



From the Captain of the Port

Prevention of Collision At Sea – Break All The Rules!

This article brings me to the end of my three-year tour as the Sector Commander for Long Island Sound, serving the mariners of Connecticut and the north and south shores of Long Island. On June 21, Captain Joe Vojvodich relieved me of command as I retire from the Coast Guard. These past 26 years have been incredibly fulfilling for me. I want to give a heartfelt thank you to all the WindCheck readers for your support of me, the Coast Guard, and your fellow mariners. As professional mariners with a penchant for safety, you have made my job very easy. BZ! Semper Paratus!

You may remember telling your parents, “But the other kids were doing it!” That excuse never got you out of trouble...and it won't work in front of an Admiralty or Maritime Board either! But, this time you may be looking for an excuse for following the rules – when you should have broken them!

Time To Take Responsibility!

The COLREGs are dominated by Rule 2 – a requirement to break the Rules if following them will cause a collision. Rule 2's exact verbiage is:

Rule 2

Responsibility

- (a) Nothing in these Rules shall exonerate any vessel, or the owner, master, or crew thereof, from the consequences of any neglect to comply with these Rules or of the neglect of any precaution which may be required by the ordinary practice of seamen, or by the special circumstances of the case.
- (b) In construing and complying with these Rules due regard shall be had to all dangers of navigation and collision and to any special circumstances, including the limitations of the vessels involved, *which may make a departure from these Rules necessary to avoid immediate danger.*

Take a look at paragraph (b) (emphasis mine). Clearly, Rule 2 is not just a “free pass” for breaking the other Rules, but a requirement that we do so when the situation calls for it. This essentially makes 2(b) the most important Navigation Rule, since it trumps all other Rules. Now, there is no argument that a participant in a collision is completely without fault because all vessel masters are obligated to take appropriate action to avoid a collision in the first place.

How do you know when or why you may be required to deviate from the Rules? What if “coming to starboard and going under the stern of a vessel crossing from your starboard side” would put you onto rocks or into the shallows? Does that mean it is OK to speed up and pass ahead? Personally, I wouldn't – ever! Not when you also have the option to stop and let the other skipper pass in front of you.

What about when you are clearly the stand-on vessel and the give-way skipper on your port side has not taken the appropriate give-way action and is about to cross ahead of you? Should you speed ahead to ensure he passes behind you? Again, I wouldn't – ever! You can stop or, if that is impossible, at least slow or turn to starboard and run parallel to the offending skipper.

Sucked In!

In the case of the aforementioned situation, if the offending skipper is driving a “battle wagon” of a boat, be wary of the hydrodynamic effect of running parallel to a large vessel – suction!

The combination of the wide bow wave of the larger vessel and prop wash can literally “suck” you right into her hull. And, in the following investigation, you will look like an over-taking vessel.

If you think this is too far-fetched, there is a famous naval collision that speaks directly to this circumstance. It happened on September 20, 1911 and 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 noticed the *Olympic* was unresponsive, so *Hawke* put the helm over hard to starboard to attempt to run parallel. Within seconds, the suction effect of the 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 an over-taking vessel that steered directly into her. After many experiments, *Hawke* was found to be under the suction effect of the *RMS Olympic*. The captain of the *RMS Olympic* said, “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: *RMS Titanic*. ♦

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