



Maritime and Coastguard Agency

Navigation in Fog

Note to Shipowners, Masters, Skippers, Officers and Pilots

This note supersedes Marine Guidance Notice 46

Summary

Key Points

- Reliance on radar and VHF can lead to accidents, as over dependence on navigational aids is no substitute for good watchkeeping practices and the exercise of proper caution.

1. The Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) is concerned that a number of casualties to ships have resulted from serious disregard for the basic principals of good seamanship and prudent navigation in bad visibility. Sensible use of radar and other aids to navigation greatly assists the conduct of ships in fog, but these aids have not reduced the need to comply fully with the Collision Regulations: to proceed at a safe speed, pay especial attention to good watch-keeping, and navigate with proper caution.
2. The following brief outline of three casualties shows how lack of sensible caution, combined with over-reliance on radar (and in one case VHF) leads to accidents.
3. A medium-sized cargo ship left port intending to proceed to sea, in fog so dense that the fore-castle could not be seen from the bridge, a distance of 100 metres. To reach the sea it was necessary to navigate a river through a channel with depths at low water of about 1.8 metres; the vessel's draught was 8 metres and she sailed on a falling tide. The channel is in places narrow and several bends have to be negotiated. The tide runs at up to 4 knots, falls at a rate of as much as 0.5 metres in 10 minutes, and in places sets across the channel. Great care is therefore necessary at all times, and to attempt the passage on a falling tide in dense fog was very foolhardy, even with the aid of radar. Not surprisingly the ship stranded.
4. A large container ship was in transit through the Dover Strait Traffic Separation Scheme, and despite very thick fog she was steaming at about 18 knots. The bridge was manned by the Master, Officer of the Watch and a look-out. Both radar's (one of which was an ARPA) were being used, but although they were found to be in good working order, when inspected after the casualty it is apparent that not all possible echoes were being displayed, perhaps due to the masking effect of clutter: there was a force 5 breeze and a considerable sea running. When radar clutter is experienced even a careful search by both automatic and manual clutter controls may not reveal the presence of small craft, and this fact should have been recognised by those on watch. Nevertheless, and despite a close-quarter encounter with a fishing vessel in which the ship had to take last minute avoiding action to avert collision, she continued at 18 knots and, later, collided with a trawler which was not seen on either radar. The trawler was stopped and hauling her nets at the time; she was severely damaged though she was able to make port. As well as demonstrating the folly of high speed in fog, this accident emphasises the need for

fisherman while working, to maintain prudent navigation and watchkeeping.

5. In the third case two vessels, one British and one foreign, were approaching one another in fog, and the latter used VHF radio to call for a "red-to-red" passing. Unfortunately the command of English of the Officer on watch in the foreign ship was limited, for what he actually intended was to pass starboard to starboard. The call was acknowledged by the British ship, but neither vessel made use of phrases in the Standard Vocabulary or paid regard to the danger in the use of VHF in collision avoidance. (See MGN 167 (M+F) Dangers in the use of VHF Radio in Collision Avoidance). Despite this, collision might still have been avoided had the British ship made a full assessment of the situation with the help of her radar and slowed down, especially since the other ship had reduced her speed to 'dead slow' but she did neither and collision followed. Both ships were seriously damaged.
6. None of the casualties described led to loss of life, but clearly this was only due to good fortune. In all cases those responsible for the ship's navigation sacrificed seamen for expediency. They failed to recognise the limitations of aids to navigation; or to follow the requirements of the Collision Regulations and the advice of Marine Notices. It is worth stressing that the ships involved were all well-equipped vessels in the charge of men with sound qualifications; it was not skill or experience that was lacking, but the proper seaman like approach to the situation.

Whatever the pressure on Masters to make a quick passage or to meet the wishes of owners, operators, charters or port operators, it does not justify ships and those on board them being put unnecessarily at risk. The MCA is concerned that proper standards must be maintained, and will take appropriate action which may lead to the loss of their certificates, against officers who in future jeopardise their ships, or the lives and property of others.

7. The MCA also wishes to stress the responsibilities of Owners. It has long been established, and Section 100 of the Merchant Shipping Act 1995 and the ISM Code now expressly provide, that it is the duty of the Company to take all responsible steps to secure that the ship is operated in a safe manner. The Company must have established and implemented an effective safety management system which includes procedures to ensure safe operation of ships, as well as reporting accidents and non-conformities. In the well-known case of THE LADY GWENDOLEN, the Court of Appeal said that "excessive speed in fog is a grave breach of duty, and ship owners should use their influence to prevent it". Because of their failure to do so, it was held in that case that the owners could not limit their liability.

Furthermore under the Merchant Shipping (Distress Signals and Prevention of Collisions) Regulations 1996, where any of the Regulations is contravened, the owner, the operator, the master and any person for the time being responsible for the conduct of the vessel shall each be guilty of an offence.

Communication and Innovation Branch
Maritime and Coastguard Agency
Spring Place
105 Commercial Road
Southampton
SO15 1EG

Tel 023 8032 9341
Fax 023 8032 9204
www.mcga.gov.uk

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