



Mayday!

I have never had to send a distress call. Never had to shoot off a flare from a drifting lifeboat. But there were plenty of situations like that in the World War II movies I watched as an adolescent, which impressed me deeply and left me with an enduring aversion to dark, open waters. There was something thrilling about those black & white scenes of British naval officers in stylish white polo neck sweaters sitting at a microphone saying, with quiet stoicism, “Mayday. Mayday. Mayday.”

As I grew up and the myth of those movies began to fade, I started wondering why people say “Mayday” in an emergency. Where I come from, that word meant May 1st, international workers’ day. I couldn’t see any connection between a massive workers’ street parade and being on a sinking ship in the middle of the Atlantic. I eventually learned that “Mayday” is an English corruption of the French expression *m’aider* that means “help me.” It is an abbreviation of *venez m’aider*, or “come and help me.” It originated in the 1920s, when a senior radio officer at Croydon Airport in London, Frederick Stanley Mockford, was instructed by his superiors to come up with a word of some kind that would be easily understood by all local and international air crews and ground staff as a call for help. Since most of the flights out of Croydon in those days flew back and forth to Le Bourget Airport in Paris, Mockford suggested “Mayday” as an anglicization of the French distress call that would be easy for everyone to pronounce.

In earlier times, military officers on battlefields all over the world communicated by Morse code, which had been around since the mid-1800s. My fellow Boy Scouts and I were inducted into the magic of Morse code in our early teens, and the concept—the idea of being able to communicate with dots and dashes—made a huge impression on me. My father had recently introduced me to Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, and the opening four notes sounded remarkably like a V in Morse code: *dit-dit-dit-dah!* I practiced my dots and dashes

as though I were learning scales on the piano, wanting to be fully prepared to send messages in the event of some life-threatening event that never happened. In those days we used SOS, which stood for “save our souls” and was easy to tap out, one letter at a time (... --- ...). No matter that in 1927, the International Radiotelegraph Convention replaced SOS with “Mayday” as the official distress call. As Scouts, we were also instructed in the use of flags for signalling at sea but, to my great disappointment, were given no guidance at all for sending or reading smoke signals.

I fully appreciate the challenge Mockford’s superiors gave him. As a translator, and especially as an interpreter, clarity of meaning is a much sought-after ideal. Most people butcher foreign languages, making words in another tongue incomprehensible with flawed pronunciation and imperfect accent. Recognizing the fragile nature of language and meaning, language schools produce advertising to conjure up the horrors of a linguistic misstep: what if the name of the product you are planning to launch overseas means something unacceptable in other languages? What if your inability to communicate in a foreign language causes loss of life? These schools and language academies want to focus our attention on the costly potential for disaster when people do not fully understand each other. One such company aired a marvellous video of a sailor on a German cargo ship out on the ocean. He is the radio operator, sitting at a desk wearing headphones. It is late at night. Suddenly he hears a voice crackling in his ear: “Hello! Can anyone hear me?” He switches on his microphone and says: “Ja, I can hear you. Vot is heppening?” The voice in his ear says, “We’re sinking!” The radio operator nods and smiles and says “Ja, but vot are you sinking *about?*”