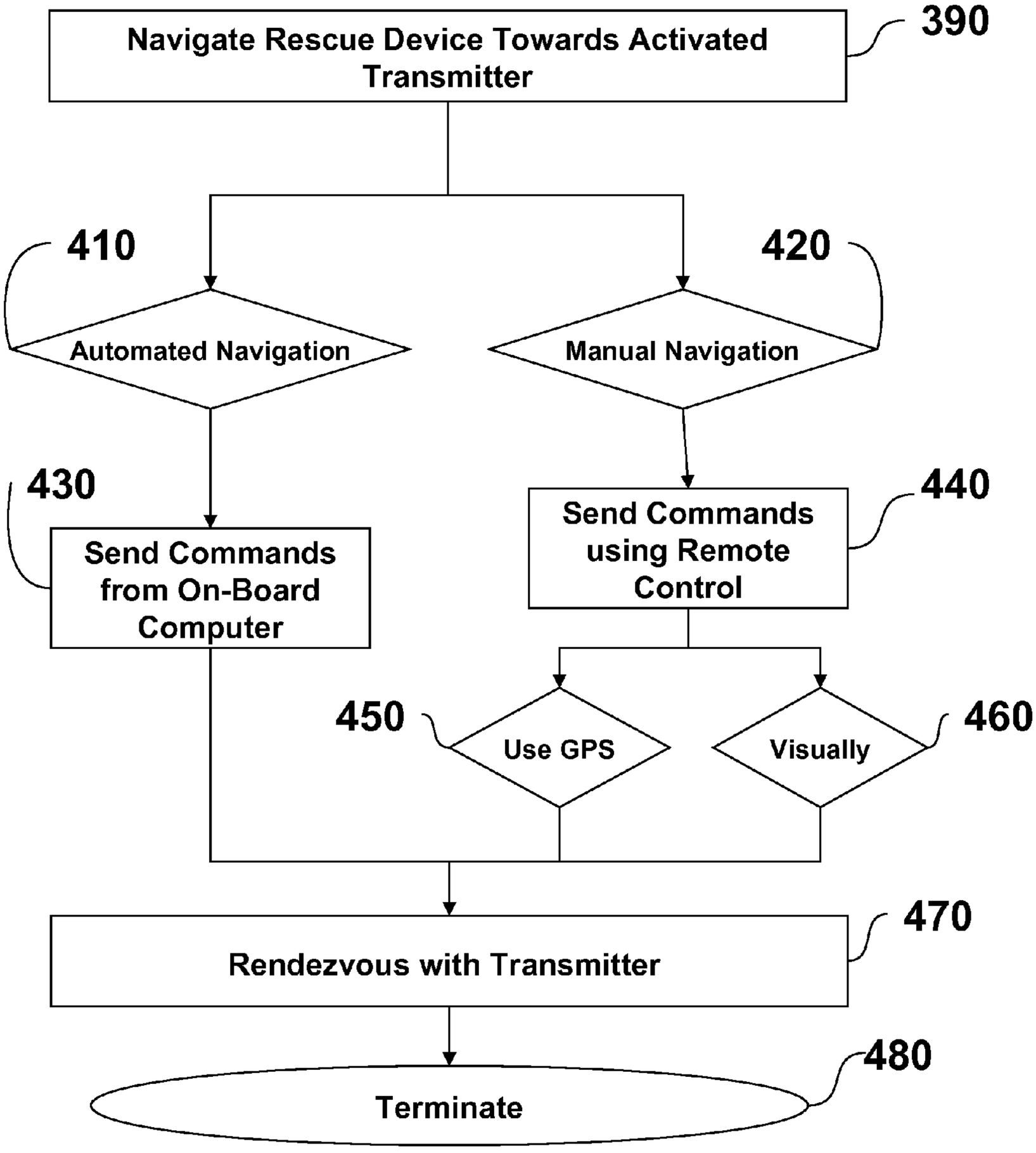

Navigate Rescue Device Towards Activated Transmitter
390
410
Automated Navigation
420
Manual Navigation
430
Send Commands from On-Board Computer
440
Send Commands using Remote Control
450
Use GPS
460
Visually
Rendezvous with Transmitter
470
Terminate
480

