

What are the "Rules-of-the-Road"?



by **Capt. Peter Kane**

In order to answer that question perhaps in would behoove me explain my interest in writing this article. Over time, and I do hate to admit how long that is, I have experienced many situations on the water that could have been prevented if vessel operators new what they were doing. A boat is not an automobile. It does not handle the same, it does not have brakes, in bad weather it cannot be pulled off the road to wait it out and it can SINK! Unfortunately, anyone with the wherewithal can buy a boat; be it sixteen feet or sixty. They can turn the key and go. Agreed, most will seek some instruction to familiarize themselves with their new vessel. I then ask "is that enough".

I do not believe so.

For hundreds of years there have been vessels on the high seas with very few incidences of collisions. Why now, in our time, do we need "rules" governing how we operate boats? The key here is "in our time"

In the last century there have been two World Wars, and other military conflicts that have led to a large number of merchant vessels being built, not to mention military vessels added to the mothball fleet. Many of these vessels were sold cheaply to anyone who could afford them. Countries with very little maritime experience were suddenly operating on the high seas with crews having very little experience. There was a communications gap as well. A ship from one country would sail into the waters of another country which spoke a different language. People from different countries speaking different languages on the bridges of these vessels. I think "communications gap" is an understatement!

And then, in the 1960's, we saw the advent of the supertankers. The largest moving vessels that ever existed. Up to a quarter mile in length with drafts of 70 - 80 feet carrying millions of gallons of oil.

In the United States we have an economy that allows the average person to own and operate

pleasure craft - just take a look at Charlotte Harbor on a sunny day in February or better yet take a trip to Miami. Sometimes it looks like there are more boats than people.

So, we have various kinds of people operating all types of vessels: professional mariners, foreign vessels, new boaters and experienced boaters - and they all know it all!

Picture this: A commercial freighter with a German captain and Portuguese mate approach a Liberian supertanker. They are all in the vicinity of Japanese and Russian fishing boats and let's include a few recreational boaters.

1. Who says what to whom?
2. In what language?
3. What will happen?
4. Rule of BIG, the tanker wins!

In 1972 at the United Nations there was a formalization of International Regulations for the Prevention of Collisions at Sea. The IMO (International Maritime Organization) adopted and ratified the rules for avoidance of collision at sea. These rules which went into effect in 1977 and are referred to as the COLREGS (Collision Regulations). They are the International Rules. These rules are to be adhered to by all vessels at sea and waters navigable by sea going vessels. The only exception to these rules is to avoid immediate danger.

Inland Rules vs International

In the 1972 meeting which adopted the International Rules the United States asked for special rules. These rules, adopted in 1981, are referred to as the Inland Rules. You may have noticed on your paper charts a magenta line. If you look closely at areas around bays, harbors or inlets you will see the dashed magenta line which is the separation

between Inland Rules and International Rules. They are the COLREGS demarcation line.

These Inland Rules were necessary because of the huge amount of maritime traffic that moves in and around our ports. They include, but are not limited to, New York, Boston, San Francisco Bay and many other regions. My experience on the Hudson River of New York testifies to this need. When I am the Captain on board I regularly communicate with the bridge of other commercial vessels via VHF radio. When I see I am meeting a down-bound tanker I will call him and agree upon which sides we are to pass. There is no doubt or confusion. "Albany Queen this is Rip Van Winkle off your bow. I would like to meet on one whistle. Rip, I'll see you on one whistle (pass port to port). Simple, safe, no confusion - we are following the rules!

Now, I do get the argument from time to time: "we only have a 25 foot outboard and we do not go any farther than over to Boca, maybe out into the Gulf on occasion to fish. I know what I am doing why do I need to know these rules? Why do I need a VHF radio? I have a cell phone."

wife and two children. After passing thru Plum Gut and navigating into the Sound the electronic navigation failed; no chart-map, GPS. It was now dark and they had no idea where they were. Maintaining the current heading, at some point they ran between a tug with a long tow. They hit the tow wire, the boat sank. The tug was not aware of what had occurred until long after the collision. The husband, who was operating the vessel was thrown into the water, his family drowned. He was found the next day on Plum Island - alive.

