

Boating Tips



BY KEVIN O'LEARY

False Maydays

So I get this call from Lieutenant Junior Grade Lauren Kolumbic, the Public Affairs Officer at Coast Guard Sector San Francisco. She congratulated me on a job well done for my column on the “boarding” process (July issue *BDY*). She asked me if I would like to do another article on a subject the Coast Guard is very serious about and wanted to get the issue out to the public.

Apparently (to my amazement), some people in the San Francisco Bay and Delta are making false Mayday calls on their VHF marine radios. This is a consistent problem. In fact, 54 percent of all search and rescue (SAR) missions for the Coast Guard in the San Francisco Bay Area result in what is termed “false alerts.” I could not believe what I was hearing and eagerly agreed to explore this issue in my column.



From left, Lieutenant Junior Grade Lauren Kolumbic, Public Affairs Officer CG Sector San Francisco, and Lieutenant Commander Leanne Lusk, CG Sector Command Center Chief, Sector San Francisco on Yerba Buena Island.

transmissions are directed and received by numerous high sites (antennas) in the Bay Area. The room is manned 24/7 by Coast Guard personnel responsible for deciphering communications, deciding on a course of action and relating pertinent information up the chain of command.

I found it very interesting that when it comes to deploying assets (planes, helicopters and vessels) to SAR missions, the Coast Guard’s policy is “to

launch appropriate resources when there is sufficient information to establish a reasonable search area.” Even if there are indications that the call may be a false Mayday or hoax, if any person on duty believes it could be a situation of real distress, and dissents from the others, the Coast Guard will launch on the case. This is what “*erring on the side of caution*” is all about.

After the tour, we settled into Commander Lusk’s office, just off the Command Center, and I got to hear six recordings of what had been determined to be false Mayday calls. I was astounded, to say the least.

Then Commander Lusk shared with me various spreadsheets outlining the cost of responding to these probable hoaxes. The total cost for just two days worth of false Mayday calls was more than \$70,000! Folks, this is unacceptable and the Coast Guard is right to try to get the word out to recreational boaters of the ramifications of these hoaxes and how we can work together to reduce their occurrence to acceptable levels. (None would be great!)

One of the most important issues involving false Mayday calls is the deployment of assets. If these assets are deployed on a search and



Coast Guard Helo, San Francisco.

rescue case that turns out to be a “wild goose chase,” they will be off station and may not be available to respond to a true emergency. In addition, crews can only work for a set number of hours before being “bagged,” or required to rest before mental and/or physical fatigue sets in, making it far more dangerous for these folks to do their jobs.

Here are the specifics on the cost breakdowns:

- RB-S (Response boat - small):
approx. \$1,600 per hour
 - Motor Life Boat (47-ft.):
approx. \$4,000 per hour
- 87-ft. Coastal Patrol Boat:
approx. \$2,500 per hour
 - HC 130 H/J Aircraft:
approx. \$15,000 per hour
 - HH65 A/C Helicopter:
approx. \$9,500 per hour

So let’s say the five assets mentioned above are scrambled for a SAR for four hours on a hoax Mayday call. The combined cost of operation would be somewhere in the neighborhood of \$130,000 of our taxes flying (excuse the pun) out the window!

K E V O ' S Boating Tips

Reasons for False Mayday Calls

There are many theories why some mariners issue false Mayday calls. One is that some mariners are trying to do a “radio check” on channel 16 and when they don’t get a response, try to get someone’s attention by issuing a false Mayday. (Radio checks are supposed to be conducted on channel 9.) Another has to do with children “playing” with a VHF radio.

Still another is that at the time the Mayday was transmitted, the mariner may have truly believed he or she was in danger, but figured out the problem and then were embarrassed to call back on channel 16 to cancel the distress call. To add to this theory, many mariners are afraid they will be given a citation or worse for making the Mayday in the first place. This is not true. If you believe you and your vessel are in immediate danger, you are encouraged to issue a distress call. There is no fine or penalty for canceling a (legitimate) distress call.

Lieutenant Commander Lusk recalled a case I found very interesting and very worthy of reporting to our readers:

A few years ago, the CG was receiving Mayday calls every day at approximately 4 p.m. This went on for five or six days. Utilizing radio direction finder technology, they were able to pinpoint the location of the transmission to a home in the Napa Valley. So they got law enforcement involved and went over and knocked at the door to inquire about the broadcasts. The guy (a father of a teenage boy) had no idea



Coast Guard CG C130 Aircraft.

what the heck was going on or why these folks were at his front door. When told the transmissions were at 4 p.m. he thought for a moment and thought out loud, “Huh, my kid gets home from school around 3:30 and hangs out with his buddies in the backyard.”

It turns out there is a (trailerable) boat in the backyard under a boat cover. The little deviants were going under the cover, turning on the radio and having a blast making false Mayday calls every day. What are the chances? I’d say pretty good considering how many parents have boats in their garage or driveways.

If you are one of these folks with VHF radios in boats on trailers on your property, secure your radio before covering the boat. Cut off all power and educate any children with possible access to a VHF radio that it is not a toy!

Coast Guard Guidelines

The USCG issued the following guidelines regarding the use of VHF radios:

- **DO NOT COMMUNICATE FALSE DISTRESS MESSAGES.**
- Mariners should have a marine VHF radio to contact the Coast Guard on channel 16 in an emergency.
- Boat owners/operators are responsible for ensuring everyone onboard understands that channel 16 is an emergency channel, equivalent to 911 for phone lines.
- Owners/operators should advise children that the radio is not a toy and



Coast Guard Surf Training, Morro Bay.

should be used for emergencies only.

- The word “Mayday” should only be used when there is an actual emergency. It is like yelling “fire,” only with more severe and costly consequences.
- It is unlawful for boaters to use channel 16 to conduct radio checks.
- Boaters who need to hail the Coast Guard for non-emergencies can contact the local station on channel 16 and request to use another channel to communicate.
- It is a violation of state and federal law to communicate false distress signals to the Coast Guard. This includes inappropriate Mayday calls or otherwise hailing the Coast Guard when no emergency actually exists.
- False distress calls and hoax Mayday calls account for roughly half of Coast Guard Sector San Francisco’s cases. This translates to an estimated \$3.2 million of taxpayer money and an estimated 1,588 hours being wasted in the Bay Area for 2008 year-to-date tying up emergency responders for actual emergencies. These estimates do not include costs from local partner agencies.
- Under Section 14 of the United States Code, an individual who knowingly and willfully communicates a false distress message to the Coast Guard or causes the Coast Guard to attempt to save lives and property when no help is needed is: guilty of a class “D” felony; subject to up to six years in prison; subject to civil penalty of not more than \$5,000; and liable for

all costs the Coast Guard incurs as a result of the individual's action.

- Under the California Health & Safety Code, Section 12684 it is unlawful for any person to use or discharge any registered emergency signaling device in any manner other than that permitted by the instructions for use.

Kevo's Tip:

False Mayday calls are costing us taxpayers a lot of money. They put CG personnel in jeopardy and tie up (critical) CG assets (OK, No more puns), which could be responding to a real emergency. It's OK to cancel a legitimate Mayday call.

As always, feedback is appreciated. I can be reached at 925/890-8428 or kevo@yachtsmanmagazine.com

Be safe & happy boating! 