

Mayday Planning

By Keith Wohltman, U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary Flotilla 95 –

MARCO ISLAND, FL – The worst time to think about what you need to do in an emergency boating situation is during the emergency. You will be very busy dealing with the emergency, making sure everyone on the boat is safe and trying to contact anyone for help. That is why you need to plan well in advance for a Mayday event.



Photo courtesy of the U.S. Coast Guard

First, we all know that “Mayday” is the word we need to communicate to obtain help in a boating emergency. Perhaps you even know that it comes from the French m'aider ('help me'), a shortened form of venez m'aider ('come and help me'). But do you know how to make the call and what information is suggested to be transmitted with the Mayday message? Does everyone on your boat know? Suppose the reason for the call is that you, the skipper, are somehow disabled or preoccupied with attending to the emergency. Can your spouse or children or your fishing buddy make the call for help?

Unfortunately, the answer to those questions might be "no." Let's start your Mayday planning before your next trip.

Your boat's safety equipment should include a VHF radio and the required visual distress devices. A working radio will be your communication tool in the event of a serious boating problem. Always perform a radio check by calling channel 27 (for Marco Island) prior to leaving your dock. It will confirm that your radio is functioning. Check it again while you are out on the water.

Let's take a simple example to develop your plan. You are offshore a few miles west of Cape Romano and strike a submerged object. Your boat, the “Reel Fun”, is taking on water and starting to list to one side. Your bilge pump is working, but it seems that you are taking more water in than you are pumping out. In other words, you are sinking. Here are the things running through your head: I need to call a mayday, I need to get my flares, I need to make sure everyone is in his lifejacket, I need to find a bucket to bail water. Where do I tell them I am located? My buddy really hurt his ankle. These are just a few of the problems you might encounter.

Here is what your call should be: (spoken slowly and clearly)

Mayday----Mayday----Mayday

This is Reel Fun, Reel Fun, Reel Fun, FL 1234 ZW. (pause)

Mayday, this is Reel Fun.

My position is: 25 50.77 N; 081 44.35 W Cape. (or Romano bears 090 3 miles)

Struck submerged object, taking on water

Need pumps, medical assistance and tow.

Four adults, two children aboard

One adult male with twisted or broken ankle.

Estimate can remain afloat for 3 hrs.

Reel Fun is a twenty-five-foot center console Sea Hunt with white hull and T-top.

This is Reel Fun - Over

That is a lot to remember in an emergency. The first part of your plan should be to write down the information known and what is needed on a 5x7 card and keep it on the boat. (see the sample form). This card can also be laminated and kept near your radio for easy access during an emergency.

Why use your VHF radio and not a cell phone? Spotty cell coverage in our area is one reason, or you may be beyond cell coverage. But as Geoffrey Pagels, a Fifth Coast Guard District Search and Rescue Specialist based in Portsmouth, Va. explains; “VHF is your direct link to the Coast Guard because the Coast Guard watchstanders at small boat stations and at the Sector [command centers] monitor those radio channels. You’ll be talking directly to the element of the Coast Guard that launches boats and planes,” and that watchstander can speak with you to get more information. Moreover, Pagels says, other nearby commercial and recreational vessels may be monitoring the airwaves and can lend a hand or communicate directly with a vessel in distress.

Things that can make this easier are additional technical enhancements to your safety equipment.

A GPS will provide you with your latitude and longitude more precisely than your guess as to direction and distance to an object. If your radio is equipped with a Digital Selective Calling (DSC) feature and you have registered your Maritime Mobile Service Identity (MMSI) and have the radio connected to the GPS, simply pushing the DSC button will transmit information about your boat and its location. Additionally, the use of a Personal Locator Beacon (PLB) or an Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon (EPIRB) can pinpoint your location if your other electronic systems fail, or your boat does sink.

The final part of your plan should be to teach everyone on your boat how to make the call and how to operate the radio, GPS, DSC panic button and EPIRB.

For more information about safe boating courses Joe Riccio, (239)-384-7416 or CGAUXCOURSES@GMAIL.COM.

To schedule your **FREE** Vessel Safety Check, please call: John Moyer, (239)-248-7078 or Coast Guard Auxiliary Station – Flotilla 95, (239) 394-5911 or email John at Jmoyer1528@aol.com.

For those interested in joining Flotilla 95, USCG Auxiliary, please call Bob Shmihluk at (215) – 694-3305

Mayday Form (use something like this to create your boat's Mayday Call)

It is vital to establish radio contact with the Coast Guard, a shore based station, or another vessel as soon as you determine that an emergency situation exists. Delaying a distress call because of panic, pride or indecisiveness can turn a near miss into a disaster.

1. Check to be sure your radio power switch is turned on and Select channel 16 on VHF-FM
2. Depress microphone key, speak clearly and slowly.
3. Say: "**MAYDAY, MAYDAY, MAYDAY, THIS IS**
(vessel name) _____, (vessel name) _____,
(vessel name) _____, (call sign) _____ **OVER.**"
4. Release microphone key, briefly listen for an acknowledgment. If there is no response repeat step 3 one or two more times before proceeding to step 5.
5. Say: "**MAYDAY** (vessel name) _____."
6. **DESCRIBE YOUR POSITION, DIRECTION AND SPEED OF TRAVEL.** Use longitude-latitude, range and bearing from known points.
7. **DESCRIBE THE NATURE OF YOUR EMERGENCY.**
8. **GIVE NUMBER OF PERSONS ONBOARD AND EXTENT OF ANY INJURIES.**
9. **ESTIMATE PRESENT SEAWORTHINESS AND IMMINENCE OF DANGER.**
10. **DESCRIBE YOUR VESSEL.**
11. **Length:** _____ **Type of Vessel:** _____
12. **Color of hull and trim:** _____
13. **Distinguishing features:** _____
14. End distress message by saying:
15. "**THIS IS (vessel name)** _____, **(call sign)** _____." **Over**
16. If a 2-way communication has been established, additional information regarding on-scene weather, availability of lifesaving and survival equipment, etc. should be reported. If no contact has been established, repeat all of the above steps as often as your situation permits.
17. Use visual signals such as flags, flares, lights and smoke as well as audible signals such as your horn, whistle or megaphone to assist rescue units in locating your vessel. Maintain radio watch on the designated emergency frequency.