

## Words and Their Stories: Mayday



May 1 is also known as May Day and is celebrated in many countries as a spring festival or as an international holiday honoring workers

Now, the VOA Special English program WORDS AND THEIR STORIES.

A listener from Venezuela sent us a question about the meaning of the expression **mayday**. He wrote that he often hears this expression in movies.

**Mayday** is an emergency code word. It is used around the world in voice communications. You might see a war movie in which an airplane has been hit by rocket fire. The pilot gets on his radio and calls "**mayday, mayday, mayday**" to tell that his plane is in danger of crashing to the ground.

**Mayday** has nothing to do with the month of May. It comes from the French expressions "venez m'aider," or "m'aidez," which mean "help me."

Frederick Stanley Mockford created the **mayday** call signal in the nineteen twenties. Mockford was a radio officer at Croydon Airport in London. He was asked to think of a word that could be used in an emergency. The word had to be easily understood by all pilots and airport workers. Much of the air traffic at that time was between Croydon Airport and Le Bourget Airport near Paris, France. So he proposed the word **mayday**.

Today, many groups use the word to mean a life-threatening emergency. The call is always given three times to prevent mistaking it for some similar sounding words.

Many other French words are commonly used in English. One of these words is even in the Special English Word Book. It is **sabotage**. It means to damage or destroy as an act of subversion against an organization or nation.

You may have heard the term **laissez-faire** to describe a kind of economic or political policy. It means to leave alone and not interfere. It was first used in France in the eighteenth century.

In the business world, **entrepreneur** is another French word. It means a person who starts and operates a new business and has responsibility for any risks involved.

Many French words are used in the arts. For example, a **film noir** is a movie about murder and other crimes. These films were popular in the nineteen forties and nineteen fifties. Anything in art, music or literature which is very modern or ahead of its time is called **avant-garde**.

If you are looking for a job, you must prepare your **résumé**. This document lists all of your education, skills and experience. Something that is one of a kind and like no other thing is called **unique**.

The French are famous for their food. All cooks need to know how to **sauté**. This is frying something quickly in a small amount of oil or butter. When you are eating at a restaurant, the server may tell you **bon appétit**, which means good appetite, or enjoy your meal. And if you go away, someone may wish you **bon voyage** or have a good trip.

This program was written by Shelley Gollust. I'm Faith Lapidus. You can find more WORDS AND THEIR STORIES at our website, [voaspecialenglish.com](http://voaspecialenglish.com).