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Float Plans—Nothing but Upside

By Vincent Pica

As we close in on the end of summer, it still isn't too late to think about Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS). In fact, as we contemplate the end of the crowded beaches, we might even feel compelled to venture out towards Connecticut or places further north and east to catch the first hints of the incoming fall. If so, the Float Plan, oft spoken of and more often ignored, can be key for you and those closest to you.

The Float Plan is nominally known as a mechanism for ensuring that missing vessels are indeed missed in time for action to be taken that might otherwise lead to the rescue of the crew rather than the recovery of their bodies. "Boat-A is supposed to be at Payne's Marina in the Great Salt Pond on Block Island at this time and date. Is it there?"

So, in a nutshell, float plans are all about SOLAS – Safety of Life at Sea. However, as the title implies, the development of a float plan delivers nothing but upside to the boat's master and thus to the crew who are fully the master's responsibility.



Charting

The ideal float plan involves the detailed analysis of getting to your destination and returning safely. The float plan provides the opportunity for the skipper to sit with his or her charts, in the calm of a kitchen, den or study and literally walk through the passage with parallel rulers and dividers.

What is the goal of such detailed analysis? The net effect is to create your own Pilot Guide for the entire passage *and* to be able to assign predicted times to each leg. Deviation from predicted times is an early warning to the skipper that something is up – working against (or with!) a current, crosswinds creating additional work effort for the engines to hold course, etc. All of this translates into fuel consumption "deltas" which ultimately leads directly to SOLAS issues – Safety of Life at Sea. If you've made an error in the development of your pilot guide, the rest of the guide is likely to be suspect and you'll have to do what every skipper has done for centuries untold – improvise *carefully*. If the chart is generally consistent but winds and tides have done the inevitable, then the overall pilot guide is likely to still have integrity but, once again, you'll have to do what every skipper has done for centuries untold – improvise *carefully*.

Weather

With respect to predicting the weather, I use the Weather.com website – www.weather.com – and the reason I do is because I can get weather prediction by the hour. If the chance of precipitation for a particular day is 50 percent, but it is 10 percent in the morning and 90 percent in the afternoon, I want to know that. Put in your zip code or city name and click go.

Click on "More Details" and see how the hourly details add to the weather analysis.

Tides

Nothing is more likely to surprise you and more potentially perilous to happen than running aground – and understanding the tide is all about that. There are several good services to use but there is something very subtle about tide analysis that no chart gives you.

Tides change at different rates at different places as we talked about in the column on Time and Tides. Knowing the tides at Moriches Inlet while spending the next six hours transiting from Seatuck Cove to Smith Point, then easting to Potunk Point and back to Seatuck Cove would require major mental gymnastics in order to keep pace with the pace of the tide as it works its way down the East and West Cuts and across the bays and into the coves...

Why do that if the Internet can do it for you?

Local Notice to Mariners

As of April 1, 2004, the United States Coast Guard stopped mailing the Local Notice to Mariners. Instead, it is accessible on the Internet – and they will even email you a link to the updates each week as they "go to press."

The electronic versions of LNM appear on the [US Coast Guard Navigation Center's Website](http://www.uscg.gov).

Why go out upon the briny deep with less information than there is available to you? What's the upside in that? Go on their Web site, click around until you find where to put your e-mail address in – and from then on, direct from the US Coast Guard forever, get the latest they know about what is happening "out there..." For free!

Battening Down the Hatches

So, in summary, a complete float plan encompasses all of these components. And a prayer...

Dear Lord,

Be good to me...

Your Sea is so wide...

And my boat is so small...

Amen!

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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1 Star



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