Figure 4

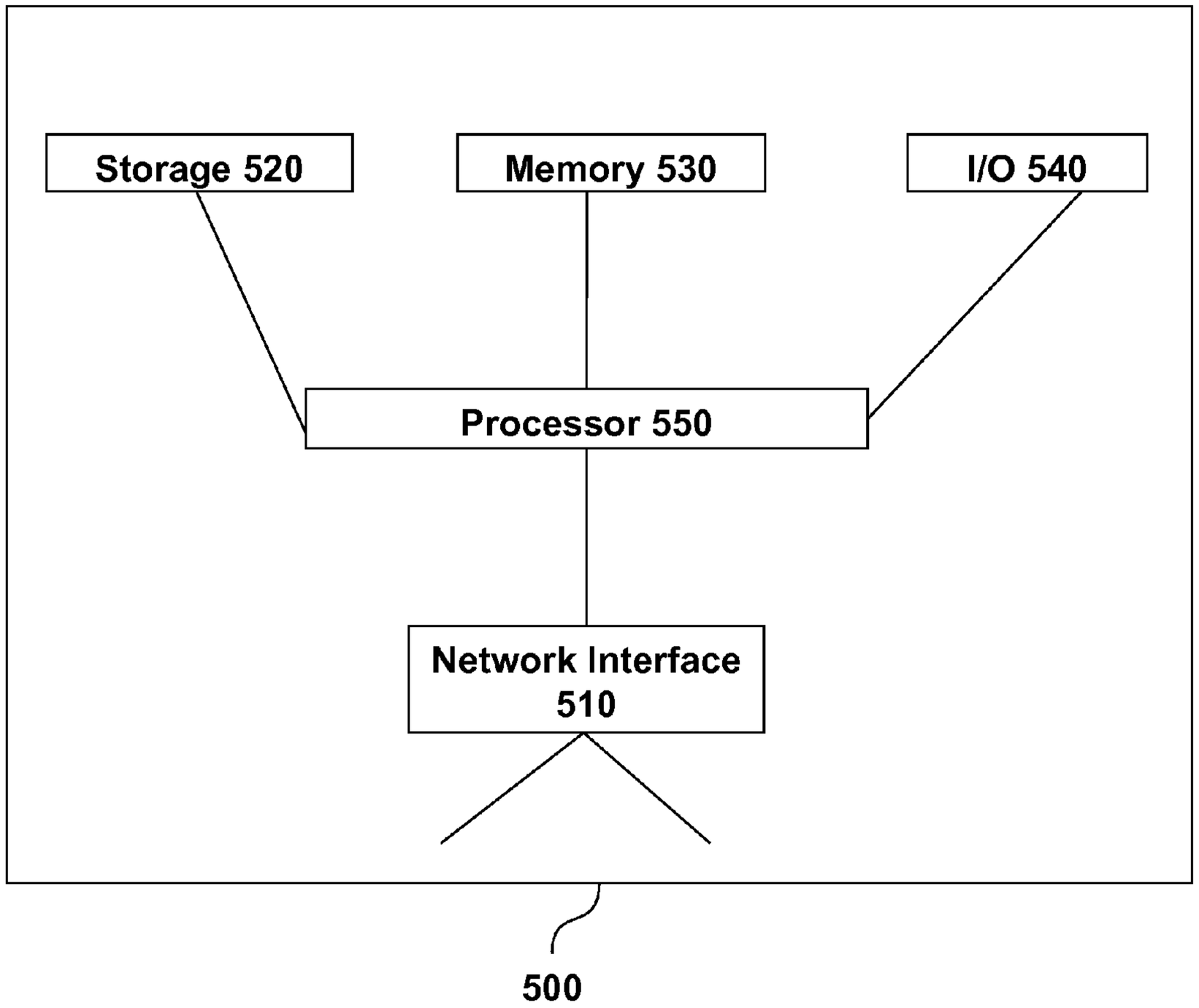

Storage 520
Memory 530
I/O 540
Processor 550
Network Interface 510
500

Figure 5

RESCUE METHOD AND SYSTEM FOR AN OVERBOARD PASSENGER

FIELD OF THE DISCLOSED TECHNOLOGY

The disclosed technology relates generally to emergency dispatch and, more specifically, emergency rescue of overboard passengers of a ship.

BACKGROUND OF THE DISCLOSED TECHNOLOGY

Ships, boats and other watercraft are widely-used by many people for transportation, fishing, vacation, and recreation. Improvement of technology and relatively low cost, especially with regard to passenger cruise ships, have led to an increase in the number of cruise ships transporting vacationers to various locales around the globe.

Safety continues to be an important issue for cruise vacation providers. Yet, every year passengers and crew members on various sea vessels fall overboard and are lost due to drowning and/or prolonged exposure to harsh elements/conditions. The individual causes of people falling overboard range from rough seas to mere accidents. If a witness isn't nearby to report an overboard passenger, there is a strong likelihood that the disappearance of the person will not be noticed in time to locate and rescue the person. Thus, by the time rescue operations are initiated, the overboard individual may have drowned or been swept away a great distance by moving currents. Cruise ships and other boats are often fitted out with life boats and life rings. However, even if the fall overboard of a passenger is witnessed, it may still be difficult to effect the proper dispatch of the rescue device to the passenger, given the movement of the seas and the wake created by the vessel. This is especially true of unmanned rescue devices, such as life vests or life rings thrown overboard for retrieval by the victim, especially if the victim is injured or otherwise rendered incapacitated due to his/her fall overboard.

More often than not, a passenger falling overboard goes unnoticed, and no alarm is raised until the passenger is deemed to have gone missing. By the time this occurs, the ship may be miles away from the overboard passenger, and the likelihood of rescue could be very low. Thus, there is a need, unfulfilled in the prior art, for automatically alerting crew members of a ship of the approximate location of an overboard passenger, and automatically dispatching a homing rescue device to such a location.

SUMMARY OF THE DISCLOSED TECHNOLOGY

Therefore, it is an object of the disclosed technology to provide a system and method for automatically dispatching a rescue flotation device to a location of an overboard passenger, based on a water-activated transmitter carried or worn by the passenger.

As such, in an embodiment of the disclosed technology, a system is used for rescuing an individual who has fallen off a ship into water. The system uses a plurality of water-activated signal transmitters. Each of the transmitters are worn by a passenger of a ship. At least one receiver is mounted on the ship. The receiver is operable to detect a signal transmitted from the signal transmitters. The system also has at least one flotation rescue device mounted on the ship. The rescue device is equipped with a motor and a navigation system. The navigation system is capable of directing the rescue device to

an activated signal transmitter. The transmitter may be incorporated into a room card (access card or key to gain access into a room) of a cabin on the ship, and may require salt-water for activation. The transmitter may further be equipped with a Global Positioning System receiver capable of detecting a location of the transmitter, and transmitting the location in the signal sent to the receiver. "GPS" (Global Positioning System) is defined as a satellite navigation system that provides location and time information in all weather conditions, anywhere on earth. Thus, a "GPS receiver" is defined as any device capable of interacting with or accessing the Global Positioning System. The rescue device may be further operable to detect said signal and navigate towards a direction of the signal. Further, the rescue device may have a receiver for receiving the signal containing the location of the transmitter. The navigation system of the rescue device may use the location-containing signal in navigating to the transmitter.

