

SAFE SPEED?

Some time ago, an article in "Lloyd's List" referring to the collision between the post panamax containership "P&O Nedlloyd Vespucci" and the yacht "Wahkuna: in the English Channel commented on the failure of shipmasters to observe the requirements of the Collision Regulations, particularly Rule.6 (Safe Speed).

It is worth mentioning that this rule applies "in any condition of visibility" but in this instance, despite the fact that the Channel was shrouded in dense fog the French MRCC noted that in a four hour period, of the 19 ships "plotted" 18 did not reduce speed. The container vessel was proceeding at her "passage" speed of 25 knots with her ARPA referenced to ground track - and the yachtsmen were unable to interpret the information given by their own radar. The former was unaware of the collision and the latter sank - fortuitously, without loss of life.

"Safe Speed" has long been difficult to define precisely although Rule 6. of the Colregs gives some pretty clear guidance relating to the factors to be taken into consideration - traffic density, manoeuvrability and visibility for a start.

Those familiar with the container trade know that it is simply wishful thinking to believe that a container ship will, in each and every instance of reduced visibility slow down to the extent that might mean she misses her berthing "slot". Quite simply, everything is geared to her maintaining her scheduled time of arrival and little allowance has been built into the schedule to allow for the niceties of continually observing the Collision Regulations. The owners supply a plethora of electronic gadgetry much of it dedicated to "Collision Avoidance" and the Master is meant to use it to their commercial benefit.

Container ships are not alone in this. The collision between the ro-ro ferry "Northern Prince" and the high-speed wave-piercing catamaran "Diamant" had many of the ingredients of the container ship/yacht collision and here again the tight schedules of these two ferries gave little scope for a speed reduction. Some time later, when this collision was being discussed in the Southampton Master Mariners' Club, the visiting Master of an HSS (High Speed Ship) cross-channel ferry stated quite bluntly "In our trade - slowing down is not an option"

It is certain that he and the Masters of the three commercial ships mentioned were in possession of precise written instructions from their owners regarding navigation in reduced visibility and the importance of adhering to the Collision Regulations so the question must be asked -why do they elect to hazard their ships, careers and certificates by disregarding these instructions?

Ships have long been encouraged to maintain tight schedules, particularly those on "mail runs". The ships of the Union-Castle Mail Steamship Company were amongst the most famous "time keepers" in the maritime world and their famous advertisement "Every Thursday at 4.0 o'clock" bore testimony to their punctuality. The required average northbound passage speed from Cape Town to Southampton was approximately 18.7 knots but most prudent Masters averaged 19.5 through the relatively uncluttered, clear and lonely waters of the S.Atlantic until arrival Las Palmas. This allowed for a meaningful reduction in speed (and the ability to maintain the scheduled arrival) in the event of encountering fog in the Western Approaches. Obviously, in terms of fuel consumption this was not as economical as maintaining the average passage speed throughout but the Marine Superintendents appreciated the wisdom of the policy and never was a Master criticised. In the event of protracted bad weather or severely reduced visibility speed WAS adjusted in the interests of safety and if the vessel arrived late there were no repercussions. The ships were well equipped with navigational aids, the Bridge was manned at all times by two certificated Officers, two Quartermasters and a Bridge Boy, the manning allowed for continuous lookouts (Bridge wing AND forecandle head, if deemed expedient by the OOW) and the Staff Commander was available to relieve the Master to allow him to get essential rest. On "Stand By" the engine room was manned by competent Officers ready for immediate manoeuvring - and fog signals were made. It goes without saying that each and every Master made every endeavour to maintain the schedule but, when circumstances absolutely prevented this, they were, to a man, certain that their jobs were secure. I am sure that broadly similar conditions prevailed on ships of the Cunard Line, P&O, Orient, Clan Line, NZS, Port Line and a horde of other quality companies.

Today's "Just in Time" policy in the retail trade certainly puts pressure on operators to ensure that the goods arrive on schedule - any disruption to the chain of supply will result in shortages in the market place and complaints from the retailer and the consumer. Excess goods on shelves (or in warehouses) exhaust capital and as long as a container arrives on the scheduled day, demand can be met. Competition from air freight is also a factor despite the higher cost.

One possible explanation for the unwillingness to adhere to the instructions to reduce speed in fog is the belief - real or imaginary - that action will be taken against any Master whose vessel arrives late. In this era of a chronic and rapidly increasing shortage of qualified and competent seafarers it is unlikely that such punitive action would be taken but, in any event, the adroit use of log book entries to accurately describe the conditions of visibility (and traffic density) necessitating the speed reduction would be useful evidence when defending the decision to adhere to the requirements of the Collision Regulations - and the Managers written instructions.

