

Frequently asked questions regarding the appropriate response to a received DSC distress call. NBR SR 5.5

Digital Selective Calling (DSC): If equipped, all crew shall review the emergency features of DSC, including the response to a DSC Distress Call.

1. *What is a DSC Distress Call?*

- A DSC Distress Call is an electronic MAYDAY activated by pressing the Red Distress Button on a DSC configured Radio. Pressing the Red Distress Button sets off an alarm on every boat that has a DSC configured radio that can only be turned off manually on each boat by silencing the alarm or by acknowledging the Distress Call with a return transmission

2. *Who should be giving an acknowledgement at sea, outside of USCG reception range and what is so unique about an Acknowledgement Call?*

- Any vessel in receipt of a distress call has an obligation to render aid. Acknowledging a DSC Distress Call is a form of aid, but care should be given not to acknowledge the call too quickly, thereby silencing the alarm on all other receiving stations. Best practice is to silence your alarm without acknowledging the call, and then monitor the situation to determine the need to formally acknowledge the distress call.

3. *Can anyone give an acknowledgement?*

- **YES**, by following the instructions displayed on their DSC Configured radio

4. *If they do, what responsibility are they assuming?*

- That depends on the specific facts of the situation; see below for a detailed explanation.

5. *Should others be told not to acknowledge a Distress Call?*

- **NO.** All masters have a duty to render aid if they and their vessel can do so safely; see below for a detailed explanation.

These questions are best answered in concert as they are closely intertwined. The overarching and general answer to these questions is that any vessel in receipt of a distress call should come to attention and evaluate their position and ability to render aid to the vessel issuing the distress call. Good seamanship as well as international and US maritime law require it by placing an affirmative duty on the master or person in charge to render aid to others in peril at sea, when possible. Effectively, maritime law has seen fit to motivate and, under certain circumstances, to compel mariners to come to the aid of others in distress at sea. However no such obligation exists if the responder would be putting his own crew or vessel in serious danger. But liability may ensue if a responder does not undertake the assistance effort in a reasonable and seaman-like manner.

This duty is codified in US law by 46 U.S.C. §2304(a) and states “A master or individual in charge of a vessel shall render assistance to any individual found at sea in danger of being lost, so far as the master or individual in charge can do so without serious danger to the master's or individual's vessel or individuals on board.” That being said “a master and vessel attempting to render aid in good faith is generally not liable for any damages that result of rendering assistance or for an act or omission in providing salvage, towage, medical treatment or other assistance when the individual acts as an ordinary, reasonable, and prudent individual would have done under the circumstances.” See 46 U.S.C. §2303(c)

The more precise answer as to how to respond to the receipt of a distress call is fact specific and requires an evaluation of the available facts; is the vessel receiving the call capable and able to render aid? Are they in the best position to do so? Is there a more capable responder communicating with the distressed vessel? Would attempting to render aid place the vessel and crew in serious danger, making the overall marine distress picture worse?

As captains of ocean racing yachts, it is imperative that your vessel have a plan in place in the event of receiving a distress call from another vessel regardless of how that signal is received; be it from a flare, a May Day call by VHF or SSB, or by way of DSC distress signal VHF or SSB. To put a finer point on the DSC related question, prudence and good seamanship suggest at a minimum; documenting the call in the ships log, notifying the watch leader and captain, and standing by to see if the call is promptly answered by a rescue coordination center (RCC) or a vessel with greater capability or closer proximity to the vessel in distress.

If no other stations respond to the call, maritime law requires any vessel capable of rendering aid to attempt to do so. Our moral compasses and the captain’s judgment of the conditions, the vessel’s resources and capability, along with the crew’s abilities and should facilitate the master’s decision.

In conclusion, when receiving a marine distress call :

- Log and monitor the distress call,
- If no other station responds, answer/acknowledge the call.
- Then attempt to relay information to an RCC or other vessels in the area that may be better suited or more capable of effectively rendering aid.
- If no other aid is available or responding; make all efforts to render aid directly.
- Continue efforts to relay the distress situation to a RCC by all available means while attempting to assist those in distress.

If you have further questions regarding offshore communications in general or specific to the Newport Bermuda Race please contact the Newport Bermuda Race Communications Officer at FCO@bermudarace.com .