

FIRST BOAT

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Pica: Taking Action

Vin Pica on prevention of collision at sea with a look at Rules 16 and 17...

Guest blog by [Vincent Pica](#)



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When I was putting together a column on Rule 17, I wondered if it would garner enough information or complexity to justify a full column. *Rule 17: Action By Stand-On Vessel* seems, on first blush, to lend itself to a short “*here it is and here is what it means.*”

Rule 17 is the simple reciprocal of Rule 16, which is as simple as they get...

Rule 16 says – “Every vessel that is directed to keep out of the way of another vessel shall, so far as possible, take early and substantial action to keep well clear.”

Rule 16 means – Just that. If you are the give-way vessel, telegraph your move to pass well clear.

But Rule 17 has some subtle nuances that, in failing to understand them, may in fact lead to more collisions at sea than people recognize... Call it what you will – but getting into a collision at sea because

you thought you had the “right of way” is just plain dumb, bad seamanship and potentially fatal.

This column is about that...

What Does Rule 17 Say?

Rule 17-a-i states:

Where one of two vessels is to keep out of the way, the other shall keep her course and speed.

OK, that is easy enough. What’s the big deal?

17-a-ii states:

the latter (the stand-on vessel) may, however, take action to avoid collision by her maneuver alone, as soon as it becomes apparent that the vessel required to keep out of the way is not taking appropriate action in compliance with these Rules.

Right. If the other guy isn’t doing what he is supposed to do, I can do it for him. Still got it...

17-b states:

When, from any cause, the vessel required to keep her course and speed finds herself so close that collision cannot be avoided by the action of the give-way vessel alone, she shall take such action as will best aid to avoid collision.

Huh? How is 17-b different from 17-a-ii..? A key difference – 17-a-ii says the stand-on vessel MAY take action – 17-b says the stand-on vessel SHALL (which means MUST in COLREG-speak) take action. The burden to avoid collision is now shared. Remember, in front of an admiralty or maritime board, 100% blame is apportioned and it is never 100-0. You can’t claim that you were forced into a collision because of 17-b... 17-d, by the way, affirmatively says that no matter what the stand-on vessel does, the give-way vessel is not relieved of her duty to act. And if there is a 17-d, there must be a 17-c...

17-c states:

A power-driven vessel which takes action in a crossing situation in accordance with the subparagraph 17-a-ii of this Rule to avoid collision with another power-driven vessel shall, if the circumstances of the case admit, not alter course to port for a vessel on her own port side.

If she won’t give way to the vessel on her starboard side, i.e., the offending vessel is on your port side, turn to starboard and run alongside her (resist the urge to mount a boarding party!). But don’t forget the aspect of “suction” that we wrote about a couple of months ago ([Breaking All The Rules](#)) which spoke about the collision between HMS Hawke, a British man o’war, and the RMS Olympic. Like the Hawke, you might get sucked into the very vessel that was the proximate cause of the collision at sea. It is re-printed here for your reading convenience and in the interest of your ever-expanding seamanship knowledge. From *Breaking All the Rules*:

“...there is a famous naval collision that speaks directly to this circumstance. It happened on September 20, 1911 and it involved the 882-foot ocean liner RMS Olympic and the 360-foot British man-o’-war HMS Hawke near the Isle of Wight.

Hawke saw Olympic on her port side but not reacting to signals and whistles so Hawke put the helm over hard to starboard to attempt to run parallel. Within seconds, the suction effect of the far larger RMS Olympic pulled the HMS Hawke into her. An official Board of Inquiry eventually found largely against Olympic but White Star, the owner of the RMS Olympic, countered that Hawke was at fault as the overtaking vessel and steered directly into her. After many scientific experiments using the technology of the day, Hawke withstood the challenge based on the suction effect of the RMS Olympic. The captain of the RMS Olympic said that, 'In all my 31 years as a White Star captain, I have never heard of such a theory as suction.'

The captain's name was Edward J. Smith. His next commission was a ship even grander than the Olympic.

It was RMS Titanic."

BTW, if you are interested in being part of USCG Forces, email me at JoinUSCGAux@aol.com or go direct to the D1SR Human Resources department, who are in charge of new members matters, at [DSO-HR](#) and we will help you "get in this thing..."