After the fact: Do not rely on electronic navigation. Learn how to plot a course on a paper chart. Take fixes frequently on your position and mark it on the chart. Have a compass on board and learn how to use it. Learn the "rules" and keep a copy of the rules on board (it is mandatory on charter and commercial vessels). He did not know identification lights when navigating at night. The tug had proper lights displayed; running lights and towing lights displayed on the mast indicating he was pulling a barge on a long tow.

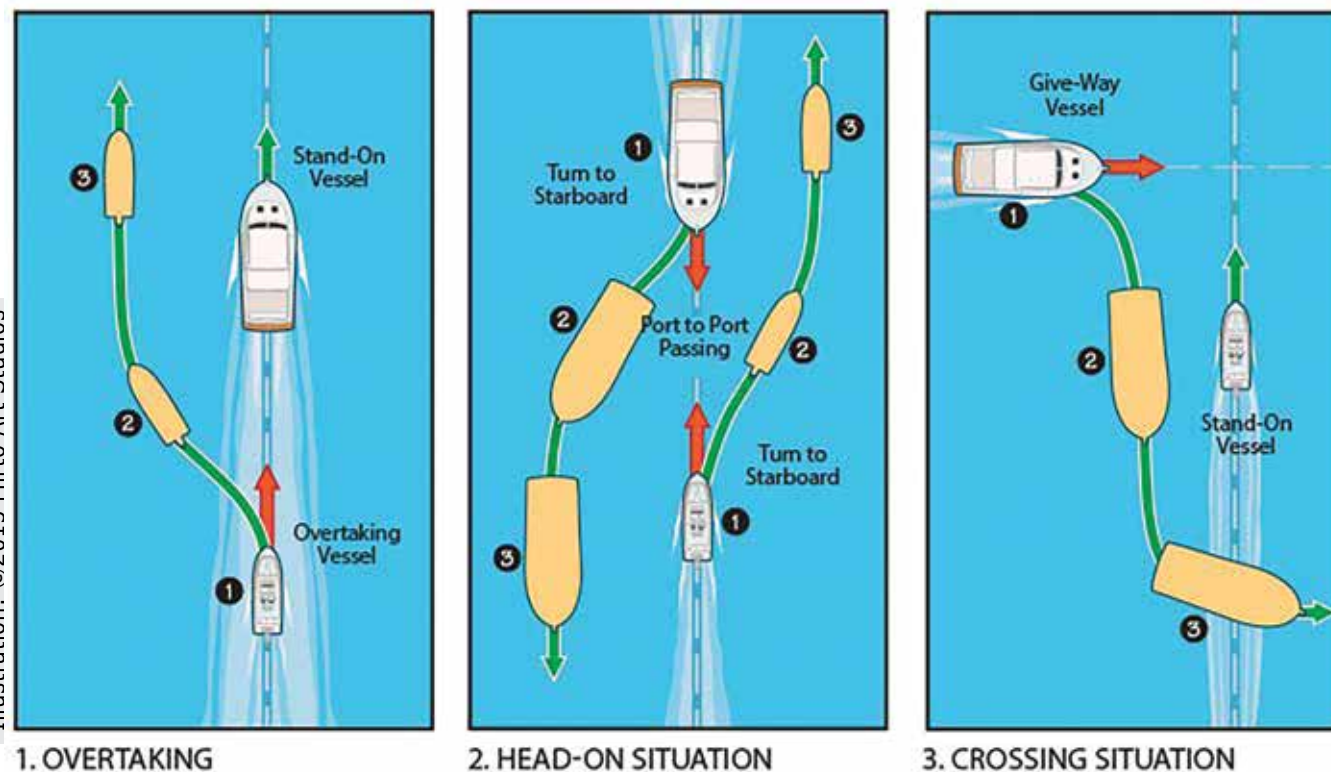


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My intent in future articles is to answer these questions. Let me end this one with a short true story (I have many!)

A family of four was navigating Long Island Sound at dusk. They were traveling back to Mystic, Connecticut after spending the day at Montauk at the tip of Long Island. Husband,

Now, I know I was not there and there may have been other circumstances but, from what I heard from other captains and the media this is what happened and it could have been avoided.

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