

Voice procedure 2: Distress calls

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Of all the reasons for wanting to have a radio on board, the ability to call for help in an emergency is undoubtedly at the very top of the list. It's important to appreciate, however, that a radio distress message may trigger an expensive, time consuming, and possibly dangerous search and rescue effort.

It is definitely not something to be used just because the wind has dropped and you would like a tow, or because the fuse has blown on your anchor winch.

Strictly speaking, no radio transmission can be made without the authorization of the Master (or Skipper) of the vessel, but this is particularly true of distress calls. Even if the Master has delegated authority for authorising routine calls to someone else, distress calls must still be authorised by the person in charge of the vessel at the time.

Definition of distress

Syllabus item D1.1

The definition of "distress" under the Radio Regulations is rather narrower than in everyday language. In order to qualify as a distress situation:-

a vessel, vehicle, aircraft or person
must be in
grave and imminent danger.

A dog has fallen overboard, and is in danger of drowning

The dog is in grave and imminent danger, but it is not a vessel, vehicle, aircraft, or person, so although this is a *distressing* situation, **it is NOT a distress situation.**

The skipper has fallen overboard, but you have practised the MoB routine lots of times.

It is far more difficult to recover a human being than to retrieve the fender and bucket used for practice, and survival after even a few minutes immersion in cold water is far from guaranteed. Unless you are 100% confident of a happy outcome, this incident involves grave and imminent danger to a person, so **it is a distress situation.**

A sailing boat has been dismasted, and the remains of the rig are tangled in her propeller. The strong wind is sweeping her quickly towards a rocky shore, only a mile or two away.

This concerns a vessel. It is in danger of being swept onto the rocks, and is likely to do so very soon. This meets both tests, so **it is a distress situation.**

A motor boat has been immobilised by discarded fishing gear tangled around her propellers and rudders. She is now drifting, some thirty miles from the nearest land.

This incident concerns a vessel, so it passes the first test. But although the vessel may eventually be in danger, it is certainly not imminent. This does not meet the "grave and imminent" test, so it is **NOT a distress situation.**

A sailing vessel has gone aground in a river estuary, on a falling tide, and is now stuck firmly in the mud.

This concerns a vessel, so it passes the first test, and the danger has already happened, so it is more than imminent. But there is no reason to believe that grounding on mud and in sheltered waters will involve the loss of the vessel, or endanger lives, so it fails to meet the "grave" part of the "grave and imminent" test, and **is therefore NOT a distress situation**.

After struggling to raise the anchor, the sixty year-old skipper suffered a severe pain in his chest, and fell to the deck.

These signs and symptoms could well indicate a heart attack. If someone on board is a doctor or paramedic, they might make a quick and confident diagnosis that it is really angina, and that the patient will soon recover. Someone with little or no first aid training could not be so confident, and would be justified in fearing the worst. **Whether this is a distress situation or not depends on the judgement of the person in charge of the vessel.** In this particular case, the "person in charge" is no longer the usual skipper.

The Distress Call

Syllabus Item D1.1

The distress call is the only case in which a ship radio station is allowed to broadcast: in other words, it is allowed to transmit a distress call and message without addressing them to anyone.

Although the Radio Regulations allow distress calls to be made on any channel, it clearly makes sense to use the channel that is set aside for the purpose, and to use the maximum power you have available.

Select Channel 16
Use High Power
Remember to speak slowly and clearly

The distress call itself consists of the procedure word "Mayday", spoken three times, followed by the procedure words "this is", followed by your own boat name three times followed by your callsign. If you have an MMSI (see page 62), you should include it as well:

Mayday, Mayday, Mayday
this is
Princess Ida, Princess Ida, Princess Ida
Mike, Victor, Yankee, Quebec, Seven
MMSI 232089001

The distress call should only be sent when the distress relates to your vessel or crew.

Most of the prowords relating to distress are based on French. Mayday itself comes from the French "M'aidez", meaning "help me!"

The Distress Message

Syllabus item D1.1

The distress call isn't addressed to anyone, and it doesn't include the word "over" to invite a reply. That is because it is intended to be immediately followed by the distress message.

The distress message always follows the distress call, but the two parts are quite separate and distinct:-

the distress call is the initial "shout for help", intended to alert listeners to the coming message

the distress message conveys important information to potential rescuers.