The flotation device is dispatchable and takes into account the speed and direction of the ship. That is, the navigation of the rescue device determines, based on the ship's speed and direction, how far the transmitter is from the ship, and in what direction the rescue device should proceed. Using this information, the rescue device may be dispatched by a statistically most probable current location of the transmitter. The signal may be detected by satellites which control the rescue device. That is, the transmitter and/or the rescue device may employ an output from global positioning satellites in order to accurately guide the rescue device to the location of the transmitter. In one embodiment, multiple radio signal receivers may be mounted to different portions of the ship, such as, for example, the aft and the bow. In this embodiment, the location of the transmitter may be determined based on a triangulation technique employed by the receivers. "Triangulation" is defined as the process of determining the location of a point by measuring angles to it from known points, the known points being the locations of the receivers mounted on the ship.

In a further embodiment of the disclosed system, a flotation rescue device may be dispatched from another ship if the other ship is closer to the location of the transmitted signal. Thus, if a nearby ship employs the same system, and if the nearby ship detects the transmitter, then the flotation rescue device may be dispatched therefrom. Further, the signal may be detected by satellites and a position of said transmitter is dispatched to a closest ship to the transmitter, wherein the closest ship is selected from a group of ships having similar rescue devices causing a rescue device to be dispatched to the location of the signal transmitter. In a still further embodiment, if a transmitter is determined to have been activated, but the coordinates of the transmitter are unascertainable, then the rescue device may be directed to traverse a known path recently traveled by the ship as determined by the ship's GPS. The rationale for this feature is that an overboard passenger, even taking into account currents and weather, is not likely to have strayed very far from the ship's wake in the time immediately following a fall overboard. For example, if the ship is traveling due south at 270°, then the rescue device would be dispatched to navigate due north at 90° in order to back track over the path traveled by the ship. In a further embodiment, the rescue device may be configured to stop at a location along the known path based on a duration of time during which the transmitter has been activated and a velocity of the ship.

In another embodiment of the disclosed technology, a method is used for rescuing an overboard victim. The method is carried out, not necessarily in the following order, by: A) providing a transmitter to each passenger on a ship, the trans-

mitter becoming activated when immersed in water; B) detecting a signal transmitted by an activated transmitter; C) determining the location of the activated transmitter; and D) launching a self-powered locomotive flotation device from the ship, and sending commands to the device, the commands having instructions to navigate by way of the self-powered locomotion towards the location of the activated transmitter. A "locomotive" device is defined as a device having an independent motor or similar mechanism for propelling the device without requiring external force. A "self-powered" device is defined as any device that incorporates an on-board power source, such as a battery or gas-powered engine, for operating the device.

In a further embodiment of the disclosed method, the commands are automated to cause the self-powered locomotive flotation device to automatically navigate by way of the self-powered locomotion towards the location of the activated transmitter. In another embodiment, the commands are manually sent by a user remotely controlling the navigation of the self-powered locomotive flotation device towards the location of the activated transmitter. In still another embodiment, the step of launching is an automated process after the step of detecting, and wherein the navigation is automated based on the determining of the location.

The rescue device may employ a motor and navigation system for directing the rescue device towards the location of the activated transmitter. In embodiments, the step of determining the location of the activated transmitter is carried out using triangulation of the signal. In still further embodiments, the transmitter may have a satellite positioning system, and the step of determining location may be carried out by the satellite positioning system. Still further, an additional step may be provided of navigating the rescue device along a route along which the ship has traveled, based on a navigation system of the ship.

In a still further embodiment, an additional step may be included of determining, upon receiving a signal from said activated transmitter, if a the signal is a false alarm by detecting if the signal is being sent from a point on said ship. The step of detecting if the signal is being sent from a point on the ship may be based on a signal strength of the signal. Further, the step of detecting if the signal is being sent from a point on the ship may be based on an elevation of the signal. Still further, the step of detecting if the signal is being sent from a point on the ship may be based on a comparison of a detected velocity of said signal transmitter to a velocity of said ship.

In yet another embodiment of the disclosed technology, a method is used for rescuing an overboard victim. The method is carried out, not in any particular order, by: A) providing a plurality of cards to passengers on a ship, each of the cards having a water-activated, signal-transmitting beacon; B) detecting a signal being transmitted from a beacon; C) determining that the signal is being emitted from a location outside the confines of the ship; D) determining a direction of the transmission of the signal by using a directional antenna employing a direction-finding technique; E) approximating a distance of the beacon from the ship; F) launching a self-powered locomotive flotation device of a plurality of self-powered locomotive flotation devices mounted at several points on the ship, the self-powered locomotive flotation device determined to be closest of the plurality of rescue devices to the beacon; and G) directing the self-powered locomotive flotation device towards the beacon, using a motor on the rescue device. A "beacon" is defined as a device designed to attract attention to a specific location by emitting radar, radio, sonic and/or visual signals to assist in identifying a location of and/or navigating to a location of the beacon. "Cards" are defined as any cards issued to passengers on a ship for purposes of identification, unlocking cabin doors, facilitating payments, and/or embarkation/disembarkation. Such cards may already be equipped with radio-frequency identification chips or magnetic strips for purposes of interacting with other devices. A "motor" is defined as any machine for converting energy into motion.

