

Avoiding Commercial Vessel Traffic

By Brian McEwing

I think it beneficial in light of the recent collision between the “Duck” passenger vessel and a barge in the Delaware River to provide recreational boaters with some facts about commercial vessel traffic movement. While there are “rules of the road” to prevent collisions that all vessels must follow, the fact is that collisions between commercial vessels and passenger/recreational vessels are not uncommon. These encounters usually produce tragic results for the recreational boater.

First, because of the size of commercial vessels, recreational boaters often underestimate the speed at which they can travel, leaving the recreational boater surprised at how soon a large commercial vessel can close the distance between them. Second, recreational boaters often believe that they have been, or can be, seen by the operator of an approaching commercial vessel. But, in fact, large commercial vessels can lose sight of a small vessel at long distances, sometimes when the small vessel is still over a mile away and directly in front of, or nearly in front of, the commercial vessel. Third, commercial vessels take a long time, and travel long distances, before coming to a full stop. In fact, a ship or large tug at cruising speed can easily travel more than a mile after reversing their engines before they come to a full stop. Even the Cape May ferries, which are fairly nimble commercial vessels, can take over ¼ miles before coming to a complete stop.

Commercial vessels must also operate within the confines of the navigation channel due to the depth of their hull compared to the surrounding waters, whereas most recreational vessels are capable of travelling outside the navigational channel because they draw less water. Recreational vessels that are concerned about the depth of water should stay close to, but outside, the navigational channel whenever a commercial vessel is likely to be encountered. Also, any vessel that is crossing a navigational channel is required to cross at right angles to the channel to minimize the time spent crossing.

One final caution for recreational boaters is that a tug and barge have often been confused as two separate vessels because there may be a great distance between the barge and tug, particularly when towing along the coast. However, the barge is connected to the tug by a wire that is submerged below the water for most of its length. There have been a number of incidents in recent years of recreational vessels attempting to travel between a tug and its barge only to have the recreational vessel caught under the barges raked bow.

While it is true that commercial vessels are equipped with far more collision avoidance equipment than small passenger vessels or recreational vessels, they are still operated by humans who have the same frailties as the rest of us – they work long hours and tire, they can be distracted, they can be focused on other commercial traffic or on maneuvering their own vessel to keep it in the channel and not on that small speck of a boat miles ahead.

Finally, while it may seem inconceivable that the “Duck” boat collision occurred in broad daylight, many collisions still occur in broad daylight. There is no doubt the admiralty courts will figure out who had the right of way and apportion blame for this tragic collision, but that will not help the

victims. The best collision avoidance advice I can offer to you, whether a commercial operator or a recreational vessel operator, is to continually scan the waterway for other vessel traffic and take early and substantial evasive action to put distance between your vessel and an approaching vessel, and if you can't move, make every effort to get noticed either through a radio call or using any signaling device you have on board, whether it be a whistle, horn, mirror, a flag or a flare.

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