The distress message is intended to convey important information to potential rescuers. No-one is going to refuse to help you if you don't get it quite right, but you should still try to include the necessary information in the right order. This is partly because a practised routine is less likely to miss bits out, partly because the correct order puts the most important bits of information first, and partly because someone who doesn't speak very good English is more likely to understand what they hear if they receive the information in the order they are expecting.

It may help to write the nonsense word MIPDANIO on the edge of the chart, on the back of your hand, or to include it in a notice alongside the radio, because it is an acronym for the distress message.

M	Mayday	Even though you've just said Mayday three times in the distress call, say it again at the start of the distress message.
I	Identity	The boat name and callsign (just once, this time. It may be helpful to add a brief description, such as "yacht" or "motor cruiser" before the name. If you have sent a distress alert by DSC (see page 67), you should also include your MMSI.
P	Position	This is the single most important piece of information, but it can be sent in either of two ways (see page 47).
D	Distress	A brief explanation of what is wrong, such as "on fire" "aground" or "flooding". Don't waste time explaining how it happened.
A	Assistance	A brief explanation of what help you need, such as "request a tow", "request pumps", or "request helicopter evacuation". For most small craft incidents, any kind of help will do, so long as it comes quickly, so "request immediate assistance" would be most appropriate.
N	Number	The radio regulations say "any other information which might facilitate the rescue". The number of people involved is clearly relevant if, for instance, the boat is sinking or on fire, but less so if the incident concerns a man overboard or an injury. Don't waste time with ages, sexes, ranks or relationships.
I	Information	Apart from the number of people on board, this could include a brief description of the boat ("ten metre motor cruiser with a blue hull and white superstructure"), or your future intentions (we expect to abandon into a liferaft in five minutes").
O	Over	If ever you wanted a reply, this is it!

A complete distress call and message, then, goes like this:-

"Mayday, Mayday, Mayday, this is Princess Ida, Princess Ida, Princess Ida, Mike, Victor, Yankee, Quebec, Seven MMSI 232089001."

"(M) Mayday.
(I) Motor Cruiser Princess Ida
Mike, Victor, Yankee, Quebec,
Seven MMSI 232089001.
(P) My position is five zero degrees
three two decimal three minutes
north, three degrees, two five decimal
four minutes west.
(D) Sinking.
(A) Require immediate assistance.
(N) Three people on board.
(I) Twelve metre motor cruiser,
white deck and hull.
(O) Over".

With a little bit of luck, Princess Ida's distress call will soon be answered:-

"Mayday
Princess Ida
this is
Brixham Coastguard,
Brixham Coastguard,
Brixham Coastguard,
Received Mayday
Stand by

Notice that the reply to the distress call, and all subsequent radio messages connected with the distress incident, begins with the proword "Mayday". This gives absolute priority over all other transmissions - except, of course another Mayday.

Including the right items in the right order is important. In a real distress situation, it will help your rescuers to help you. In the SRC exam, a lot of students throw marks away by missing out the "Mayday" and "Identity" parts of the Distress message.

Specifying position

The obvious way to specify your position is by latitude and longitude, probably by reading it from the display of a GPS set. This is always acceptable, but it may not be the best option. In some situations, it should be treated with particular care.

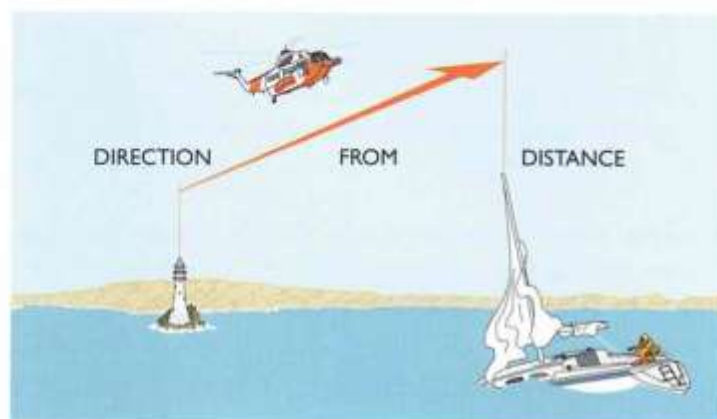
Check that the position indicated by the GPS is valid: if the GPS has been switched on within the past few minutes, or if its antenna has been damaged, it may not be showing the true position.

