

Prevention of Collision at Sea

Let's NOT Take a Meeting!

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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! And a "meeting" on the water can generally be bad. This column is about that.

Overtaking, Head-On & Crossing

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. We've written a paragraph or two about these scenarios before (see LIBW, "Prevention of Collision at Sea", March 2010) but now it is time to devote more substantial space – and understanding – to these critical Rules.

Rule 13 - Overtaking

Lucky 13 means this – there is almost nothing lower on the totem pole of priorities than you if you are overtaking another vessel. Here are three ways to judge whether you are overtaking or not:

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. If you only see that white 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.

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.

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 are almost

under the United Nations with its post-9/11 security zone. You want to pass a slower-moving tour boat. What do you do?

Get on the radio and hail the vessel ahead. 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."

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 down my port side") or two short blasts ("I would like to pass you on my starboard side"). The opposing skipper would return the same whistle signal to signal agreement – or return 5 or more short blasts to indicate that he can see something dangerous ahead. These days, you say the words rather than blast the whistle.

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...

Rule 14 – Dead Ahead!

When two vessels are on reciprocal (opposite) compass courses, obviously this is a problem. There are three ways to determine if you are "head on."

At night, if you see three lights – red, green and a white light above them, you are definitely heading straight at each other.

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 at each other. That break is the bow cutting through the water.

When in doubt, assume you are on reciprocal courses and act accordingly.

In this situation, both vessels are "give-way" and both are

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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, (3) shallows, etc...? Rule 14 does permit 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 turned towards him, i.e., to your port side. 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! If indicated, give 5 or more short blasts on the whistle.

Rule 15 – Crossing

When two vessels appear to be heading across each other's paths, this is by definition a crossing situation. There are three ways to determine if a collision is imminent.

At night, if you see a red light and a white light above it and trailing behind, you are crossing each other's path and she is the stand-on vessel. You are thus the give-way. If you see a green and a white light above it and trailing behind, you have a crossing situation where you are the stand-on vessel – but keep an eye on her always! You don't want to be "dead right!" During the day, you can obviously see if the vessel is crossing your path on your starboard side (you are give-way) or on your port side (you are stand-on.)

2. Mark the other boat's progress against something fixed on your boat – a cleat, a stanchion, the anchor – anything that is traveling with you. If the opposing

boat continues to hover on or around that fixed mark as you both continue your course and speed, a collision is about to happen!

3. When in doubt, assume you are on a collision course and act accordingly. In this situation, the give-way vessel is to turn to starboard (towards the stand-on boat) and go behind her (go "under her stern"). 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, (3) shallows, etc...? Rule 15 clearly says that the give-way vessel "shall avoid crossing ahead of the other vessel", i.e., do not speed up and try to cross ahead! If you don't have substantial time and distance to telegraph such a proper maneuver, just slow down or even stop! Let the approaching vessel pass ahead of you, just as you would allow a sail boat to pass ahead. So, you are the stand-on vessel. Are we done now? No...

There are (at least) three catches:

What if a vessel constrained by the nature of their work (say a dredger or a commercial fishing vessel) is on your port side? You are on their right so you should go ahead, no? No. Rule 18 comes into play. Any power-driven vessel approached on its port side by a hampered vessel must keep clear. You can increase speed to pass ahead though, if conditions clearly permit.

If you are crossing a narrow channel, Rule 9(d) governs. "A vessel shall not cross a narrow channel or fairway if such crossing impedes the passage of a vessel which can safely navigate only within such a channel or fairway."

Lastly, if you are in a "traffic separation scheme", and if you fish the Canyons you may be, Rule 10(j) prohibits a boat of less than 20 meters (roughly 65 feet) from impeding the safe passage of a power-driven vessel following the traffic lane.

BTW, if you are interested in being part of USCG Forces, email me at JoinUSCGAux2010@aol.com or go direct to John Blevins, who is in charge of new members matters, at FSO-PS@emcg.us and we will help you "get in this thing..."