

Maritime Rescue Institute
Coastal Notes – 21 November 2006

What does SOS mean? Save Our Souls? Save Our Ship? Send Out Succour? Actually the answer is none of these, despite popular myth to the contrary. One hundred years ago at the Second Berlin Telegraphic Conference, SOS was formally adopted as the international call sign for distress. It's become so ingrained into our culture now that it's hard to think that it hasn't always been so. Yet, the early distress call was CDQ. So, where did that come from? To find the answer, we have to look back in time a little.

Guglielmo Marconi made the practical use of wireless telegraphy possible in the closing years of the 19th century. Until then, ships at sea out of visual range were very much isolated from shore and other ships. The first radio distress signal was transmitted from the East Goodwin Lightship on 17 March 1899 when the merchant vessel Elbe ran aground on the Goodwin Sands. The radio operator on duty at the South Foreland Lighthouse received the message, and was able to summon the aid of the Ramsgate lifeboat.

Wireless telegraphy caught on very quickly and by 1904 many trans-Atlantic British ships were equipped with wireless communications. The wireless operators came from the ranks of railroad and postal telegraphers. In Britain a general call on the landline wire was a "CQ." This sign for "all stations" was adopted soon after wireless came into being by both ships and shore stations. In 1904, the Marconi company suggested the use of "CQD" for a distress signal. Although generally accepted to mean, "Come Quick Danger," that is not the case. It is a general call, "CQ," followed by "D," meaning distress. A strict interpretation would be "All stations, Distress."

When the Berlin Telegraphic Conference adopted SOS, the thinking was that the Morse code signal of three dots, three dashes and three dots could not be misinterpreted. It was to be sent together as one string. The Marconi Yearbook of Wireless Telegraphy and Telephony, 1918 states, "*This signal [SOS] was adopted simply on account of its easy radiation and its unmistakable character. There is no special signification in the letter themselves, and it is entirely incorrect to put full stops between them [the letters].*" Stations hearing this distress call were to immediately cease handling traffic until the emergency was over and were likewise bound to answer the distress signal.

The first time the 'SOS' signal was used in an emergency was on 10 June 1909, when the Cunard liner SS Slavonia was wrecked off the Azores. Two steamers received her signals and went to the rescue.

CDQ continued to be used for a number of years after SOS had been adopted. In fact the Titanic's first distress call was CDQ, alternating with SOS. Ironically, Guglielmo Marconi was waiting in New York to return home to England on the Titanic. However, the news accounts of the Titanic disaster cemented the new "SOS" call in the mind of the public, and the use of CQD soon disappeared after that.

The use of Morse code for sending distress calls is now superseded by automated systems using satellite relay; the U.S. Coast Guard, for example, no longer monitors Morse code transmissions. The distress code by radiotelephony is MAY DAY, which corresponds to the French "m'aider." The signal NC, not followed by a message, also has the same meaning. The technology and the codes may have changed, but the underlying meaning remains the same – I'm in distress and need help.

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