FIRST BOAT

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Rules of the Road - Set to Poetry
Vin Pica waxes poetic about the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea...

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Photo Courtesy of The U.S. Coast Guard

Over 125 years ago, Captain Eldridge set to poetry the most essential aspect of the Rules of the Road (COLREGs.) From this, the renowned Eldridge Tide and Pilot Book, the marine industry's most respected tide and current reference guide since 1874, was born. I have had one at the helm of my vessels since, well, I can't remember that far back.

But the poem is worth dusting off and passing on to the current generation of mariners and boat skippers… In short, it is the essence of avoiding collisions at sea. This column is all about that....

The Poem - Dissected!

Here is what the Captain penned, and here is the dissection…

When all three lights I see ahead,
I turn to Starboard and show my Red.

Green to Green, Red to Red,
Perfect Safety - Go Ahead.

But if to Starboard Red appear,
It is my duty to keep clear -

To act as judgment says is proper:
To Port or Starboard, Back or Stop her.

And if upon my Port is seen
A Steamer's Starboard light of Green,

*I hold my course and watch to see **
That Green to Port stays Clear of me.

Both in safety and in doubt
Always keep a good look out.

In danger, with no room to turn,
Ease her, Stop her, Go Astern.

* "There's nought for me to do but see" is the original version.

Now, granted, you can't reduce an inch of regulations to 4 stanzas of poetry, completely, but these words are key to the essential elements of what the rules are all about - avoiding a collision at sea!

Sound Collision Alarm!

When patrolling, we often come upon situations where we see private boaters closing on us in a fashion that will cause a collision unless someone starts to act. I always, as I am taking the action necessary, call out, "sound collision alarm", as a teaching aid. From time to time, a trainee will ask, "How'd you know?" as if I was clairvoyant. To determine the risk of collision is relatively easy – the hard part is keeping an eye on the skipper ahead of you who just might, at the last possible second, decide

that he needs to do something too…! Until you are well and by, stay sharp! And here are the ways to see a collision coming before crunch time!

Overtaking

Bottom line, if you are overtaking another vessel, you are the give-way vessel. There are three ways - with the 3rd always winning out - to tell if you are indeed over-taking:

1. 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. You are overtaking that vessel. Don't hit her!
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. If you see a break in the middle of the wake, you are not. (see "Head-On" below)
3. When in doubt, assume you are the overtaking vessel and act accordingly.

Head-On

When two vessels are on reciprocal (opposite) compass courses, obviously this is a problem. There are 3 ways - with the 3rd method, as usual, always winning out to tell:

1. At night, if you see three lights - red, green and a white light above them, you are definitely heading straight at each other. 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 at 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. Remember - take "early and substantial" action so that your maneuver is "telegraphed" to the other skipper.

Crossing

When two vessels appear to be heading across each other's paths, this is by definition a crossing situation – and, like in your car – a collision needs to be avoided! But how can you tell if you are actually on a collision course. There are 3 ways – with the 3rd method, as usual, always winning

out:

1. 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 (red means stop!) 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! 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! If still in doubt, watch the land behind her. If she appears to be gaining on the land, she will pass ahead of you. If she seems to be falling back against the land, she will pass behind you. If the land is unchanged against her course over the water, sound collision alarm!
3. When in doubt, assume you are on a collision course and act accordingly.

In this situation, the give-way vessel is, by preference, 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.

BTW, if you are interested in being part of USCG Forces, email me at JoinUSCGAux@aol.com or go direct to the D1SR Human Resources department, who are in charge of new members matters, at DSO-HR and we will help you "get in this thing…"