

Signal Flags

They went out with Lord Nelson, didn't they ? No-one carries these things in yachts or powerboats any more, do they ?

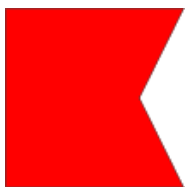
Well yes, we now have these things that Nelson couldn't even dream of, such as radio, radar, AIS and the mobile phone. But flags have not entirely gone the way of the dodo... there are just a few that you really need to know. For example....

There was a TV programme a few weeks back about a company doing some underwater work in our area; they were very unhappy that passing vessels were not keeping clear of their diver. They had displayed an appropriate warning flag, but evidently hardly anyone knew what it meant.

Commercial vessels do fly meaningful flags sometimes, but here's the thing... all skippers (of vessels both large and small) are expected to take note of the warnings that they give. Let's look at some of the most important –



This is ALPHA, and it means '*I have a diver down*' or '*I have a swimmer near me*'. You must stay well clear or you will put the person in the water in danger. The possibility of running down a diver does not bear thinking about – and nor do the moral and criminal consequences.



Next is BRAVO, meaning "*I am taking in or discharging or carrying dangerous goods.*" This could mean explosives. Again you should stay well clear... but this time it's for *your* safety. You'll see this often on tankers, including the ones that moor on the fuel jetty in Portsmouth harbour, and on vessels at the UHAF.

Flags can also be used in combinations. Flying ROMEO over YANKEE, shown below, means '*Pass me wide and slow*'. Again, it's seen in Portsmouth harbour on the tankers at the fuel jetty.

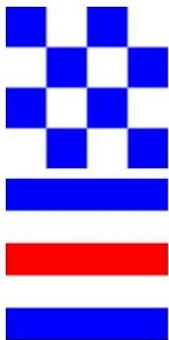
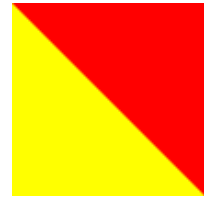


But it's not all about warning you to keep away. There is one flag, and one flag combination, that asks you for help.

This one, OSCAR, means '*I have a man overboard*'. The vessel flying it will be searching for and/or recovering the MOB. Feel free to offer to help (but don't run the MOB down).

You might also see it on a floating danbuoy that has been put in the water to mark the last known position of the MOB.

[If you have such a danbuoy, please ensure the flag is well furled while the buoy is stowed. You don't really want to sail around accidentally telling everyone that you have a man overboard. We've seen it happen and it causes unnecessary alarm].



And finally, this combination of NOVEMBER and CHARLIE (in either order) is a general distress signal. This vessel needs your help.

It doesn't hurt to learn more about signal flags. There are many books on the subject, and you can find lists like the following by searching the internet.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_maritime_signal_flags

You can even get tea-towels with the flags and meanings displayed. Why not get one to keep on your boat ?

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