It should be understood that the use of "and/or" is defined inclusively, such that the term "a and/or b" should be read to include the sets: "a and b," "a or b," "a," "b."

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. **1** shows a general overview of an overboard passenger rescue system of an embodiment of the disclosed technology.

FIG. **2** shows a general overview of a triangulation configuration of a rescue system of an embodiment of the disclosed technology.

FIG. **3** shows a flow chart illustrative of steps followed to carry out a method of launching a rescue device according to embodiments of the disclosed technology.

FIG. **4** shows a flow chart illustrative of steps followed to carry out navigation of the rescue device according to embodiments of the disclosed technology.

FIG. **5** shows a high-level block diagram of a device that may be used to carry out aspects of the disclosed technology.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF EMBODIMENTS OF THE DISCLOSED TECHNOLOGY

In an embodiment of the disclosed technology, a system and method are used for dispatching a rescue float to an overboard passenger or crew member (herein "victim" or "overboard passenger") from a ship, boat or other watercraft (herein "ship"). A water-activated transmitter is carried or worn by each and every passenger (including crew members, in embodiments of the disclosed technology) on a given ship. Upon detecting moisture, the transmitter is activated to send a data signal to a radio signal receiver on the ship. The contents of the data signal may be the location and/or coordinates of the victim as determined by triangulation of the signal and/or a GPS receiver. Upon transmission of the data, a rescue flotation device or vessel (herein "rescue device") is automatically deployed from a portion of the vessel into the water. The rescue device may be any floating device capable of acceleration in water. The rescue device may be dispatched from a portion of the ship nearest to the determined location of the victim, and/or the rescue device may be self-propelled, such that it navigates to the approximate location of victim.

Embodiments of the disclosed technology will become clearer in view of the following description of the drawings.

FIG. **1** shows a general overview of an overboard passenger rescue system of an embodiment of the disclosed technology. A victim **10** who has fallen overboard from a ship **20** is shown. While the ship **20** is illustrated as a regular boat, it may be any vessel known in the art, such as, but not limited to, a cruise ship, a fishing boat, a passenger ferry, a cargo or container ship, a naval vessel, or the like. The victim **10** is shown wearing a transmitter **100**. Upon sensing water, the transmitter **100** may transmit a data signal **110** to a receiver **200** on the nearby ship **20**. Alternatively, the receiver **200** may send a signal **210** to the transmitter **100**. Thus, data signals may be transmitted back and forth between the transmitter **100** and the receiver **200**. Furthermore, the transmitter **100** may generally emit a signal that is capable of being picked up by any nearby ships or aircraft. For purposes of this specification, the terms transmitter **100** and receiver **200** will refer to devices

disposed on a passenger **10** and the ship **20**, respectively, regardless of whether each device sends and/or receives signals.

Upon receiving the signal **110** indicative of an overboard passenger, the receiver **200** activates a rescue system on the ship. The rescue system employs a rescue device **35** disposed on portion of, or within, a housing **30** on the ship **20**. The rescue device **35** is then dispatched from the housing **30** into the water for retrieval by the victim **10**.

Depending on the data signal **110** received from the transmitter **100**, a particular, single rescue device **35** of a plurality of rescue devices disposed on the ship **20** is dispatched. For example, a passenger ship that is 1000 feet in length and 200 feet wide at the rear may have multiple rescue devices disposed along the sides and rear of the ship at 50 foot intervals. Thus, a rescue device **35** may be dispatched from the portion of the ship **20** nearest to where the victim **10** is located in the water, as determined by the data signal **110**. On a fast-moving ship, the particular rescue device that is dispatched may depend on the amount of time that has passed between the transmitter **100** first sensing water and the time at which the rescue device **35** was dispatched. In a case where dispatch of the rescue device **35** may be instantaneous or nearly-instantaneous (limited only by transmission speed and processing of the data via automated processes) to the sensing of water by the transmitter **100**, the device may be dispatched from the location nearest to the victim **10**.

The rescue device **35** may be a life vest or similar flotation device. Additionally, the rescue device **35** may have a battery-powered motor for propelling and/or steering the rescue device **35**. For example, a light-weight propeller and rudder may be equipped on the rescue device **35** for automated or manual navigation to the victim **10**. The motor, battery, propeller, and rudder are sufficiently light in weight, such that the rescue device **35** floats, and is capable of keeping an adult human afloat, upon reaching the victim **10**. The rescue device **35** has a floatable body, such that its buoyancy maintains an upright orientation of the rescue device with the propeller and rudder disposed in the water. Thus, the rescue device **35** may have a symmetrical top and bottom surface, such that the device may be operated regardless of which surface is on top when the device lands in the water. Alternatively, the rescue device **35** may have a keel or some other counter-weight for keeping the rescue device upright in the water.

In the automated embodiment, as illustrated in FIG. **1**, the rescue device **35** may receive the location coordinates of the victim **10** from the transmitter **100** and/or the receiver **200**, so that the rescue device **35** can be automatically navigated towards the vicinity of the victim **10**, using an on-board computer to control the propeller and rudder. Alternatively, an automatic computer on the ship **20** may send radio signals to a receiver on the rescue device **35** for purposes of controlling the propeller and rudder. In a manual embodiment, a crew member aboard the ship may be alerted to the overboard victim **10**, and may dispatch and control the rescue device **35** by use of a remote control.

