Ships and Radio Distress by VEOMWD

The practical use of wireless telegraphy was made possible by Guglielmo Marconi 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. A ship could vanish from the high seas, and no one would know until that vessel failed to make a port connection. Marconi, seeing that wireless would not compete with wire telegraphy for land based communication, concentrated his efforts on ship to shore communications. Ships equipped with wireless were no longer isolated.

The first use of wireless in communicating the need for assistance came in March of 1899. The East Goodwin Lightship, marking the southeastern English coast, was rammed in an fog in the early morning hours by the SS R.F. Matthews. A distress call was transmitted to a shore station at South Foreland and help was dispatched.

By 1904 a number of ships in the trans-Atlantic trade were equipped with wireless telegraphy. The British operators were nearly all landline telegraphers who had left railroad or post-office keys to go to sea in the newly opened field. They brought along with them not only their Morse code but also many of their telegraphic abbreviations and signals. One was the general call - CQ, which had been used to attract attention of all operators along a wire. It preceded the time signal in the morning at 10- o'clock and also all notices of general importance. CQ went to sea and became a general call to all ships.

Early in 1904 the Marconi Company, realizing the desirability of some universal distress signal, filled the need by issuing the following general order: "It has been brought to our notice that the call 'CQ' (All Stations), while being satisfactory for general purposes, does not sufficiently express the urgency required in a signal of distress. Therefore, on and after the 1st of February, 1904, the call to be given by ships in distress, or in any way requiring assistance, shall be 'CQD'."

Popular accounts of the origin of "SOS" fail to mention that the Germans had used "SOS" for a distress signal. They adopted the signal "SOS" for distress as well as "SOE" for inquiry on April 1, 1905, a year before the Berlin conference. *The Electrician*, May 5, 1905 published "German Regulations for the Control of Spark Telegraphy" which started: ". . .---... Distress signal (Notzeichen). This is to be repeated by at ship in distress until all other stations have stopped working". On the 3rd of October 1906 at the International Wireless Telegraphic Conference in Berlin, the SOS replaced the CQD distress call, but its adoption by maritime stations was very slow. So slow in fact that at the time of the sinking of the Titanic on the 15th of April 1912, her radio operator, John Phillips, used both the old 'CQ D' and the then newer SOS signals.

As an aside, the SOS combination of letters was chosen because the "dit dit dit, dah dah dah, dit dit dit" sound was easily recognizable. 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 stops between them [the letters]." It was only later that the suggestion was made that it might stand for 'Save Our Souls'.

As electronics evolved, the ability to send voice signals by radio caused a technological explosion in the years around 1920, that evolved into today's radio broadcasting industry. In 1927, the International Radiotelegraph Convention of Washington adopted the word "Mayday" as the radiotelephone (RT) distress call.

May Day (derived from the French: m'aider - help me) is now the recognised voice distress call, and SOS is the Morse code procedure.

Pan-pan. (from the French: panne - a breakdown) indicates an urgent situation of a lower order than a "grave and imminent threat requiring immediate assistance", as a mechanical breakdown or a medical problem.

Some sources claim that PAN is short for Possible Assistance Needed but nowhere can this be verified.

Securite (pronounced 'Say-cur-i-tay') (from French: sécurité - safety) indicates a message about safety, such as hazard to navigation or weather information.

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