

Seamanship

Fog!

by Vincent Pica, District Commodore, First District, Southern Region (DISR), U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary

Jeez, is it me or have we been beset by fog more often than sun of late? 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 boil. 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?

Well, with the dropping price of radar, boats in the mid-20’ range can now be found to have radar aboard. If you do have radar aboard, read the manual and get familiar with gain controls. I won’t waste space in this newspaper lending advice to a skipper who already has a state of the art system aboard on how to use it. Not surprisingly, however, the advice below holds for the 65’er with radar and chart overlay capabilities as well as the skipper in the 17’ open boat with a 90-hp Merc on the stern. When the fog rolls in...

Slow down to “a slow bell”, that is, with forward propulsion necessary to maintain steerage, but no greater. Put on life jackets. Now.

While underway and making way, that is, engine in gear, give 1 “prolonged” blast on your whistle (4-6 seconds). This is specified in the Navigation Rules, Rule 35(a). (See COLREGs-LIBW: Conduct of Vessels in Restricted Visibility October 2010.) In fact, the rules say “not more than 2 minutes apart.” Let me make it plainer. No **less** than every 2 minutes.

While underway but **not** making way, that is, dead stop on the engine but not at anchor, give 2 “prolonged” blasts, separated by a couple of seconds apart, no less than every 2 minutes. This is Rule 35(b).

If necessary to anchor due to visibility (none!), “boats less than 39 feet 4 inches (12 meters) in length may make an efficient sound signal at intervals of not more than two minutes.” In short, it is not specified for boats under 12 meters. Boats larger than 12

meters at anchor must clang their bell 5 times quickly, followed by one prolonged and one short (~1 second) blast on the whistle.

Listen. Sound travels more efficiently through fog than clear air. Listen. Bring your engine to dead stop from time to time and listen. Listen for the sound of surf (Move away from that!), buoy whistles/horns/bells (Move towards that, carefully.) or other engines. (Sound danger whistle right away and take all way off – but don’t turn off the engine!)

So, now you are properly communicating with other boats but you do want to get out of the fog if you can. How? Don’t, as some old chestnuts might advise, hug the shore. As the fog intensifies and you draw closer and closer to shore, you know what will happen. Of far more danger, don’t “hug the shore” when you are outside the inlet. If you get caught in the surf line (see 5 above), you could capsized and now there is an imminent threat to life.

If you can’t see, you must stop, drop the hook, sound your warning horn as specified and wait out the fog. If due to electronics (GPS, Loran), you realize that you are in a heavy traffic lane, get out - at a slow speed and just enough to be out of the traffic. But if you can’t see past the bow and you are underway and making way, you are in extreme danger of having a collision at sea.

If you have some visibility, see #’s 1 and 2 above. The slower speed will help in another way as well – you can hear better. Lastly, if you have those canisters of compressed gas as your boat’s horn/whistle, you will likely run out of compressed air before you run out of fog. Think about getting a simple whistle. Get the “pea-less” kind in case you have to worry about your spittle freezing one cold and foggy day... and blow, baby, blow!

BTW, if you are interested in being part of USCG Forces, email me at JoinUSCGAux@aol.com or go direct to the DISR Human Resources department, which is in charge of new members matters at DSO-HR and we will help you “get in this thing.”