The transmitter **100** is preferably on the person of each passenger of the ship at all times. When used on passenger cruise ships, the transmitter **100** may be incorporated into each passenger's identification and/or room card. Such cards, which serve multiple purposes, are issued by many cruise lines to be carried by every single passenger. On a naval vessel or cargo ship, the transmitter **100** may be, for example, incorporated into each crew member's badge or uniform. All crew members of warships must typically be uniformed at all times when they are outside of their cabin, and thus, if the transmitter **100** is part and parcel of each crew member's shirt, it would automatically be on the crew member at all times when there is a risk of his/her falling overboard.

The transmitter **100** is water-activated by using a water sensor. The water sensor may have two electrodes, which, when dispersed in water, decreases the resistance between the two electrodes, thereby completing and activating a electrical circuit with an on-board battery and signal transmitter. The maximum amount of resistance needed to activate the transmitter **100** is adjustable, based on the type of water. That is, the electrodes may activate the transmitter **100** only if the electrodes are dispersed in saltwater (as opposed to freshwater). Thus, this would eliminate false alarms in instances when the transmitter is accidentally exposed to water on the ship. For example, if a cruise passenger went swimming with the transmitter in a pool on the ship, or if a crew member accidentally got the transmitter wet while using a sink, the transmitter would not be activated, provided that this occurred in freshwater. This is because saltwater has a much higher conductivity than freshwater. due to the particle content contained therein. Thus, the electrical circuit of the transmitter **100** may require a liquid of an elevated conductivity to be activated. With regard to cruise ships with saltwater pools, an additional measure against false alarms may immediately make a determination whether an activated transmitter is coming from a point within the confines of the ship, as will be discussed in greater detail below.

FIG. **1** represents a simplified example of a configuration of the disclosed technology for illustrative purposes. The disclosed technology may be employed on very large ships, such as cruise ships, container ships, or naval vessels. When carrying out the embodiment on a large scale, a plurality of rescue devices **35** and corresponding rescue device housings **30** may be placed at various points on a large ship. Moreover, a plurality of receivers **200** may be mounted at various points on the ship **20**, in order to improve accuracy and guarantee that the signal from the victim **10** will be received.

In one embodiment, the disclosed technology may be carried out by using direction-finding techniques. "Direction-finding" is defined as the establishment of a direction from which a received signal was transmitted by using radio signals or other wireless forms of communication. In the embodiment shown, the transmitter **100** acts as a beacon, continuously giving off a radio signal upon activation. A directional antenna **200** on the ship determines the source of the transmitted radio signal by determining from which direction the maximum signal is obtained. Upon determination of the signal direction, the rescue device **35** may be dispatched in the direction of the received signal.

As for the distance to be traveled by the rescue device **35**, a pre-configured distance may be implemented based on the speed of the ship and the average time it takes for the overboard passenger's transmitted signal to be picked up. For example, if a ship is moving at 7 knots, and a passenger is determined to have fallen overboard 15 minutes earlier than the time of launching of the rescue device, the following calculation is performed. Firstly, knots are converted to miles per hour, which would yield that at 7 knots, the ship is traveling at approximately 8 miles per hour. Because the passenger fell overboard 15 minutes prior, the ship will have traveled 2 miles from the point at which the passenger fell overboard. Thus, the rescue device may be pre-configured, upon dispatch, to travel 2 miles in the direction of the received radio signal, as determined by the aforementioned direction-finding techniques. In further embodiments of the disclosed technology, if a direction of the signal is undetermined, the rescue device may additionally be configured to simply back-track

over the ship's traveled path, and stop at a pre-configured distance determined by using the aforementioned distance calculation.

A receiver **200** on the ship **20** may be constantly seeking out distress signals, in a Doppler-type configuration. That is, the receiver **200** may send out signals in all directions radially from the center of the ship **20**. Upon detection of a distress signal, the rescue system is initiated. Thus, under such a system, it would be possible for a second ship to pick up a signal transmitted from an overboard or shipwrecked passenger of a first ship. This is especially likely if, for some reason, the transmitter was not immediately activated upon the passenger falling overboard. By the time of activation, the overboard passenger may be closer to a different ship than the one from which the passenger originated. Such would possibly be the case if the system is used in inland waterways or busy harbors.

FIG. **2** shows a general overview of a triangulation configuration of a rescue system of an embodiment of the disclosed technology. In systems and methods of the disclosed technology, radio signal triangulation may be used to determine the location of the overboard victim **10** via the transmitter **100**. A triangulation system requires three or more known points and a single unknown point, the distance between each of which is used to calculate a location of the unknown point. Such a system may require three or more antennae/receivers on different locations of the ship **20**. In the example shown, a first receiver **201** is disposed on a point at the front of the ship **20**, a second receiver **202** is disposed on a point at the rear of the ship **20**, and a third receiver **203** is disposed around the middle of the ship **20**.

In operation, a known signal **204** is transmitted between the first receiver **201**, the second receiver **202**, and the third receiver **203**. Each receiver then receives the beacon signal from the transmitter **100**, and communicates with the other receivers to determine the distance and location of the transmitter **100**, using triangulation. Thus, the first receiver **201** receives a first signal **101** from the transmitter **100**. The second receiver **202** receives a second signal **102** from the transmitter **100**. And the third receiver **203** receives a third signal **103** from the transmitter **100**. Using this system, the dispatched rescue device **35** is calibrated to navigate to the location of the transmitter **100** using the same triangulation principles. Thus, the rescue device **35** may also have a radio signal transmitter.