If the battery voltage is low, such as by self-discharge through flood water or by continuously-running pumps, the added power drain of transmitting on the radio may lower the voltage so much that the GPS switches itself off.

Latitude and longitude are meaningless to a listener until they are plotted on a chart. To many local boats, something like "half a mile south of Gull Rock" or "the eastern side of Spit Sand" would mean a lot more. It is quite acceptable, and sometimes most appropriate, to give positions by reference to a well-known and charted landmark.

The convention is to express your position FROM the charted object, giving any bearings as three figures.

*"My position is one
six five degrees from
Black Rock Buoy, two
decimal four miles"*



Remember the order of things by imagining that you are giving directions to a helicopter pilot:- such as "fly south from the lighthouse for three miles".

Remember that the hypothetical helicopter will be flying **from** the landmark **towards** you: make sure you don't send him the wrong way!

Unless you specify otherwise, it will be assumed that bearings are in degrees true, and distances are in miles.

Receiving a distress message

Syllabus items C3.2 and D1.1

It is a very well-established principle that seafarers are supposed to help each other when in distress. It is embodied in the international Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) convention, as well as in the Radio Regulations.

The ITU Convention says:-

Radio stations shall be obliged to accept, with absolute priority, distress calls and messages regardless of their origin, to reply in the same manner to such messages, and immediately to take such action in regard thereto as may be required.

That principle, however, needs to be diluted with a bit of common sense. If a cruise liner were to get into difficulties on its way out of Southampton on a summer Sunday, a thousand yachts and motor cruisers trying to reply to its distress call would not be exactly helpful!

More recent amendments to the Radio Regulations clarify the situation: in effect they say:-

if it is likely that a coast radio station (such as the coastguard) will have received the message, you should allow five minutes for them to respond before doing so yourself

if you are not in a position to offer effective assistance, you should not acknowledge the message

unless you are acknowledging and assisting, you must maintain radio silence on any channel being used for distress communications.

As well as these compulsory requirements, it is a very good idea to write down as much of the distress message as possible, in case you subsequently find that you are able to assist in some way, such as by sending a Mayday Relay (see page 51)

Acknowledging a distress message

Syllabus item D1.1

If, after several minutes, you have not heard a response from the coastguard, but decide that you are in a position to offer assistance, you should first acknowledge the distress call:-

"Mayday,
Princess Ida,
this is
Hilarion,
Hilarion,
Hilarion,
Received Mayday,
Out."

As soon as possible afterwards,
follow up the acknowledgment
by telling the casualty where
you are, how fast you are
travelling towards them, and
when you expect to arrive:-

"Mayday
Princess Ida
this is
Hilarion,
Hilarion,
Hilarion,
My position is five zero degrees
two nine decimal five minutes
north, three degrees, two four
decimal two minutes west.
My speed two five knots.
My ETA ten minutes.
Out."



Seelonce

Syllabus item D1.1

The fact that there are distress communications going on, automatically imposes radio silence on the channel concerned. No-one, in other words, should transmit on that channel unless their message is directly connected with the distress incident or unless they are in distress themselves.

It is always possible, though, that someone may not realise that there is a distress incident in progress: they may have only just switched their radio on, or they may have only just arrived within range.



Mayday Relay (see also page 71)

Syllabus item D1.1

There are, unfortunately, many reasons why a vessel is unable to transmit a distress message to the Search and Rescue authorities. It may be that:

- the vessel concerned has been dismantled, losing its radio antenna in the process
- rising bilge water has reached the battery, resulting in loss of power to the radio
- the message is being sent from a hand-held radio which has limited the range due to its lower power
- the vessel, such as a small day boat or dinghy, does not have a radio set
- the vessel is simply out of range

Whatever the reason, if you see a vessel in distress, or receive a distress message, and have not heard any radio traffic relating to the distress, you may be able to assist by acting as a relay station. The proword "Mayday Relay" makes it clear that you are not in distress yourself, but are passing on a message for someone else. If you don't receive a reply from the Coastguard, you should repeat the process, but substituting "All stations" in place of the name of the coastguard station.

