A Need to Know

by **Capt. Peter Kane**

If you have ever had the chance to take a close look at the "Rules of the Road" you may ask yourself if there is a real need to know all of this "stuff". Perhaps not; maybe only those rules that apply to you and your vessel. But then, what about the "other guy"? Does he need to know all this "stuff"? The simple answer is yes.

If you are a boater operating a vessel you should know them all. I realize you may forget some of them if they never seem to apply to you. At some point in your boating ventures there may come the need. I strongly suggest you carry the Navigation Rules and Regulations Handbook on board. It is published by the Department of Homeland Security/US Coast Guard and available on Amazon. As mentioned in my first article this publication is required to be on board any charter or commercial vessel.

A few years back I had a friend who was about to enter a creek off the main channel of the Hudson River. He was an experienced mariner but was a bit puzzled by a flashing yellow light just off his port bow. Playing it safe, he decided to slow down before making his turn to port. A good thing he did. It was the "special flashing light" displayed on the bow of a barge being pushed by a tug. He told me afterwards," I seemed to recall a flashing yellow light mentioned in the "Rules". As the tug passed its' light configuration made sense to him. We wondered, if he had never taken a course on the "Rules" would he have made that turn - into the barge!

As a recreational boater you really cannot remember all the details in the rules. I have been a captain for over forty years and still need to refresh my memory on occasion. That being said, there are those rules you need to know.

Rules Applying to Specific Vessel Types

Let's consider first what a vessel is and then explore the types. By definition, a vessel is anything used for transportation or capable of being used for transportation on the water. Broad definition for sure. That includes a canoe, an ocean- going tanker and anything in between.

Rule #3 specifically defines vessel types. Some of these definitions are almost self - explanatory.

A ***power- driven*** vessel is propelled by machinery

A ***sailing vessel*** is one under sail, providing it is not using propelling machinery

(if it is it becomes a power vessel)

A vessel ***engaged in fishing*** using nets, lines, trawls or other fishing apparatus which restricts maneuverability

A ***seaplane***, includes aircraft designed to maneuver on the water

A vessel ***not under command*** - under special circumstances is not able to maneuver

A vessel ***restricted in her ability to*** maneuver due to the nature of her work (laying pipe, a dredge, engaged in towing, mine clearance)

By definition, these vessel types lend to a "pecking order". For example, if a vessel not under command cannot maneuver it stands to reason all the others should give wide birth - she cannot get out of the way! A vessel not under command (NUC) is at the very top of the "pecking order". Vessels restricted in their ability to maneuver (RAM) are next. Note here that "due to the nature of their work" they are restricted; they are under command. Vessels engaged in fishing are next on the list (these are commercial fishing vessels, not the recreational fisherman) then comes vessels under sail, power vessels and finally seaplanes (they take last place in the "pecking order").

It is important to note here that most of us operating our power boats are pretty low on the list. There is one other vessel type I failed to mention because it only applies to the International Rules. That is a CBD - a vessel Constrained by Draft. These are the mega tankers and can only operate on the oceans and very deep ports, not on inland waters.

Steering and Sailing Rules

Steering and Sailing Rules apply to the conduct of a vessel in any condition of visibility. One of the most important here is Rule #5. Every vessel shall at all times maintain a proper look-out by all means appropriate in the prevailing circumstances and conditions.....

A look-out at all times. Remember the purpose of the "Rules": prevent collision! Someone has to see or hear the other vessel. We all get distracted but distraction can be the cause of a collision.

Years ago, I installed an autopilot on a customer's boat. After the installation I had to take the vessel out on the water to calibrate it. After all was done I made the mistake of setting a heading and going below to collect my tools. I was only there for a few minutes when a heard five blasts from a ships horn. Running top-side I saw a tug about a half mile off my bow. A look-out at all times! What do they say about changing your underwear? We all learn from our mistakes as long as they are not fatal.

OK, so now we are making way through the water with our lookout. Our speed is 30 knots and we are approaching a number of anchored boats fishing. We reduce our speed to 10 knots as we approach the boats and then to 5 knots to reduce our wake as we pass. Was this a safe speed? Did we proceed at a safe speed so that we could take proper and effective action to avoid collision and stop within a distance appropriate to the prevailing conditions? If so, we followed Rule #6. Factors taken into consideration in determining safe speed Include:

The state of visibility

- ***Traffic density (our fishing boats mentioned above)***
- ***Maneuverability of the vessel (many large vessels take a mile or more to stop even after going astern)***
- ***Night (background lights)***
- ***Sea state***
- ***Draft of vessel relative to water depth***
- ***Vessels navigating with radar must also know the characteristics and limitations of their equipment.***

So far, with all being said, we still need to determine if the risk of collision exists. We have a look-out, our speed is safe relative to the prevailing conditions. There is a vessel about two miles off our bow. Her bearing is 180 degrees, her distance is decreasing, bearing is not changing. There is a risk of collision! We need to take action to prevent collision. What do we do? What is the basis of our decision? How do we do it?

That will be discussed in our next article.