Given the possibility that the transmitter **100** is not activated until the ship **20** is a great distance away from the victim **10**, an on-land or an off-shore receiver may serve as one of the points used to triangulate the position of the transmitter. That is, because the three on-board receivers **201**, **202**, **203** are spatially located close to one another, it may be difficult to determine a specific location and distance to a victim **10** that is far from the ship **20**. Thus, an alternative triangulation point may be used elsewhere, at a location not on the ship **20**. In further embodiments, Doppler triangulation may be employed to determine location and distance with greater specificity.

Alternatively, the transmitter may be a distress radio beacon, such as, for example, an Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon (EPIRB), an Emergency Locater Transmitter (ELT), or a Personal Locater Beacon (PLB). Such a beacon, when activated manually or by water-immersion, sends out a distress signal. The signal is picked up by satellites managed by a world-wide monitoring service, and the location of the transmitter is determined. Upon detection of the distress signal, emergency respondents may communicate with the ship to initiate rescue services or dispatch third party rescue services, such as, for example, the coast guard of a nearby landmass. As such, the communication with the ship may cause the rescue device **35** to be dispatched automatically. That is, the emergency respondents may directly communicate with the ship to launch the rescue device **35**.

In another embodiment of the disclosed technology, the location of the transmitter **100** may be determined using a global positioning system (GPS). In this embodiment, the transmitter **100** may use a small GPS receiver therein. Developments in GPS technology have led to the introduction of GPS receivers that are smaller and thinner than a dime, and thus such a receiver may be employed in an identification card or badge on a passenger or crew member of a ship. Upon water activation of a transmitter **100** with a GPS receiver, the GPS receiver would locate satellites to determine coordinates thereof. The GPS coordinates would be traceable by a computer on the ship **20**, which would dispatch and control the operation of the rescue device **35** in navigating to the victim **10**. As such in this embodiment, the rescue device **35** may also have an on-board GPS receiver for facilitating the navigation towards the victim **10**.

FIG. **3** shows a flow chart illustrative of steps followed to carry out embodiments of the disclosed technology. The method is initiated in step **310** when transmitters are provided to passengers of a ship. The passengers may be any individuals that are aboard any type of ship. For example, on a cruise ship or ferry, the passengers may include guests as well as crew members. Thus, a "passenger" is defined as any individual that is aboard a ship or will be boarding the ship in the near future. "Passengers," for purposes of this specification, need not be restricted to humans and may include animals and/or transportable equipment or cargo.

In an embodiment of the disclosed technology, the transmitter is incorporated into a combination room key, identification, and payment card carried by passengers at all times. Such cards are common on vacation cruises and serve multiple purposes. They are typically required to be carried by passengers on a cruise at all times and thus would logically be on a passenger's person in the unlikely event that the passenger falls overboard. Many of such cards are already equipped with radio frequency identification (RFID) tags. The radio signal transmitter may require the addition of a battery to power the transmitter. Because the battery would only be required if the transmitter is activated, the battery may presumably be a small, one-time-use battery and would not require recharging. As briefly discussed, the card may also have an on-board GPS chip that is also powered by the battery and only activated when the card is immersed in water. In other embodiments, the transmitter may be incorporated into another article that is on a passenger's person at almost all times. For example, on a naval vessel, the transmitter may be incorporated into an officer's or other crew member's badge.

Referring still to FIG. **3**, the method proceeds with step **320**, whereby a distress signal is sought and detected using an on-board receiver or antenna. The distress signal is transmitted from a transmitter that has been immersed in water. Inevitably such a system would be prone to false alarms in situations where the transmitter is accidentally exposed to water, such as, for example, the water of a pool on a cruise ship. Thus, in step **330** it is determined whether the signal is being transmitted from a point within the confines of the ship. That is, the rough location of the signal transmission (defined as the relative direction within 45 degrees, 30 degrees, or 10 degrees, or within a 100 meter radius) is quickly detected and determined to be coming from aboard the ship or from the sea. The rough location or relative direction may be determined based on the elevation of the transmitter. Since most passen-

ger-accessible portions of a cruise ship are elevated above the surface of the water, a detected decreased elevation of a transmitter may be determinative of whether the transmitter has fallen into the sea. Moreover, the transmitter may be equipped with a cancellation button or mechanism, by which a carrier of the transmitter may signify a false-alarm, thereby canceling any rescue operations which may be underway.

Thus, step **340** asks if the signal transmission is coming from aboard the ship. If yes, step **350** indicates a false alarm, and the method is terminated in step **360**. If not, in step **370**, the specific location of the transmitter on the water is determined. The location at the surface of the water is determined, and the transmitter, in embodiments, floats, to aid in transmission thereof of the location. The numerous discussed techniques may be employed for determining and tracking the location of the transmitter. It should be understood, however, that the overboard person will need to be able to grab onto or attach him or herself to the dispatched flotation device.

Upon determining the location of the transmitter, even if the location is not yet precise (GPS satellite navigation may take some time render a precise location, and/or the transmission signal from the overboard person may be weak or have interference), the rescue device may be launched from a portion of the ship nearest to the transmitter (step **390**). That is, numerous rescue devices may be mounted around the perimeter of the ship. If the ship is stationary or is moving very slowly, the rescue device nearest to the location of the transmitter is dispatched. If the ship is moving, depending on its speed, the rescue device may be launched from a portion on the rear or stern of the ship. If the victim, for example, has fallen off the starboard side of the ship, then the rescue device may be dispatched from the starboard side of the stern of the ship.

