The Chesapeake Paddler Rerun: Close Encounters of the Big Ship Kind

by Jim Ferguson

You are on a Bay crossing from Annapolis on a sunny day with unlimited visibility. You approach the western edge of the ship channel with a large bulk carrier heading north. The ship has been bearing about 30 degrees relative (1 o'clock for all the aviators out there) for about 30 minutes. She is now about 2 miles south of you. You figure you can easily cross her bow with a quick sprint and therefore not have to alter your heading on your trip across the Bay. Bad idea. Please read on.

On a foggy day with about a mile of visibility, no wind, slack water, and occasional rain showers, which cut the visibility down to about 500 yards, you are in an anchorage area off Annapolis Roads heading west. You've just seen a tug off your port bow. The tug is well lit, showing you a red running light and three vertical white lights on its mast. Then, in a rain storm, you lose sight of the tug for about 10 minutes. It reappears on your starboard bow, now showing a green running light in addition to the white lights. Even though the tug has changed course, it appears you can easily pass under its stern on your present heading so you continue on despite a new rain squall that again swallows up the tug. Terrible idea. Please read on.

In the same anchorage on a better day, clear and sunny with a 15 kt SE wind, you are paddling south after enjoying a brief surf in the wake of the pilot boat heading back into Annapolis. You're approaching the port side of a really interesting anchored ship dead ahead of you with her bow heading NE. You can almost read her name on the bow, so you alter course to check it out. It seems like a good idea because the anchor chain is almost vertical so you can get a really close look, and since the ship is perpendicular to the wind, she presents you with a welcome lee and a little easier paddling. Besides, you really didn't want to go under her stern because of all that diesel smoke from the stack. Good idea? Probably not. Please read on.

There probably are no “right" answers to these scenarios. They are intended to stimulate some interest in reading the rest of this article, and some discussion thereafter. There's only one true emergency, and all the information needed for the discussion is contained in this article, which is a follow-up to Greg Welker's earlier excellent article on kayak courtesy. "Kayak Courtesy" .

Herein courtesy becomes synonymous with safety. But, first of all, an in-depth review of the Rules of the Road: Don't start snoring yet, there's only one: *Kayaks better yield the Right of Way.* Or Vince Dalrymple's variation thereof*: I'm fast, but they're big.*

We all know there are many situations where kayaks do have the right of way. Those of you who wish to defend that right of way need read no further. There are also situations where we have neither the legal nor the moral right of way. Examples:

Kayaking with big ships in the American Channel, Thousand Islands, US/Canada ***photo by Rich Stevens***

Encountering vessels with limited ability to maneuver, and/or limited space in which to maneuver (large vessels in the Bay, or 30-foot yachts trying to dock); and vessels engaged in "special operations" (fishing, anchoring or mooring). Stay clear because during thes maneuvers, ship’s movements become unpredictable, and you don’t want to get hit on the head with an anchor.

In good visibility, the water horizon is about 6-8 miles away. If a ship’s bow appears on the horizon and it appears to be heading your way, plan on about 30 minutes of maneuvering time. Know where you are relative to the channel. Take set and drift into account, these affect you more than they do that ship. To get away, choose a course perpendicular to the course you think the ship is on. Then watch that ship very closely. Remember, a constant relative bearing equals a collision course. Remember that forever. If the ship starts off in the 1 o’clock position relative to your kayak, and never progresses to 1:30 or 2 o’clock, unless you change course you’re going to collide. That’s a constant relative bearing. If your aim is to get away, your course will be 90 degrees to the ship’s course. If your aim is to surf the wake, that’s an entirely different course and it will not be addressed here. There is plenty of time to paddle clear, and a good initial heading is one perpendicular to the ship channel away from the approaching vessel. Then, watch that ship. As she closes, remember these should signals:

1 short blast means she’s coming to starboard,
2 means she’s turning to port,
3 means she’s reversing her engines, and
4 means danger.

