

'Conflicts in Offshore Waters'

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The September 1996 issue of the *Journal* has an article by J. C. Hines¹ which, as a RYA instructor and former maritime lawyer, I found very confusing.

I agree with him that there are many yachtsmen and some professionals who I would not let out in a pram dinghy, let alone in the vessels they are commanding.

It is significant that many commercial ships will have one watchkeeping officer on the bridge, no other lookout, and a helmsman on call. The ship will be on autopilot and, upon a target being seen, it will take two minutes or so before the helm is manned.

Mr Hines assumes that his yacht can be seen, which is very unlikely either visually or by radar particularly if the sea state is bad. Even if the visibility is good he thinks his yacht will have been seen for 10–15 minutes, but that may well be 4–5 miles. If the yacht were to become visible at 2.5 miles, the ship would have insufficient time to take any action. Incidentally, the white flare candela has a visible range of only 2 miles.

Mr Hines rightly refers to use of the handbearing compass, but seems to suggest that its use should be continuous; it should not be. It should be used at intervals of several minutes. If the bearing remains constant there is 'Risk of Collision'. No plotting is required.

There is no duty to hold course and speed to the death, a wind shift could cause a change of course. Any change must be made both early and substantial (COLREG r.8), no problem will be caused.

It is my opinion, and official UK policy (M Notices), that VHF should never be used for collision avoidance, confusion so often is the result. If the ship called can be identified by name it is already too late.

His coaster story, 'We must have been visible for over an hour'. How can he possibly be sure? In any event it appears he was not seen, otherwise the overtaking vessel would have kept clear.

R/T procedures require identification of both vessels, called and caller, which is not possible.

A year or so ago I was under sail in mid-channel. It was daylight, with visibility about 10 miles, when a green container ship was observed approaching on a line from about 12° abaft the beam. At 2 miles there was no alteration. I attempted VHF communication, and got an answer from the wrong ship. He looked and could not see any schooner ahead of him. The container ship was by then less than a mile from contact. Luckily, although only a 34 footer, I have an Aldis signal lamp aboard. I sent the letter 'U' which fortunately had the desired affect. She altered course across my stern, by about two cables. The ship was German, I did think of sending thanks, but one of my crew suggested that doubts as to existence of the skipper's father might be more appropriate.

REFERENCE

- ¹ Hines, J. C. (1996). Conflicts in Offshore Waters. This *Journal*, 49, 431.

KEY WORDS

1. Collision avoidance. 2. Small boat navigation. 3. Communications.