In step **390**, the rescue device is navigated towards, or in the direction of, the transmitted signal. This step may be carried out by an auto-piloted navigation system equipped on the rescue device. The navigation system may receive the coordinates of the transmitter from the receiver on the ship, and use GPS to navigate towards the transmitter. The rescue device may also be configured to track the transmitted signal, using an on-board receiver, and may navigate to the transmitter in this manner. In order to move in water, the rescue device may have a light-weight motor and propeller. The rescue device may also be controlled via radio signals given by a remote control on the ship. The remote control may be operated automatically by a computer, or manually by a crew member. The rescue device may further be equipped with a camera, radar, sonar, and/or GPS to further facilitate rescue. The size of the rescue device may vary. The rescue device may have an inflatable portion, which is self-inflated, using CO_2 or compressed air at the time of dispatch. The rescue device may be equipped with handles, ropes, or life-vests capable of keeping an adult human afloat and comfortable for an extended period of time.

FIG. **4** shows a flow chart illustrative of steps followed to carry out navigation of the rescue device according to embodiments of the disclosed technology. The flow chart of FIG. **4** picks up where the flow chart of FIG. **3** left off. Thus, step **390** involves the initiation of navigating the device towards the activated transmitter. The device may be navigated automatically or manually, according to steps **410** and **420**, respectively. Using automated navigation, step **430** dictates that commands are sent from an on-board computer to the rescue device. The commands may be received by the rescue device prior to being dispatched from the ship. Alternatively, a computer on the ship may remain in communication with the rescue device after it has been launched or dispatched. Thus, radio signals may be sent back and forth between the rescue device, and the on-board computer as the rescue device is navigated towards the transmitter.

When manual navigation is employed, in step **440**, commands are sent to the rescue device using a remote control. The remote control uses radio signals to control the operation of the rescue device. As such, acceleration and steering of the rescue device is controlled by the remote control. In one embodiment, step **450** dictates that a user navigates the rescue device using GPS. In this embodiment, the user may control the rescue device via an interface with a compass or a screen with a map displaying the locations of the transmitter and the rescue device with respect to one another. Thus, the user may navigate the rescue device towards the location of the transmitter as determined by GPS.

Alternatively, in step **460**, the user may remotely control the rescue visually. That is, the user may be standing on a point of the ship from which the rescue device and the transmitter may be viewable. As previously discussed, the transmitter may be a beacon with a flashing light. The flashing light may be an encoded optical signal. An encoded optical signal communicates a coded message to anyone viewing the flashing light. The light may flash at different intervals or using different colors, the summation of which projects a message which is understood by a viewer. The message may, for example, indicate to any rescuers how long the transmitter has been activated. Such information may be important for giving rescuers an idea of how long a victim has been exposed to, for example, cold water, thus giving rescuers a time frame in which they should reach the victim before hypothermia develops. Thus, the user may manually direct the rescue device towards the transmitter by following the flashing beacon. The operation of the device may be similar to that of a radio-controlled boat, in that a small handset may be used to send signals to the rescue device. Alternatively, the control of the device may be similar to that of an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), in that the rescue device may be equipped with a camera, the view of which is projected on a screen and viewable by the remote user in piloting the device. Such would be the case in conditions of poor visibility, or if the transmitter is at such a distance from the ship that the flashing light and/or the passenger is out of sight.

Still referring to FIG. **4**, the method proceeds with step **470**, whereby the rescue device is in close proximity to the transmitter. "Close proximity," for purposes of this specification, is defined as being close enough to the transmitter so that an able-bodied adult would easily be able to swim to the rescue device. Thus, "close proximity" may be between 5 feet and 50 feet, depending on the weather conditions and accuracy of the GPS and/or radio signals. Ideally, the rescue device is navigated to within arms' reach of the passenger, but of course weather conditions and limitations of the technology employed may prevent such accuracy. Thus, in embodiments, the rescue device is transmitted within swimming distance of the passenger, such as within 100 meters, 50 meters, or 10 meters. Upon the rescue device reaching the transmitter, the method may be terminated in step **480**. That is, the navigation of the rescue device to the victim is completed, not necessarily the rescue of the victim. It is envisioned that further steps may be taken to rescue the victim once the rescue device has reached the victim. As such, the rescue device may employ a communication system by which the victim may communicate with members of the crew of the ship or other rescuers. Moreover, the determined coordinates of the transmitter and/or the rescue device may be employed by third parties in recovering the victim. Furthermore, once a victim is grasping

the rescue device, the rescue device may conceivably continue to be navigated back to the ship or to some other point of safety.

FIG. **5** shows a high-level block diagram of a device that may be used to carry out aspects of the disclosed technology. Device **500** comprises a processor **550** that controls the overall operation of the computer by executing the device's program instructions which define such operation. The device's program instructions may be stored in a storage device **520** (e.g., magnetic disk, database) and loaded into memory **530** when execution of the console's program instructions is desired. Thus, the device's operation will be defined by the device's program instructions stored in memory **530** and/or storage **520**, and the console will be controlled by processor **550** executing the console's program instructions. A device **500** also includes one, or a plurality of, input network interfaces for communicating with other devices via a network (e.g., radio signaling). The device **500** further includes an electrical input interface for receiving power and data from a battery or other power source.

