Flare death in Pacific reignites pyrotechnic debate

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Heather Prentice February 14, 2023

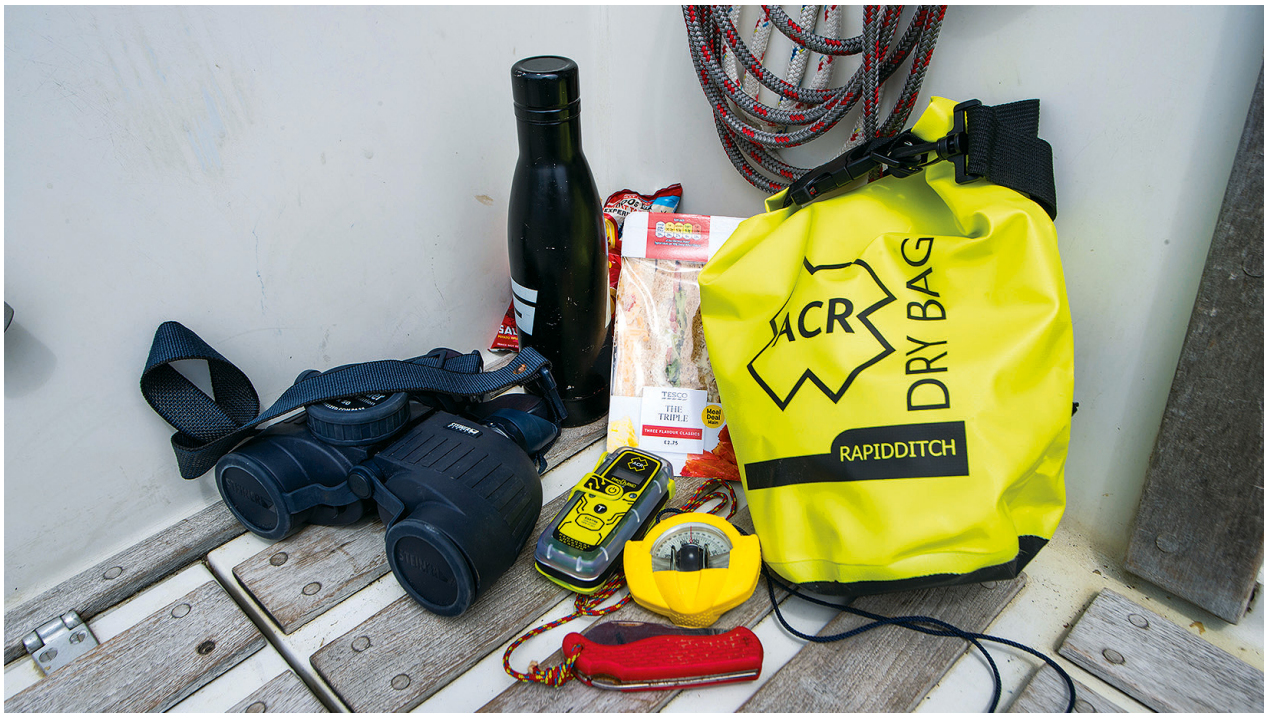
The tragic death of a Dutch sailor on New Year's Day after setting off a flare has reignited criticism about the use of pyrotechnic flares on yachts. The RYA is urging authorities to adopt more modern technology for safety at sea.

The Dutch Safety Board investigated the fatal accident in the Pacific Ocean and issued an alert against the use of the batch of parachute flares.

'The flare was fired according to instructions, but exploded immediately with fatal consequences,' the Dutch Safety Board announced. 'It is unclear why the flare exploded immediately. There is a risk that it is not a one-off incident.'

Manufacturer LECEA issued a recall for the batch: Red Rocket Parachute Flare L-35 / L-35A (Pirolec), batch 0525/2021 – 113.

There have been a number of accidents involving pyrotechnic flares in recent years. In May 2016, the RNLI Skegness Inshore Lifeboat caught fire and subsequently sank during a search after firing a white flare.



A grab bag including a PLB. Photo: Theo Stocker/YM

In 2006, sailing instructor Duncan Wells was demonstrating how to use flares when one backfired and burned into his abdomen, putting him in hospital for nine months. A charter yacht belonging to Sailing Holidays was also burned out when a flare spontaneously ignited and could not be extinguished.

Current Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) regulations require all yachts over 13.7 metres (45ft) in length and all commercially operated recreational yachts of any size to carry flares.

‘It seems barking mad,’ says RYA Cruising Manager Stuart Carruthers. ‘We have been trying for 18 years to make the government see sense. We have succeeded in getting rocket flares taken off the list of compulsory carriage items for vessels over 13.7 m in length, but hand-held flares are still mandatory.’

The RYA is urging the MCA to recognise that modern technology (EPIRB, PLB,VHF DSC, AIS, EVDS and SART) is safer and now able to provide reliable, accurate and timely rescue alerts and location information. ‘The main problem is the MCA continues to rely on a firework as the main distress alert tool,’ says Carruthers. ‘We fundamentally disagree. Flares didn’t work for the Titanic and they don’t work for us.’

‘There are two functions to signalling distress: firstly telling someone you are in trouble and secondly telling them where you are. The problem with flares is that they work backwards – giving the locations first. There is no confirmation that someone has seen the flare and is raising the alarm,’ adds Carruthers.

‘We have many electronic devices (VHF DSC radio, EPIRBs, PLBs, AIS, radar) that are good at alerting the maritime authorities directly that someone is in trouble. For the final mile location, a high intensity strobe light would show the location. The so-called EVDS are another method for final mile location and just to be clear the RYA does not promote their use as a primary means of distress alerting.’

Duncan Wells supports the RYA’s stance. ‘The faulty flare that shot into me was actually a white collision warning flare. Radar/AIS should avoid the need [for this],’ he says. ‘We have plenty of electronic ways of calling in a distress and really only need LED flares for the last mile location.’

Wells has been working with the US Coast Guard and UK manufacturer Daniamant to find an LED alternative. The USCG has also approved an LED called Sirius.

Yachting Monthly reached out to the MCA for comment and a spokesperson said: ‘EVDS are not an internationally recognised means of distress signalling and there is no indication from the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) this will change anytime soon. There are also no internationally recognised performance standards for EVDS so it would be entirely

possible to end up with different specifications in different countries, or worse still, different requirements in different states meaning EVDS may be acceptable in some but not others. MIN 542 Amendment 1 outlines the current MCA policy with regards EVDS.

‘The MCA is not aware of any EVDS product which meets the light intensity required to be compliant with the SOLAS technical performance standards or MSN1676 for distress flares. Additionally, they may not be considered an internationally recognised distress signal as outlined in The International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea, 1972 (COLREGS), and may only meet requirements of COLREGS Annex IV if they have an SOS function.

‘There remains a need to carry the Pyrotechnic flares as per the applicable regulations; however, if vessel owners/operators wish to carry EVDs then they may do so, though only as supplementary equipment.’

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