

Internationally recognised methods of communicating distress

There are many ways of indicating we are in distress and all vessels should have two methods of sending and receiving distress signals. These signals should only be used when we are in “grave and imminent” danger. They indicate to others that we need urgent help. Using these signals when not in distress is illegal.

The distress signals we use at sea are defined in the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea (Colregs) and in the International Code of Signals in Annex IV.

- 1) **DSC (Digital Selective Calling) Distress Alert** – This allows you to send a digital distress message for your VHF radio by pressing the red distress button. This digital alert is sent on channel 70 and your radio will automatically go to this channel when you press the button. Remember – you should always try and follow it up with a voice call.



- 2) **Mayday call** - this is probably the first way most people will call for help and also one of the most effective methods. Especially, when linked to a radio with DSC capability. This is sent on Channel 16: For example:

Mayday, Mayday, Mayday
Sailing Yacht Blue Sky, Blue Sky, Blue Sky
MMSI 235675673 Call Sign MAWR3
Mayday, Sailing Yacht
MMSI 235675673 Call Sign MAWR3
My position is 50° 42'.8N 001°39'.6W
I am holed and sinking
I require immediate assistance
There are 4 persons on board, preparing to abandon to Liferaft
Over



- 3) **Flares** (see our article on flares for more information)

- a. Parachute – good for attracting attention when vessels are some distance away or you may not be able to see any other vessel
- b. Red hand held
- c. Orange smoke



4) Flames on-board your vessel i.e. from a burning tar/oil barrel



5) EPIRB (Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon)

They are great as they work worldwide and can alert the emergency services that you are in trouble when you are out of range for using other methods of sending a distress signal.

It is essential you register your EPIRB with the coastguard. In the UK this is with

The EPIRB Registry, HM Coastguard Falmouth, Pendennis Point, Castle Drive, Falmouth, Cornwall, TR11 4WZ. Tel 01326 211569.

The EPIRBs operate on 406.025MHz and when activated transmits a distress signal which is received by the COSPAS/SARSAT satellite system. The signal is then passed to a Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC). The centre then decides on whether to send a lifeboat or helicopter to you. Or if you are out of range they send another satellite signal, via the INMARSAT Satellite system to other vessels out at sea.



6) SART (Search and Rescue Transponder)

A SART reacts to the emission of a radar. If the SART detects a signal it will transmit twelve pulses, and this is seen on the radar screen as a series of twelve dots. The first dot is at the position of the SART and the others go in a straight line towards the edge of the screen.



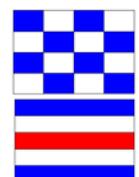
As the rescue vessel approaches the SART, the twelve dots become short arcs, and these increase in length as the vessel gets closer until the SART is reached and then they become complete circles.



7) Repeated raising and lowering of arms - this cannot be seen far and it does require using a crew member to continuously raise and lower their arms. The plus side is that this needs no special equipment and is free!



8) Code flags "N" November over "C" Charlie – although this cannot be seen for far – once the flags are hoisted you can now forget them and carry on with dealing with the incident.



9) **Square flag and ball** – this has the same issues as for the “N” over “C” flag – also it may be much harder to distinguish as a distress signal depending on the orientation of the boat.



10) **Continuous sounding of a fog horn** - This is a very simple method of attracting attention, but is obviously only of use when other vessels are in ear shot!



11) **A gun fired at one minute intervals** - Not many vessels in European waters will carry guns or explosive devices, but in other parts of the world you may come across this signalling method (just make sure they are not firing at you!).



12) **On an orange background a black ball and square** – Another simple method of attracting attention if people are within sight, which once hoisted allows you to carry on dealing with the incident.



13) **SOS Morse code** (...---...) by any signalling method i.e. light and sound – again a simple method, most people have torches on board, whistles etc. that they can use to make this signal.



14) **Dye Marker** – this is particularly good for Man Overboards.



It is important to make sure your means of communicating distress are:

- Easily accessible
- In date
- Crew know where they are kept and how to use them