



Visual Distress Signals and the Private Boat Captain

When I teach seamanship courses, I stress to the private boat captains that they have to imagine that they are astronauts who have landed on Mars. If something has gone wrong, it is going to take time for help to arrive so you have to start doing things to buy yourself more time. And when does the rescue clock start? When someone sees or hears your cry for help. So this starts a series that we will add to over the course of the coming Fall and Winter so that, by next Spring, you will be armed for what the sea gods present to you. And we start with getting that clock started as fast as possible – the visual distress signal.

USCG requirements for visual distress signals are:

- Three hand-held red flares (day and night).
- One hand-held red flare and two parachute flares (day and night).
- One hand-held orange smoke signal, two floating orange smoke signals (day), and one electric distress light (night only).

In short, you need three USCG approved and unexpired flares or devices for day and night. Check the dates on the side of the flare. They are manufactured with 3 ½ years of life. How long have they been on the shelf or in your cabin? By the way, are they still good after the expiration date? Most likely they are so keep them around as back-up. But don't expect to pass a USCG boarding if they aren't "good to go" as the boarding officer looks at them.

All boaters should be able to signal for help and instructions for use are printed right on the device. What should you consider when doing so? First, unless you are truly "in extremis", don't set them off unless you can see or hear help nearby (btw, if you can see lights on the land, that constitutes help nearby – just don't use them all in case no one is looking.) Shooting flares into a dark, empty sky might prove to be totally useless, especially if someone happens along later and you have no way to signal them. Secondly, if you are using hand held flares, hold them out over the boat. If a piece of the burning slag drops off and lands on your fiber glass deck, be prepared to watch it burn straight through to the sea below. You can't put out the burning magnesium compound. Third, if a flare pistol or hand-held rocket propelled distress signal is used, be sure to take the wind into account. In generally calm winds, keep your arm at approximately 45-60 degrees above the horizon with the wind at your back. As the wind increases, increase the angle of your arm upwards but do not fire the device straight up or in such a direction that it may land on your boat (such as into the wind) or another boat.

As you can see, distress signals have distinct advantages and disadvantages. No single device is ideal under all conditions or suitable for all purposes. But pyrotechnics are universally recognized as excellent distress signals. However, there is potential for injury and property damage if not properly handled.

By USCG regulations, who is required to have these visual distress signals?

All vessels used on coastal waters, the Great Lakes, territorial seas, and those waters connected directly to them, up to a point where a body of water is less than two miles wide must be equipped with U.S.C.G. Approved visual distress signals. Vessels owned in the United States operating on the high seas must be equipped with U.S.C.G. Approved visual distress signals. Regulations prohibit display of visual distress signals on the water under any circumstances except when assistance is required to prevent immediate or potential danger to persons on board a vessel.

And who is not required to have these visual distress signals?

The following vessels are not required to carry day signals but must carry night signals when operating from sunset to sunrise:

- Recreational boats less than 16 feet in length.
- Boats participating in organized events such as races, regattas, or marine parades.
- Open sailboats less than 26 feet in length not equipped with propulsion machinery.
- Manually propelled boats.

But think of our motto, "semper paratus" – always prepared! Why go to sea in anything and be unable to call for help and get the rescue clock started?