



## Distress Alerting Procedures



Distress alerting procedures are of paramount importance in life threatening situations. Recreational boaters must know the correct procedures to transmit a distress alert in time of emergency. Distress alerts may be transmitted by a number of methods including: VHF radio, Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon (EPIRB), satellite systems, and cellular telephone.

### VHF Radiotelephony

To transmit a distress alert by VHF radiotelephony, the radio is switched to channel 16 and the distress message is transmitted in the format below:

**DISTRESS SIGNAL: MAYDAY MAYDAY MAYDAY**  
**NAME OF VESSEL IN DISTRESS:**  
**RADIO CALL SIGN:**  
**POSITION:**  
**NATURE OF DISTRESS:**  
**NUMBER OF PERSONS ABOARD:**  
**DESCRIPTION OF VESSEL:**  
**OTHER INFORMATION:**

Recreational boaters begin an emergency radio call on VHF channel 16 (156.8 MHz). Make certain the radio is turned “on.” To ensure the radio is operating, listen with the “Squelch” turned to zero before transmitting. If the channel is clear, a steady “hiss” will be heard from the speaker. If the channel is occupied, voices will indicate communications already in progress. Press the microphone Push-To-Talk button, speak directly into the microphone in a normal tone of voice and enunciate clearly. Watch the radio for an indication the transmitter is active when the button is depressed. Many radios have a red or amber light that illuminates in the transmit mode, others display “TX” in the front panel Liquid Crystal Display (LCD).

Begin the distress message with the appropriate radiotelephone signal (i.e., “MAYDAY”) followed by the identity of the vessel in distress (i.e., name and radio call sign). Transmit the radiotelephone distress message and use the proword “OVER”. Release the transmit button. The radio’s transmit indicator will extinguish and a “hissing” sound (or voices) should emanate from the radio’s speaker. If an immediate reply is not received, check the radio again. Is it tuned to Channel 16? Is the squelch button turned all the way down? Is the volume control turned up? Repeat the transmission and listen for a reply. If no reply is received after three distress calls, switch the radio to channel 22A and attempt to contact the U.S. Coast Guard. An example of a properly formatted distress call is provided below.

***“MAYDAY, MAYDAY, MAYDAY. This is the yacht Sun Flower, Sun Flower, Sun Flower. Whiskey-alfa-eight-eight-one-three, whiskey-alfa-eight-eight-one-three, whiskey-alfa-eight-eight-one-three. I am in distress. My location is one mile northeast of Beavertail Light on a bearing of fifty degrees. I am holed and taking on water. Sun Flower is a thirty-foot sloop with a wide red cove stripe. Request immediate assistance. Over.”***

In any emergency, don a life preserver and/or survival suit and direct others to do the same. Activate the vessel’s EPIRB and proceed with transmission of the radio distress call. In many circumstances authorities may decide to initiate a search and rescue operation via helicopter. Although effective, helicopter operations

are inherently hazardous and potentially dangerous. Keep search and rescue (SAR) personnel informed of the vessel's position, weather, sea conditions, and any change in the distress situation. Be prepared to signal with flares or a signaling mirror when SAR aircraft is sighted. At night, light the boat area and deck. *Never* shine any light source directly at a helicopter during flight as doing so may blind the pilot and crewmembers wearing night vision equipment.

While waiting for SAR personnel to arrive, plan and communicate precisely what to do when rescue operations begin with an emphasis on safety. Some helicopter operations may involve the rescue of personnel by hoist. To prepare for hoisting operations:

- Let the hoist basket touch the water or the metal deck of the boat to “bleed off” (i.e., discharge) high voltage static electricity before coming in contact with it
- *Do not delay in boarding.* There is likely to be rapid motion between the boat, helicopter, and hoist basket
- Sit inside the hoist basket with both arms and legs *inside*
- Hold on tightly
- Carefully listen and follow the directions of SAR personnel

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