

Look up at the sky.... Is it a plane, is it a helicopter or is it a....VDS?



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During a recent training mission we heard a report from the Coast Guard Station at Castle Hill that there was a reported sighting of a aerial flare (VDS - Visual Distress Signal) off Fairhaven. All in the vicinity were asked to keep an eye out for additional flares and to report such to the Coast Guard. It made me think whether many would know what to do if they saw a VDS.

In many coastal communities, lights in the sky after dusk are a rare sight. In other areas of the country, they are commonplace. But streaking lights always make people look twice.

With the exception of the 4th of July, these streaking or arcing lights at night should make you sit up and take notice. They are probably a Visual Distress Signal (VDS), commonly referred to as an Aerial Flare.

Here are some guidelines should you see what you believe is a flare.

1. Estimate the direction of the flare from where you are.
2. Estimate the distance.
3. Record the time of each flare sighting
4. Call the Coast Guard.
5. Have your location ready.
6. Have a description of the type and quality of the flare sighting.
 - A. Did the reporting source see the flare both rise and fall?
 - B. Rising only?
 - C. Falling only?
 - D. What were the rates of rising and falling (rapid rise and fall, rapid rise, slow fall, etc.)?
 - E. Was the trajectory steep (mostly vertical) or flat (mostly horizontal)?
7. Note the flare's color (red, orange, white).
8. How long did the flare burn?
9. Estimate the angle from you to the top of the flare's projectory.
(If you hold your fist at arm's length, with your thumb on top and the bottom of your fist on the horizon, was the top of the trajectory above or below the top of your fist?)

The answers to these questions will aid the Coast Guard in calculating true distance and direction from you vantage point to the approximate position of the vessel in distress. Multiple sightings aid both you and the Coast Guard in pinpointing the exact location.

For more information on the procedures for reporting (and taking) flare sightings, the Coast Guard has in Appendix I of the Addendum to the United States National Search and Rescue (SAR) Supplement everything you need. It is located on the web: You can download the supplement by visiting our flotilla homepage at <http://a0130804.uscgaux.info/index.htm>

For more information about boating safety and/or the United States Coast Guard Auxiliary, contact the Somerset Flotilla at (<http://a0130804.uscgaux.info/index.htm>). For more information about the Coast Guard, contact your local unit or find them on the web at www.uscg.mil.

See you on the water!