But when you see the bearing start to change rapidly, and it seems safe, you might want to stop and watch. It’s worth it. In deep water, a half mile to a mile is usually a safe distance if you want to escape the wake, but beware if you ventured into shallow water. In shallow water, wakes can become very large, very suddenly, so know the waters in which you paddle.

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Tugs are different. Their speeds are much slower, their wakes may be much larger, or nothing at all. They tow all sorts of things, not just barges. If you see a tug, followed closely by a big ship, check it out. There might be a tow line. Even if a tug is towing astern, that tow might be anywhere relative to that tug depending on set, drift, and the tug's heading. Tugs tow astern, alongside, or ahead. Yes, a tug can tow ahead. I didn't invent this language, but we can agree to call that a "pusher tug". Pushers and tows alongside usually act pretty much like slow moving ships with bizarre and potentially dangerous wakes full of whitewater-like phenomena. Tugs are basically huge engines surrounded by a hull. They can make water do all sorts of funny things, and it may be best to just stay clear of those wakes.

Methods of towing vary widely between open water and restricted or shallow water. In open water (and my experience is in open water around Puget Sound, the Pacific, and the Gulf of Alaska), the tows may be hundreds of yards behind their tugs. Towlines are frequently weighted with one or more shots (90 feet each) of heavy chain called a towing bridle. This is for shock absorbency, and the effect is to completely sink the towline out of sight. In some cases the towline might be as much as one hundred feet under water. Obviously this would not be a good plan for towing in the Chesapeake Bay, so ocean tows shorten up somewhat close to the mouth of the Bay. I've never seen a sunken towline from the mid-Bay north, but check the tug-tow combinations out closely if you're paddling in open water. Tandem tows may not look it, but both barges are towed from the tug, so there are 2 tow lines. Remember, the tows may act independently of the tug and each other.

Another thing to be aware of as the tows pass close aboard is something we used to call a "panic line". This is a line rigged as an emergency towline from the bow of the barge. It is normally at least as long as the barge, carried along the side of the ship to it can easily be broken free and trailed from somewhere abaft the beam (behind the middle of the hull) with one or more floats. Its purpose is to recover the barge if the main tow line is lost for any reason. It's usually 3 ½-inch braid attached to a 2-inch wire and it's not a good thing for a kayak to get snagged on. I have seen short versions of these in the Bay.

Tugs with tows on the Bay seem to be making between 6 and 10 knots. Signals are 2 or 3 vertical white lights on the tug's mast, and a black diamond rigged on the towed vessel during the daylight. At night, the towed vessel shows red and green running lights and a normal stern light.

So, when you see a tug, be sure to identify the tow(s) and the towline(s). Then check them out from a safe distance, probably ½ to 1 mile as stated earlier because they are pretty interesting, in my totally unbiased point of view.

My last courtesy/safety point is this: After you've spotted the other vessel and decided on a course of action, telegraph your intent to yield the right of way to the other skipper. Even if a 5-degree course change would be enough to safely avoid a collision, the other skipper can't detect that small a change in course. It's best to make a big change, like 45 degrees (or even stopping), and then hold the new course for a few minutes

Close encounter of the wrong kind ***source: https://windagainstcurrent.com/tag/ships/***

so the skipper will know for certain that you are yielding the right of way. The skipper is then much more likely to have a decreased anxiety level and therefore maintain the current course and speed while thinking laudatory thoughts about you, the courteous kayaker. Your life is also easier now because you can much more reliably predict the skipper's actions and you can both go about your business of having a good day simply messing about in boats.

Editor's Note: After 4 years of sea duy in the USCG on the Pacific, Gulf of Alaska, and Bering Sea, Jim Ferguson spent 2 year working on ocean-going tugs out of Seattle. Jim currently lives in Annapolis and paddles his Mariner Express frequently on the Chesapeake Bay.

This article appeared originally in the 06-1999 editon of ***The Chesapeake Paddler.*** *Recent close encounters have been with crab boats and someone snagging the line of White's Ferry. Stay sharp and stay clear!*

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