

FIRST BOAT

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SOS, MAYDAY, and other distress signals

Vin Pica looks at The Rules for distress signals that all boaters should be familiar with...

The Rules for Prevention of Collision at Sea – *Hey You, Over There! Help!*

Rules 36 (Signals to Attract Attention) and 37 (Distress Signals) are rather straight forward and don't take up a lot of pages in the COLREGs. But, upon reflection, can there be anything more important than to be able to send signals that the receiver actually understands, especially if you are in distress...?

This column is about that...



A USCG photo of a vessel examiner examining the visual distress signals as part of a safety check.

What Does Rule 36 Say?

"If necessary to attract the attention of another vessel, any vessel may make light or sound signals that cannot be mistaken for any signal authorized in these Rules." Meaning? Well, if you send up a red flare, that conforms. Send up a white flare? It means you are the salvor looking for something or someone but are not in distress...

Further, it goes on. "Any light to attract the attention of another vessel shall be such that it cannot be mistaken for any aid to navigation. For the purpose of this rule use of high intensity intermittent or revolving lights, such as strobe lights, shall be avoided." Of note, the strobe prohibition doesn't apply to the Inland Rules (inside the Demarcation Line, which means inside our bays and creeks.) Meaning? Don't use a red or green light as a way to attract attention. Even if you are waving it back and forth, at any distance you will look like a lighted buoy bobbing in the waves. And if you are going to use a strobe, stay away from yellow colored lights. You might be mistaken for a submarine surfacing...

How about pointing a searchlight at another boat or some shore facility and holding your cap over it – dot, dot, dot, dash, dash, dash, dot, dot, dot...? I've done it with a small flash light – and a USCG patrol came alongside shortly thereafter to rescue me from a wind-blown dinghy. While making way, one of my oars had broken in half... I was now good at rowing in a circle but not much else and getting blown further and further away from shore. I certainly wasn't going to leave the dinghy (night time or otherwise, my motto is "you may leave your vessel in distress when she has sunk to the bottom beneath you.") So, fishing my flash light out of my pocket (never get on a boat without a flash light and a knife in your possession), I started flashing "S-O-S"... and it worked...

What Does Rule 37 Say?

"When a vessel is in distress and requires assistance, she shall use or exhibit the signals in Annex IV to these Regulations." Printed here for your convenience!

Distress signals include:

- (a) "SOS" (...---...) signal made by any audible or visual means;
- (b) International Code Flags: "NC" (a blue/white checkerboard flag above a blue-white-red-white- blue horizontally striped flag);
- (c) Hoisting any square flag with a ball (or anything resembling a ball) above or below it;
- (d) Flames made visible (as burning oil barrel);
- (e) A rocket parachute flare or hand held flare showing a red light;*
- (f) Rockets or shells, throwing red stars, fired one at a time over a short interval;
- (g) Continuous sounding of any fog-signal device;
- (h) Slowly and repeatedly raising and lowering arms outstretched to each side;
- (i) Signals transmitted by emergency position-indicating radiobeacons (EPIRBs);
- (j) A signal sent by radiotelephone consisting of the spoken word "MAYDAY";
- (k) Radiotelephone alarm signal: generally sent over 2182 kHz and consisting of an alternating audio signal sounding something like a siren (BEEEEEE-DOOOOOO, BEEEEEE-DOOOOOO, etc.);
- (l) A piece of orange-colored canvas with either a black square and circle or other appropriate symbol (for identification from the air);
- (m) A dye marker of any color.
- (n) Orange smoke emitted from distress flare.
- (o) A gun or other explosive signal fired at intervals of about 1 minute.
- (p) The radiotelegraph alarm signal.
- (q) In Inland locations, a strobe light.

* As noted above in the Rule 36 section, a red light or flare indicates distress versus a white light or flare which is used for illumination. Also, note that the upside down US flag is no longer a valid distress signal.

Of note, let's spend a minute on (h) above. Waving your arms across your body like a baseball umpire signaling "safe!" isn't a danger signal. Conversely, waving "hello" by waving your arms over your head is a danger signal – not a way to say hello to a passing USCG vessel. Tragically, a number of years ago that is exactly what happened. A USCG rescue vessel was dispatched to a may-day called for 2 swimmers who had come to grief off of the beach in East Quogue. As the USCG raced out of Shinnecock Inlet and

turned west towards East Quogue, one of the crewmen saw a swimmer in the surf off the county beach – waving his arms in what was the classical distress signal. The team diverted to the nearby swimmer and, as they came in close, the swimmer yelled, “Hey, fellows, have a great patrol!” Being so close to shore at that point, the boat was swamped by the breakers and delayed in responding to the real emergency. One swimmer didn’t make it. Only God knows if the delay mattered or not... It didn’t help, that is for sure...

BTW, if you are interested in being part of USCG Forces, email me at JoinUSCGAux@aol.com or go direct to the D1SR Human Resources department, who are in charge of new members matters, at [DSO-HR](#) and we will help you “get in this thing..”