



# 'MAYDAY MAYDAY MAYDAY'

**Whenever you hear these words a shiver is guaranteed to run down your spine because whatever the reason for the call someone out there feels their life or someone else's is in real danger ...**

**H**owever many times you hear these words the real fear and worry you hear in people's voices is chilling. While the word 'Mayday' is understood worldwide, there are actually many ways of issuing a distress signal. In this article we'll look at the various ways we can alert others to our predicament; we'll look at flares and how we set them off, the suggested changes to the Mayday message and the various electronic methods

of issuing a distress signal. We'll also consider what to do when you're out boating and hear a Mayday call.

Firstly, what is distress? The 'proper' definition is that you should issue a distress call when there is 'grave and imminent danger to life, vessel, vehicle or aircraft and immediate assistance is required'. Definitions are all well and good if you are sitting in your armchair with a cup of coffee and not a care in the world, but what does this mean in practice?

The way I look at it is that if you feel life is at risk on your vessel, then you are well within your rights to make that call. Spend any time on the various boating forums, though, and you will see people dissecting calls they have overheard, discussing whether they should have been Maydays, pan-pans or routine calls. Whatever anyone else thinks with the benefit of hindsight doesn't matter; if you feel when the messy stuff has hit the fan it deserves a Mayday then you certainly won't get any

criticism from me from my comfy chair/PC. My point is, don't ever think about others – do what you feel is right.

Quick quiz question – how many ways are there of issuing a distress signal? Got 15? No? Then sadly you are wrong. The COLREGs list 15 ways of issuing distress signals, and while it's fair to say that not all of them are particularly practical on a RIB or smaller sports boat (barrel of burning tar on foredeck etc etc!), there are probably four key ways for us to get the message

**... IF YOU FEEL LIFE IS AT RISK ON YOUR VESSEL, THEN YOU ARE WELL WITHIN YOUR RIGHTS TO MAKE THAT CALL.**





## IN THE ABSENCE OF ANYTHING BETTER, FLARES WILL REMAIN A KEY PART OF OUR SAFETY SYSTEM ON BOARD FOR SOME WHILE ...

out that we need some assistance. These are: 1) Flares 2) Using your VHF radio 3) Your hands 4) Other electronic means. Of course, we can also use our phones – more of which later.

Flares have been around for ages and more recently there has been some discussion about whether they have had their day and if the dangers of carrying, using and disposing of explosives outweigh the benefits of having them, particularly in light of the existence of more up-to-date means of issuing a distress signal.

At the moment, though, flares occupy a unique position inasmuch as, on seeing one, 'Mr Joe Public'

generally understands what he is looking at and will call the coastguard. In the absence of anything better, flares will remain a key part of our safety system on board for some while – certainly in respect of boating close to shore.

Of course, we mustn't overlook the trusty VHF. If operating close to shore in a pretty busy area then a hand-held VHF may suffice. Any RIB over 4.5m should really have a fixed VHF fitted and nowadays that should always be one with a red distress push button (Digital Selective Calling).

Again, various people seem to question the benefits of using the DSC option when issuing a distress message,

feeling that just sending the usual voice message does the job just fine. In my opinion, not using the DSC (push and hold the red button for 8–10 seconds) plus then sending a voice Mayday overlooks the key benefits of the DSC system which are:

- 1) DSC distress alerts are loud and obvious, voice calls can be missed
- 2) DSC alerts are heard by boats that either have the volume low or are switched to a channel other than 16



## FLARES – WHAT TO BUY

**Red rocket flares:** Instructions say visible up to 30 miles but assuming 10–12 for smaller boats makes more sense. Rises to about 300m and burns red and floats gently down lasting a few minutes. Suited to those regularly boating more than 5 miles offshore – buy four. Visible day and night.

**Red hand-held flares:** Visible up to 5–6 miles according to literature but in a RIB/sports boat a better assumption would be 1–3 miles. Close inshore, carry two plus two hand-held orange smoke flares. Visible day and night.

**Orange smoke flares:** Will usually be hand-held but for further offshore choose the buoyant version – they last longer. Visible 1–3 miles but wind strength may disperse smoke rapidly. Carry two hand-held inshore or two buoyant versions for offshore use. Visible day only, useful for position fixing.