A device **500** also includes one or more output network interfaces **510** for communicating with other devices. Device **500** also includes input/output **540** representing devices which allow for user interaction with a computer (e.g., display, keyboard, mouse, speakers, buttons, etc.). One skilled in the art will recognize that an implementation of an actual device will contain other components as well, and that FIG. **5** is a high level representation of some of the components of such a device for illustrative purposes. It should also be understood by one skilled in the art that the methods and devices depicted in FIGS. **1** through **4** may be implemented on a device such as is shown in FIG. **5**.

While the disclosed technology has been taught with specific reference to the above embodiments, a person having ordinary skill in the art will recognize that changes can be made in form and detail without departing from the spirit and the scope of the disclosed technology. The described embodiments are to be considered in all respects only as illustrative and not restrictive. All changes that come within the meaning and range of equivalency of the claims are to be embraced within their scope. Combinations of any of the methods and apparatuses described hereinabove are also contemplated and within the scope of the invention.

I claim:

1. A water rescue system comprising:

a plurality of water-activated signal transmitters, each transmitter being on an individual on a ship;

at least one receiver on said ship, said receiver operable to detect a signal transmitted from said transmitters; and

at least one flotation rescue device mounted on said ship, said at least one flotation rescue device having a motor and navigation system, said navigation system directing said rescue device to an activated said transmitter;

wherein said transmitter is part of a card which further functions as a room key of a cabin on said ship.

2. The water rescue system of claim **1**, wherein:

said transmitter further comprises a Global Positioning System (GPS) receiver; and

said signal comprises a location of said transmitter based on an output of said GPS receiver.

3. The water rescue system of claim **1**, wherein said at least one flotation rescue device further comprises:

a receiver for receiving said signal comprising said location of said transmitter, wherein said navigation system uses said location in navigating to said transmitter.

4. The water rescue system of claim **3**, wherein said at least one flotation rescue device is dispatched to a statistically most probable current location of said water-activated transmitter based on a speed and a direction of said ship, and a time between said detection of said signal and said dispatch of said at least one flotation rescue device.

5. The water rescue system of claim **3**, wherein said at least one flotation rescue device is dispatched and navigates to a location based a signal strength and a direction of said signal.

6. The water rescue system of claim **1**, wherein said signal is detected by satellites and a position of said transmitter is dispatched to a closest ship to said transmitter, wherein said closest ship is selected from a group of ships, each having at least one said flotation rescue device, causing a said flotation rescue device to be dispatched to said location of said transmitter.

7. The water rescue system of claim **1**, further comprising at least one receiver mounted at an aft said ship and at least one receive mounted at a bow of said ship, said receivers being in communication such that a location of said transmitter is triangulated based on said signal.

8. The water rescue system of claim **1**, wherein an additional flotation rescue device from an other ship is directed to said transmitter if said other ship is closer to said transmitter.

9. The water rescue system of claim **1**, wherein said flotation rescue device is directed to traverse a known path most recently traveled by said ship as determined by a navigation system of said ship.

10. The water rescue system of claim **1**, wherein said at least one flotation rescue device is configured to stop at a location along said known path based on a duration of time during which said transmitter has been activated and a velocity of said ship.

11. A method of rescuing an overboard victim, the method comprising the steps of:

providing a transmitter to a plurality of passengers on a ship, said transmitter operable to be activated when immersed in water;

detecting a signal transmitted by an activated said transmitter;

determining a location of said activated transmitter; and

launching a self-powered locomotive flotation device from said ship, and sending commands to said device, said commands comprising instructions to navigate by way of said self-powered locomotion towards said determined location of said activated transmitter;

wherein said transmitter is part of a device which further functions as a key on said ship.

12. The method of claim **11**, wherein said step of launching is an automated process after said step of detecting, and wherein said navigation is automated based on said determining of said location.

13. The method of claim **11**, wherein said commands are manually sent by a user remotely controlling said navigation of said self-powered locomotive flotation device towards said location of said activated transmitter.

14. The method of claim **11**, wherein said self-powered locomotive flotation device comprises a motor and a navigation system for directing said self-powered locomotive flotation devices towards said location of said activated transmitter.

15. The method of claim **11**, wherein:

said transmitter comprises satellite positioning system; and

said step of determining a location of said activated transmitter is carried out using said satellite positioning system.

16. The method of claim 11, further comprising a step of:

determining, upon receiving a signal from said activated transmitter, if a said signal is a false alarm, by detecting if said signal is being sent from a point on said ship.

17. The method of claim 16, wherein said detecting if said signal is being sent from a point on said ship is based on a signal strength of said signal.

18. The method of claim 16, wherein said detecting if said signal is being sent from a point on said ship is based on an elevation of said signal.

19. The method of claim 16, wherein said detecting if said signal is being sent from a point on said ship is based on a comparison of a detected velocity of said signal transmitter to a velocity of said ship.

20. A method of rescuing an overboard victim comprising:

providing a plurality of cards to passengers on a ship, each of said cards having a water-activated, signal-transmitting beacon and wherein each of said cards is a key to at least one room on said ship;

detecting a signal being transmitted from a said beacon;

determining that said signal is being emitted from a location outside of confines of said ship;

determining a direction of said transmission of said signal using a directional antenna employing a direction finding technique;

approximating a distance of said beacon from said ship;

launching a self-powered locomotive flotation device of a plurality of self-powered locomotive flotation devices mounted at varying points on said ship, said self-powered locomotive flotation device determined to be closest of said plurality of said locomotive flotation devices to said beacon; and

directing said self-powered locomotive flotation device towards said beacon using a motor on said rescue device.

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