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Prevention of Collision at Sea (Part Two) – Overtaking, a Meeting

By Vincent Pica

When someone says, "Let's take a meeting!" it should make you cringe at the importation of that phrase from the ultra-swank really-West-Bank – LA – into our New York culture. If they say it on the water, do as Nancy Reagan once advised – Just Say NO!

Overview

There are only three conditions of vessels meeting on the waters – head-on, crossing or overtaking situations. The Rules govern how the skippers are to interact with each other through helm control and sound (or radio) signals. This is about overtaking another vessel – which puts you just about as low on the priority totem pole as there is.

Rule 13 - Overtaking

Bottom line, if you are overtaking another vessel, you are the give-way vessel. How do you know that you are overtaking the vessel and not crossing her path? Well, there are three ways – with the third always winning out:

1. At night, you can see a white light and no red or green side lights. The white light is either an anchor light or it is the stern light. There is an angle of arc (135-degrees) that sweeps like the wings of a jet plane from one side of the vessel around to the stern and back to the corresponding point on the opposite side of the boat within which, by regulation, you must only be able see the stern light. You are overtaking that vessel.
2. During the day, if at a distance you see an uninterrupted wake from one side of the boat to the other, you are overtaking her. If you see a break in the middle of the wake, you are not.
3. When in doubt, assume you are the overtaking vessel and act accordingly. Even a sailboat is the give-way boat to a power driven vessel – if it is overtaking you. (Ever drift fish at 1 or 2 knots and have a sailboat under sail go by you at 4 knots...?)

If you want to pass a boat in a "narrow channel," you must get permission first. Imagine you took the boat into New York to give the family the rare treat of a circumnavigation of Manhattan. You've gone up the Hudson, down the Harlem River, passed the Hell Gate to port and are now running down the East River. You're almost under the United Nations with its post-9/11 security zone. You want to pass a slower moving tour boat – but the combination of Roosevelt Island to port, the security zone to starboard and the USCG Fast Boat with the 50-caliber on the bow is making a mighty river look very small.... So, what do you do?

Get on the radio and hail the vessel ahead. Try Channel 13 (bridge-to-bridge) and, if that fails, she is certainly on 16. If you can see her name on the transom, hail her by name. "Motor Vessel 'New York Tours,' this is the motor vessel 'Charlie' on your stern." Repeat it one or two more times and

wait a moment. "Charlie,' this is 'New York Tours.' Pass your traffic, skipper," might come right back. "New York Tours,' this is 'Charlie.' Skipper, I'd like to pass you on 'one whistle.'" "Roger that, skipper. I will 'come left' a bit to give you some room."

What was that all about? Well, a couple of things passed there. Under the Rules, you can only propose a maneuver. The counter-vessel must approve it. Before radio, you would have proposed that exchange by giving either one short blast on your whistle ("I would like to pass you on your starboard side") or two short blasts ("I would like to pass you on your port side"). The opposing skipper would return the same whistle signal to signal agreement – or return five or more short blasts to indicate that he can see something dangerous ahead. These days, you say the words rather than blast the whistle. I added the example above that the vessel ahead would move a little to port (come left) to emphasis the point – one whistle, skipper...

Lastly, you cannot turn it into a stand-on crossing situation by speeding ahead, turning to port and then cutting across the over-taken vessel's starboard bow. You must be so far ahead when you make that turn to port that there is no question...

No one said getting ahead was easy!

About the Author: *Vincent Pica is a coxswain and the Commander of Flotilla 18-06 East Moriches. He was a navigator in a brown-water and blue-water sailboat racing crew for eight seasons. From the "iron sails" side, he is a licensed US Coast Guard Master of Steam and Diesel Powered Vessels, carries a Radar Observer endorsement, Unlimited, on his license and is certified in Marine Diesel Engine Operation and Maintenance.*

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