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Prevention of Collision at Sea (Part Three) – Vessel Dead Ahead!

By Vincent Pica

In 1875, Captain George Eldridge put the Rules, as they were then defined, to poetry, amongst other learning aids. "If three lights I see ahead, turn to starboard, show my red, perfect safety dead ahead..." This column is all about that...

Overview

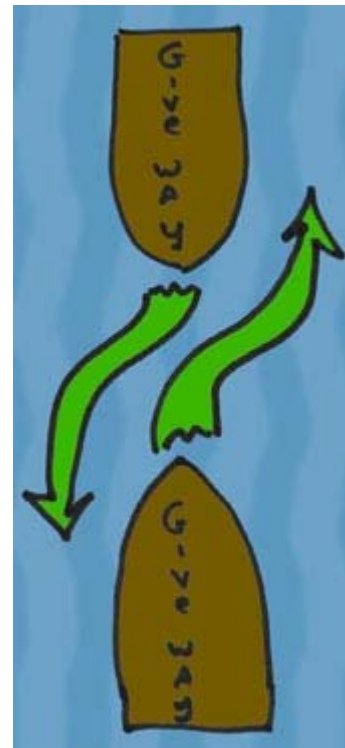
There are only three conditions of vessels meeting on the waters – head-on, crossing or overtaking situations. The Rules govern how the skippers are to interact with each other through helm control and sound (or radio) signals. This is about two power-driven vessels heading straight at each other – the only time that both vessels are the "give-way" vessel.

Rule 14 – Head-On

When two vessels are on reciprocal (opposite) compass courses, obviously this is a problem. A collision is unavoidable. But how can you tell if you are heading at each other and not following behind. There are three ways – with the third method, as usual, always winning out:

1. At night, if you see three lights – red, green and a white light above them, you are definitely heading straight for each other. If you see a red or a green and a white light above (and behind and to the side), you have a crossing situation. If the white appears to be largely above the single colored light, e.g., you see red and white almost in a line, the green light may be just out and she is heading straight at you!
2. During the day, if at a distance you see an interrupted wake in the middle of the boat's aspect, you are very likely heading right for each other. That break is the bow cutting through the water.
3. When in doubt, assume you are on reciprocal courses and act accordingly.

In this situation, both vessels are "give-way," and both are required, where conditions permit, to turn to starboard and open up a passing lane between them. Once appropriate distance has been created, turn back to your original heading and both boats will pass each other "port-to-port" – your port side and his port side will each be the passing side for the encounter. Remember –



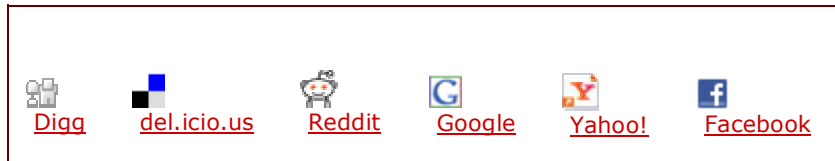
take "early and substantial" action so that your maneuver is "telegraphed" to the other skipper.

But what if you see that you cannot turn to starboard because of (1) traffic conditions, (2) rocks or (3) shallows, etc...? Rule 14 permits you to turn to port and create a "starboard-to-starboard" passage. However, since most skippers will be expecting, and perhaps already executing, a turn to his starboard to set up the preferred passage of port-to-port, you have some extra precautions and actions to take. First, assuming that you still have substantial time and distance between you and the approaching vessel, take early and "really substantial" action – make it extremely obvious you have to turn towards him, i.e., to your port side, to create a safe passing situation for the conditions. This will give the other skipper time to reverse his maneuver and come in line with your thinking. If you don't have substantial time and distance to telegraph such a maneuver, just stop! Give five or more short blasts on the whistle to clearly indicate "danger!" Let the approaching vessel deal with a situation that you cannot handle otherwise. Second, get on the radio (see Radio Smarts, SSP) and hail the vessel ahead. Given the dangerous situation, start on '16.' You can't see her name on the transom so hail her by color/make and direction/location. "Grady White, westbound by buoy 14 in Moriches Bay, this is the blue-hulled motor vessel 'Charlie' eastbound dead ahead of you." Repeat it one or two more times and wait a moment. "'Charlie,' this is 'Rosy'; pass your traffic, skipper," might come right back. "'Rosy,' this is 'Charlie.' Skipper, I am constrained by draft from passing you port-to-port. I am going to lie-to right here until you pass." "Roger that, skipper. I will 'come right' a bit to give you some room."

Even if you both can't "turn to starboard and show your red," one of you can – if you create the scenario to do so. You're the captain. Safety of life at sea comes first, even before getting home on time!

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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