



# National Coastwatch Fleetwood

EYES ALONG THE COAST



## NCI FLEETWOOD TRAINING MANUAL

### PART 9

## SIGNS AND SIGNALS

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### PART 9

## SIGNS AND SIGNALS

### Introduction

Distress, Urgency and Safety communications at sea are generally conducted by radio transmissions. However there is a wide range of other signs and signals that can indicate that a vessel or person is in need of immediate assistance or to provide others with information.

Watchkeepers need to be aware of these signs and signals and how to interpret them.

### Flares and Smoke

After marine radio the next most common way of indicating distress is probably the use of flares and smoke signals. They can serve two purposes, to raise the alarm and to pinpoint the casualty's position. There are different types.

- Red parachute flares

Visible up to 25 miles, they rise to about 300 metres before burning and then the red flare floats down on a small parachute burning for about 40 seconds, leaving a smoke trail behind. Note: if it leaves a trail as it goes up, it may be a firework.

- Red hand-held flares

May be used in daylight, or at night close to shore. They are visible up to 7 miles and burn for one minute.

- Mini Flares

Windsurfers, jet-skiers, kayakers, dinghy sailors and military aircrew often carry packs of mini-flares. They rise to about 60 meters and then burn for only 6 seconds.



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- **Day/night flares**  
With smoke at one end and a red flare at the other. The flare burns for 20 seconds. They commonly are used by divers.
- **Orange smoke**  
This can be more effective than flares in daylight. However the smoke can disperse quickly in a strong wind. The dense orange smoke can be seen for up to 5 miles and burns for one minute or 3 minutes depending on the type used. Ideal to help aircraft pinpoint a target and give wind direction.
- **White flares**  
These are used for illumination purposes as a collision warning or to advise the sender of a distress signal that it has been seen. They are not a distress or urgency signal but, if there is any doubt as to their colour or purpose, the Coastguard should be informed.
- **Laser beam 'flares'**  
Not yet officially recognised as distress signals, they are becoming increasingly popular because of their long life and range. Many consider them safer than pyrotechnics especially on smaller vessels

### Other Visual Distress Signals

There are other recognised means of visually signalling distress

A person raising and lowering their arms



Flames or heavy smoke from a vessel



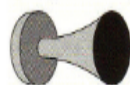
A ball over or under a square shape



A gun or other explosive signal fired at intervals of about one minute



Continuous sounding of a fog horn



Flag code signal of distress. Flag 'N' over 'C'





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There are also some unofficial means of signalling distress such as a piece of material waved on the end of an oar or the ensign hoisted upside down. Shouts for 'HELP!', flashing lights, repeated blowing of a whistle and a variety of other methods may all be used to attract attention.

It is important to bear in mind that any unusual activity observed by watchkeepers could be an indication that someone is in need of help. If in doubt contact the Coastguard.

### **Divers' Signals**

Diving operations occasionally takes place within NCI Rossall Point watchstation's sector. Watchkeepers should be aware of the recognised 'I require assistance' signal which is one arm extended with a clenched fist waved from side to side over the head.

If this signal is observed the watchkeeper should look for the attendant dive boat which should be flying flag 'A' for alpha. If the dive boat has clearly not seen the diver, then the Coastguard should be alerted immediately.

To mark their position divers may use a surface marker buoy (DSMB). It has the appearance of an inflated orange sausage.

The marker buoy does not indicate that the diver is in distress.

### **Flag Signals**

The International Code of Signals (ICS) lists over six hundred single letter and two letter signals which can be sent by using the dedicated code flags. Marine radio is now the most common means of communication and as a result code flags are not in common use. However many vessels still carry code flags for use if radio communications cannot be established.

Watchkeepers should be able to identify code flags by reference to the ready reference display in the watchstation. There are also several day signals that can be displayed by vessels which are also displayed in the tower.

### **Buoys and beacons**

Watchkeepers should be familiar with the meaning of the buoys within visual range of the watchstation. These include a yellow marker buoy and several cardinal marks. The meaning of other buoys beacons and lights are displayed within the Tower.

The yellow marker buoy indicates an underwater obstruction.



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Cardinal marks can be found on the side of a channel but are usually sited to one side or another of an obstruction. There are four types each named for a cardinal point of the compass, north, east, south and west.

A north cardinal mark will stand north of the obstruction therefore a vessel can pass safely to the north of the mark. The east, south and west marks are placed in their respective positions.

Cardinal marks are black and yellow. The disposition of their colours and their topmarks are easy to remember.

North: Both topmark arrows point upwards (north) and the black stripe is at the top.

East: Topmarks point up and down away from each other, and the black stripe is top and bottom. The topmark has the shape of an egg. E for egg and E for East.

South: Both top marks point downwards (south) and the black stripe is at the bottom.

West: Topmarks point up and down towards each other, and the black stripe is in the middle. With the topmarks pointing together some say they have the resemblance of a wineglass. W for wineglass and W for West.

To assist in the prevention of collisions at sea all vessels must display navigation lights at night and in restricted visibility. In addition, vessels engaged in certain activities must also show distinguishing lights by night and shapes (day signals) by day.

### **Vessel night signs.**

Except in exceptional circumstances NCI Rossall Point watchstation does not open during hours of darkness. Therefore there is no requirement for watchkeepers to be able to identify the various combination of navigation lights displayed by vessels at night.



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