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[Rules 16 & 17 – Keep Clear or Be Dead Right](#)

There are few Rules as clear as Rule 16: “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.” Very straightforward – if you are the give-way vessel, telegraph your move to clear to the other skipper and to keep well clear of the stand-on vessel. See WindCheck, Rule 8, “Prevention of Collision At Sea – Where Can I Go – And Not Go” March 2011, for the prescribed way.

But what about Rule 17, regarding the stand-on vessel, which is the simple reciprocal of Rule 16? 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.

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 COLREGspeak) 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 17-b clearly burdens you with action. Rule 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 the offending vessel 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!)

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."

Captain Joe Vojvodich is the Captain of the Port and Sector Commander for US Coast Guard Sector Long Island Sound. Captain Vojvodich is responsible for all active-duty, reservist and auxiliary Coast Guard personnel within the Sector. Vin Pica, Chief of Staff for the First District Southern Region in the US Coast Guard Auxiliary, works closely with Captain Vojvodich and his staff to promote boating safety in the waters between Connecticut, Long Island and 200 nautical miles offshore. Sector Long Island Sound Command Center can be reached 24 hours a day at 203-468-4401 203-468-4401 .

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