

Prevention of Collision at Sea

Signaling Your Distress!

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Can there be anything more important than to be able to send signals that the receiver actually understands, especially if you are in distress? Rules 36 (Signals to Attract Attention) and 37 (Distress Signals) are rather straight forward in that regard. This column is about that.

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? The use of a red flare conforms to this injunction – but a white flare doesn’t. A white flare is something that you would use to look for something or someone, but you are not in distress. So, no one is going to come save you.

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 the 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). So, you can’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, *in extremis*, you are going to use a strobe, stay away from yellow-colored lights. You might be mistaken for a surfacing submarine.

Necessity is the mother of invention. Once, while making way in Moriches Bay, one of my oars broke in half. I was now good at rowing in a circle but not much else and getting blown farther and farther 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 flashlight out of my pocket (never get on a boat without a flash light and a knife in your possession), I started flashing “SOS” by holding my cap over it – dot, dot, dot, dash, dash, dash, dot, dot, dot... and it worked. A USCG patrol

came alongside shortly thereafter to rescue me from a wind-blown dinghy.

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.” Distress signals include:

- a) “SOS” - signal made by any audible or visual means (see above!)
- 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 (see above again!)*
- 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 radio beacons (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 one minute.
- p) The radiotelegraph alarm signal.
- q) In inland locations, a strobe light.

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 Mayday called for 2 swimmers who had come to grief off the beach in East Quogue. As the U.S.C.G. 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.

*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 U.S. flag is no longer a valid distress signal.

Little Known Fact: There are not horns on boats. Only whistles. Why? Because there are rules that say if it makes noise, it is a whistle!

Rule 32, Section 5, Sounds and Light Signals, says – “The word ‘whistle’ means any sound-producing appliance capable of producing the prescribed blasts.”

Rule 32, Section 5, Sounds and Light Signals, means – Rules 21-37 apply to the facts of a case or in the interpretation of their use by the master of a vessel. It defines a short blast as being approximately one second and a prolonged blast as being of four to six seconds.

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, which is in charge of new members’ matters, at [DSO-HR](#) and we will help you “get in this thing.”