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Stuck in the Fog — Now What??

By Vincent Pica

As the air temperature drops and the water still holds some of that summer heat, we can expect fog, just as we do in the spring when the air is warming but it is the water that is now cold. For those of a more scientific-bent, fog that forms when water is warmer than the air (in the fall) is called "steam" fog. Fog that forms when the water is colder than the air (in spring) is called "advection" fog (spring). There is a third kind of fog called "radiation" fog. That's the fog you see floating across the backyard or lingering 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 have radar, read the manual and get familiar with gain controls. I won't waste space advising a skipper who's already got 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...

1. Slow down to "a slow bell," that is, with forward propulsion necessary to maintain steerage, but no greater. Put on life jackets.
2. While underway and making way, that is, engine in gear, give one "prolonged" blast on your whistle (4-6 seconds). This is specified in the Navigation Rules, Rule 35(a). In fact, the Rules say "not more than two minutes apart." Let me make it plainer. No *LESS* than every two minutes.
3. While underway but *not* making way, that is, dead stop on the engine but not at anchor, give two "prolonged" blasts, separated by a couple of seconds apart, no less than every two minutes. This is Rule 35(b).
4. If necessary to anchor due to visibility (none!), "boats less than 39'4" (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 five times quickly followed by one prolonged and one short (~1 second) blast in the whistle.
5. 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 in 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. (See column on running aground.) Far more dangerous, don't "hug the shore" when you are outside the inlet. If you get caught in the surf line (see number 5, above), you will be capsized and now there is 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, making way, you are in extreme danger of having a collision at sea.

If you have some visibility, see numbers 1 and 2, above. The slower speed will help in another way as well – you can hear better. Last, 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...!

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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