

Prevention of Collision at Sea

Conduct of Vessels in Restricted Visibility

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Yikes... summer is unofficially over. This means that the weather will be getting cooler while the water is holding onto the heat. Translation? Fog. For those of a more scientific-bent, fog that forms when water is warmer than the air is called “steam” fog (fall). Think of that pot of spaghetti water you are boiling. Fog that forms when the water is colder than the air is called “advection” fog (spring.) There is a third kind of fog called “radiation” fog. That is the fog that you see float in across the backyard or linger in a dip in the country road. But fog is fog. You can’t see the land or the buoys, or, worse, the bow! What to do?

Rule 19 – Conduct of Vessels in Restricted Visibility

First, does “restricted visibility” mean just fog? No. It means restricted visibility – rain, darkness, fog, snow, smoke, heavy seas (like when you are down in troughs and can’t see anything but the sea).

What does Rule 19 cover? Specifically, this governs how vessels **that can’t see each other** act. If you can see each other, even in the fog, all the prior rules we have discussed rise to the top. Further, it states that (like a car) “Every vessel shall proceed at a safe speed adapted to the prevailing circumstances and conditions of restricted visibility.” It goes on to add that “a power-driven vessel shall have her engines ready for immediate maneuver.” Remember, with respect to the language of the Rules, “shall” means “must.”

Be aware that this injunction about having your engines ever at the ready has more than a bit of “having your cake and eating it too” with respect to an admiralty or maritime board. For example...

If you are traveling at speeds consistent with “normal” visibility within sight of an area of restricted visibility, i.e., a fog bank, you can be judged to have been speeding as if you were *in* the fog bank! Why? Because you can’t see a boat coming out of it and she can’t see you – until it is too late. A vessel which detects “by radar alone” the presence of another vessel shall determine if a close quarters condition is developing and/or a risk of collision exists. (Remember, if you have radar and you don’t turn it on, you are already breaking the

Rules, since you are obligated to use “all available means” for navigation and safety. See LIBW Look Out Below – and Above and About! June 2010.) If a risk of collision exists, “she shall take avoiding-action in ample time”... but don’t...

a. turn to port if you believe a vessel is ahead of your beam (amidships), unless you are overtaking that vessel.

b. turn towards the vessel on your beam or abaft (behind) you...

c. unless you can’t avoid it!

If you believe a risk of collision exists, “every vessel which hears apparently forward of her beam the fog signal of another vessel shall (must!) reduce her speed to the minimum at which she can be kept on course. She shall (must!) if necessary take all way off and, in any event, navigate with extreme caution until the danger of collision is over.”

...but be ready and “have her engines ready for immediate maneuver!”

Admittedly, this rule is hard to follow in that “safe speed” has been judged repeatedly by maritime boards as “allow stopping in half the distance of visibility.” There have been some days of late where visibility didn’t extend to the bow! Further, many a mariner (including this one) has turned off his engine to increase his ability to hear. Perhaps now with 4-strokes being so much quieter, this conundrum can be avoided.

In short, unless you are dead sure that there is no risk of collision, assume there is a risk. If a collision occurs that is *prima facie* evidence that a risk did exist! Assuming there is a risk, your first and best step is to slow to bare steerage – and then get on that horn.

Rule 35 – Sound Signals in “Restricted Visibility”

Rules 32 through 38 are all about “Sound and Light Signals” and we’ll dissect them in the months ahead. They hark back to the days well before radio, much less cell phones and radar. But, be realistic. There just isn’t any way to use a cell phone to signal a vessel that you only can hear – and unless he also has radar, your radar is telling you a lot but is saying nothing to the counter-party. But you

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can't talk about Rule 19 without talking about Rule 35. So, you hear a whistle* ahead? What is it telling you?

You hear **one** "prolonged" (4-6 seconds) blast. What's the message? A power-driven vessel underway (not fast to the bottom or a dock) making way (engine engaged in propulsion) is out there. Somebody like you.

You hear **two** prolonged blasts (about 2 seconds apart, per the rule). What's the message? A power-driven vessel underway (not fast to the bottom or a dock) but NOT making way is out there.

You hear **three** blasts in succession – one prolonged followed by two short blasts. What's the message now? Well, that signal, if not a "catch-all", is a "catch-many." It could be any of these types of vessels:

an "NUC" – a vessel "not under command" – unable to maneuver due to total mechanical failure.

a "RAM" – a vessel "restricted in her ability to maneuver" due to the nature of her work.

a "CBD" – a vessel "constrained by her draft".

a sailing vessel... enough of those in these parts?

a (commercial) vessel fishing by means of nets or trawling lines (not a Penn reel off the back of a Grady White!) whether underway or at anchor.

a vessel engaged in towing, whether by the stern, on the "hip" or pushing ahead...

What is the common denominator here? Restricted maneuverability... 3 blasts equals even more than the average amount of complexity. If that vessel is bearing down on you, she cannot get out of your way.

You hear **three** blasts in succession – one prolonged followed by two short blasts – and then immediately hear **four** blasts in succession – one prolonged followed by three short blasts! What's the message now???

That's the signal from the vessel being **towed**! She says, "Don't forget me out here on the end of the 600' hawser!" If more than one vessel is being towed, it is the responsibility of the last towed

vessel to issue the signal. All of these signals should be repeated no less than every two minutes.

You hear **three** blasts in succession – one short, one prolonged and one short. What's the message now? A vessel at anchor... and that signal will come no less than one minute apart. Alternatively, the master of the vessel may decide to ring his bell "rapidly for 5 seconds." Same message – I am at anchor. Don't hit me!

What about hearing a "rapidly struck gong for 5 seconds" directly after hearing the rapidly rung bell? Well, try not to hit this guy! Any vessel 100 meters or greater (that's a football field and then some) is required to ring the bell from the bow and the gong from the stern so you have a chance to judge, hopefully by the relative direction of the two sound signals, how this monster is lying at anchor.

But wait! You heard three "separate and distinct strokes on a bell", then the bell being struck rapidly for 5 seconds, and then the three claps on the bell again. What is the message now? Oh, the ignominy of it... she is aground.

Lastly

Here is also one last idea and it is not in the Rules and in fact goes against 2(b) above (Rule 19-d-ii, in the COLREGs) but it goes back to time immemorial. If you hear a boat ahead of you, before you take all way off, do this: Turn into her. Your bow presents a smaller target than your beam and the bow is your least vulnerable point. It is nearly impossible for her bow to plow into your boat through your bow. They will "glance off" each other. You won't find that in any rule book, but it may go back as far as the Phoenicians.

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..."

* For those that enjoy the arcana of the sea and the Rules, Rule 33 specifies the kinds of equipment that can be used for making signals – whistles, bells and gongs. What's missing? A horn! Horns and motors are in cars. Whistles and engines are in boats!