**Top tip:** Carry a gardening-type glove in the flare box to protect your hands.

**Disposing of flares:** Things have changed and getting rid of old flares is not as easy as it used to be. Walking into a police

station with a pile of flares used to be pretty positively received – no longer! Nowadays there are only two ways to dispose of out-of-date pyrotechnics: 1) Contact a disposal centre and agree a drop-off time (see [www.mcga.gov.uk](http://www.mcga.gov.uk) for details) 2) Buy the flares from an organisation that agrees to take them back when they are out of date (eg [www.oceansafety.com](http://www.oceansafety.com)).

And don't do what a complete idiot did in one town – hide them in his garden waste that went to the recycling plant that ...!



## ... AN EPIRB WILL ALWAYS BE IN MY KIT BAG WHEN I BOAT EITHER ALONE OR OFFSHORE.

3) DSC calls have a slightly longer range – by about 10%

4) DSC alerts are simple and rapidly get the key information out – that it's a Mayday and the position of your craft

5) More and more chartplotters linked to a DSC VHF immediately plot the casualty's position on the plotter

EPIRBs (Electronic/ Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon) have come down massively in price and are now a real possibility for many boaters. The versions with GPS embedded can transmit your position rapidly and accurately and come in two forms – a smaller personal version and a larger (better battery life etc) version for fitting to the vessel. Available for between £350 and £800, with batteries that last up to 72 hours, an EPIRB will always be in my kit bag when I boat either alone or offshore. EPIRBs transmit your distress to the coastguard, and if you have a version with GPS built in, the position transmitted will be accurate to a few hundred metres or so.

More recently some products have been launched that can issue distress messages to call centres, in contrast to EPIRBs, which transmit their messages via coastguard stations. These newer products are cheaper

and can have a wider use and may be worth a look, although I prefer the idea that the coastguard gets my distress message as soon as possible rather than relying on another party to pass it on.

We all carry mobiles and know to dial 999 in an emergency. VHF's should take preference in a marine environment, though, as they 'broadcast' your distress. Mobile reception is not always great afloat, and position fixing for the RNLI/ coastguard can be more difficult.

Finally, we could also use our hands/arms to show the internationally recognised distress signal.

### And the future?

Laser flares have been developed as a potential replacement for pyrotechnics but have yet to gain any real foothold. Whether they ever will is open to debate, not least because it seems more and more likely that electronic means of distress will be the norm. With phones now integrated with GPS there must be a future with probably some sort of app being able to issue a distress for you. We will probably also see smaller versions of the Spot Tracker integrated into other devices – perhaps even into watches.

So there are many ways of issuing a distress signal, but what should you do if you

hear a Mayday call or see another boater in distress?

What you should do will be based on a number of factors. Firstly, you would need to note down the details of the distress. Where is the casualty, what is the problem, how many people are involved? If you hear a VHF call then in all probability the coastguard will acknowledge the call and deal with the issue. You may be asked to assist. Whether you respond to a call for assistance because the coastguard hasn't responded, or whether you respond to that call for assistance, consider a few things.

Firstly, where is the casualty relative to you? If they are miles away it is likely someone else is better placed to assist; if they are near you, are you in a position to assist? Think about the boat you are in, the people you have on

board and the nature of the casualty's distress; remember that your first priority must always be to the people on your boat – the RNLI will not thank you for becoming a casualty yourself if you push your boat and crew beyond something you are capable of. Remember too that you being 'on scene' may help the coastguard hugely by being their 'eyes and ears' even if you are not in a position to help directly.

So in summary, think about the various aids you have on board for issuing a distress signal and ensure that you know how to use each of them. Also think about what you and your boat are capable of and ensure that you don't risk the people on your boat for something beyond your capability.

**Paul Glatzel** runs Powerboat Training UK in Poole and is author of the *RYA Powerboat Handbook*.



## MAYDAY CALL

The Mayday message has recently undergone a small rejig to also now include the vessel's call sign. An example call could be:

- *Mayday, Mayday, Mayday this is Top Hat, Top Hat, Top Hat*
- *MMSI 235666999, MTNY9*
- *Mayday Top Hat*
- *Position 52° 42'09N, 001° 57'64W main*

*channel Poole Harbour*

- *Man overboard, 4 persons still on board*
- *Require immediate assistance*
- *Over*

Why the change? Adding in the call sign gives the coastguard further means of precisely identifying the craft and linking the DSC call made to the subsequent voice call.

While not a change, note the description of the position by a latitude and longitude and a description – increasing your chances of help.

However ...!!

If the stuff has really hit the fan then just get out Mayday + position – you will get help!