



We Have Permission to Use the Word Mayday

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I can hear some readers now: "What do you mean we have permission to use the word Mayday- we have been using it all along! What's the big deal?" It is not a "big deal" but it is an important "little deal". Having a common understanding and use of words is a significant foundation of professionalism. In addition, words can have a powerful influence on our cognitive and affective responses to the verbal cues. Think of what happens to you when you hear the phrase "Working Fire" over the radio as you are responding. Is the term Mayday a word to be used by the fire service?

A colleague and friend Howard Cross, who studied French for six years, explained the origin of the word Mayday to me. Mayday comes from the French "m'aide" (literally; help me), the root verb being aider (to help). Knowing the source and meaning of a word is important to our comprehension. As you know, our Firefighter I and II Standards do not use the word Mayday. When I was writing about the concept of Mayday Decision Parameters for firefighters, I was advised that the word Mayday had not been accepted as the standard firefighter distress call. Since I was studying our Mayday Doctrine, someone sent me a copy of the 2002 NFPA 1500 standard. In the Appendix A.8.1.11 in bold print, it states: "The term mayday should not be used for fireground communications in that it could cause confusion with the term used for aeronautical and nautical emergencies." My first reaction was confusion; our radios have a difficult time talking to each other across the street. How could they interfere with a plane or ship in distress?

I became curious. Who is the authority having jurisdiction (AHJ) over the word Mayday? The AHJ over the word Mayday is the National Search and Rescue Committee (NSRC) in Washington, DC. The Committee is composed of the Departments of Defense, Interior, Commerce, and Transportation, in addition to the Federal Communication Commission and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. The Chairman is Rear Admiral Ken Venuto of the US Coast Guard.

I wrote to the Admiral at the NSRC: "Many fire departments nation wide use the term "Mayday-Mayday-Mayday" over fire ground radios as part of their emergency procedures when a firefighter's life is in danger. ? (I enclose a copy of the NFPA 1500 standard A.8.1.11) My questions are: Will a firefighter calling Mayday, on the fire ground over a fire department radio, cause confusion in the aeronautical and or nautical emergency communications system? If not, does the National Search & Rescue Committee see any reason the fire service should not use Mayday-Mayday-Mayday as the distress call for firefighters?"

Captian Steve Sawyer US Coast Guard, Alternate Chairman, NSRC wrote me back, here are some excerpts: "Use of MAYDAY under such circumstances is permissible under U.S. law and regulations [the ones sighted were International Radio Regulations (2001), Paragraph 4-9 and FCC rule (Part 80.311)]. The radio frequencies concerned are different from the aeronautical and maritime frequencies, so use of the term should not cause confusion. Further, any effective means of calling for help is authorized under other national and international radio regulation for true distress situations.

The U.S. has taken no action to preclude use of the word Mayday by endangered firefighters. Mayday is recognized nationally and internationally as a signal meaning life is in danger and immediate assistance is required, although federal regulations only mention its use for ship and aircraft.

The above guidance is based on review of the regulations and consultation with experts of the Coast Guard, FCC, International Civil Aviation Organization and others.

We trust that this explanation will help not only for your local training and operations; you may also find it useful seeking to update relevant guidance in NFPA or other standards, as appropriate."

I have forwarded this information to the NFPA 1001 and 1500 committees. Thanks to our consensus standards making process, the fire service has increased its common understanding and use of words. Fire Service Doctrine comprehension helps us in our continuing quest to become a true profession. We have permission from the NSRC to use the word Mayday. Our next step is to decide if we choose to use it. Mayday the word is just a "little deal" - unless you have to call it. I pray someone hears you when you call out "help me" in any language.

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