

From the Captain of the Port

Where Can I Go – and Not Go – to Avoid Collision?

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Rule 7 – What Does It Say (emphasis mine)?

(a) Every vessel shall use all available means appropriate to the prevailing circumstances and conditions to determine if risk of collision exists. **If there is any doubt, such risk shall be deemed to exist.**

(b) Proper use shall be made of radar equipment if fitted and operational, including long-range scanning to obtain early warning of risk of collision and radar plotting or equivalent systematic observation of detected objects.

(c) Assumptions shall not be made on the basis of scanty information, especially scanty radar information.

(d) In determining if risk of collision exists the following considerations shall be among those taken into account:

Such risk shall be deemed to exist if the compass bearing of an approaching vessel does not appreciably change.

Such risk may sometimes exist even when an appreciable bearing change is evident, **particularly when approaching a very large vessel or a tow or when approaching a vessel at close range.**

Rule 7 – Determining the Risk of Collision

In “close quarters,” it’s easy to see that the angle between your boat and another is a constant. On open water, it may be a considerable distance to other points of reference such as a point of land behind the other boat. When distances are great, measuring the angles in your mind’s eye is just too unreliable to be of any value. But you needn’t use a distant object. Use your boat. Sight the other vessel over an object on your boat – such as a bow rail stanchion. If the other boat keeps a constant relationship – a “constant bearing” – collision is absolutely certain!

How about “7.b?” Rule 7 specifically says that you must use “all available means” to make that determination. If you have radar, use it. But a stanchion will be as reliable as radar – “constant bearing” means collision certain! This covers “7.c” too. Let’s return to “7.d.ii” in a moment. Now that a collision is imminent, what next?

Rule 8 – Action to Avoid Collision

Have you ever walked toward someone who was walking in the opposite direction and done the “stutter step” – you turned to your right just as they turned to their left so you both stopped – and then you both reversed course simultaneously, again and again...and again?

We’ve written earlier about “stand-on” (hold course and speed) and “give-way” (take early and substantial action to keep clear) vessels. Rules 13 (Overtaking), 14 (Head-On) and 15 (Crossing) are all about these obligations. So, what is Rule 8 about? You’re stand-on and collision is still possible – now what?

The give-way vessel must take “early and substantial action” to keep clear. Given that, changing course is easier to “telegraph” as a move versus just slowing down. Unless you come to a dead stop, the stand-on skipper may not be sure of your intentions. But, imagining that you are the stand-on vessel and the give-way is not telegraphing a proper action to avoid a collision, you must assume one is imminent and, having applied Rule 7 in your mind’s eye, you start to take your independent action.

1. You never hesitate to use your car horn. Why do you hesitate in your boat? You may give 5 or more short blasts that might just get that skipper to port (you are on *his* right) to wake up and at least throttle back.

2. You may take any action yourself regarding the boating’s heading – except turning towards port when the offending vessel is on your port side.

3. If collision seems imminent unless you do something, you must do something. Blast away on the horn and “take the most effective action” to avoid the collision. Dead stop may be best. Turning so as to be going in the same direction, but hopefully only parallel to, as the offending boat may be best. Use judgment. I like dead stop as a first try since the combined velocity is lessened if both of us aren’t going 20 knots at crunch time.

Rule 9 – In a Narrow Channel

Are there any others in our creeks and inlets?

A channel is defined as “narrow” when boats in it are severely limited in room to maneuver. So, stay as far to the starboard side of the channel as possible. If both skippers do that, it opens up a safe passage, normally. Do NOT anchor in the narrow channel (in any event, it is a violation of Federal Regulations to anchor in any channel or tie up to any federal buoy).

Do not cross the channel if it will interfere with a vessel that, by the nature of their draft, is confined to it. Rule 9(b) specifically states that “a vessel less than 20 meters (~60 feet) in length shall not impede the passage of a vessel which can safely navigate only within the narrow channel or fairway.” In contrast, a large vessel should not try to pass a smaller vessel in a narrow channel as the hydrodynamic effects caused by the larger displacement and the suction of her propellers will pull the smaller vessel into the larger one.

And thus Rule 7.d.ii comes into play...

Any collision at sea would be a bad day. After losing 46 souls when the *T/N Andrea Doria* collided in the fog with the *M/V Stockholm* on July 25, 1956, the *Andrea Doria*’s captain was heard to mutter, “When I was a boy, and all my life, I loved the sea. Now, I hate it.”

If you’re interested in being part of USCG Forces, email me at JoinUSCGAux2010@aol.com or John Blevins at FSO-PS@emcg.us and we’ll help you “get in this thing.” ♦