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An Open Letter to all leisure sailors in The Solent

18th March 2009

To whom it may concern

Close Quarters Situations with Large Vessels

I have become increasingly concerned about the growing number, year-on-year, of close quarters situations between yachts – both sail and motor, but predominantly sail – and large commercial vessels transiting the Central Solent and Southampton Water. The incidences indicate an apparent lack of knowledge of the Port of Southampton's regulations, relevant in particular to 'The Precautionary Area' and 'Moving Prohibited Zones' but, more worryingly, they indicate an actual lack of appreciation of the potential consequences of being involved in a Close Quarters Situation with a large commercial vessel.

Many of the large commercial vessels transiting to and from Southampton are tidally constrained. They are confined to the charted navigational channel between the Nab area and the Port and can neither deviate from their track nor respond quickly to avoid a small vessel. In many cases - for container ships and tankers in particular - the bridges are situated aft on the vessel and therefore the visibility cut-off ahead for the Master and Pilot may be as much as 1000 metres dead ahead. Thus, even if the Master and Pilot can see you attempting to cross close ahead, there is virtually nothing they can do to take avoiding action, should you get into difficulty.

Additionally, the speed of these large vessels is often greater than generally appreciated. In making the approach to the long turn from the Central Solent into the Thorn Channel, and again into Southampton Water, they need a defined speed to obtain the required rate of turn to safely negotiate the alteration. Thus, whilst it may appear that you have sufficient time to cross ahead, in general, there will be less time than you think.

Consequently, it does not make sense - where you can safely navigate outside the buoyed navigational channel – to remain in the channel as a large vessel approaches or to attempt to cross ahead of a large vessel as it approaches a key part of its transit into or out of Southampton. If you do need to cross, by all means wait and cross astern.

The Port's Byelaws (Southampton Harbour Byelaws 2003), and in particular Byelaw 10 'Navigation in fairways' and Byelaw 11 'Moving Prohibited Zone', make my requirements clear. As a "small vessel" (defined in The Byelaws as "...any vessel of less than 20 metres in

length or a sailing vessel and for the purposes of this definition “sailing vessel” means a vessel designed to carry sail, whether as the sole or as a primary or supplementary means of propulsion....”) you should avoid the navigational channel (fairway) and not enter a Moving Prohibited Zone. The meaning of these Byelaws is more generally explained in several current ABP Southampton Notices to Mariners, in particular No 2 of 2008 ‘Safety in Small Vessels’ and No 3 of 2008 ‘Port of Southampton – Precautionary Area (Thorn Channel)’.

The Byelaws and Notices to Mariners mentioned above can be downloaded from the ABP Southampton website www.southamptonvts.co.uk . I would be grateful if you could download these documents and study them and, by all means, pass them on to your Club Secretary or to your friends taking up sailing etc – please spread the word. Additionally, “ The yachtsman’s guide to Southampton Water and its approaches” may also be downloaded from the Port’s website and it provides further explanation on the issues I have raised above.

One last point, every large vessel entering, and leaving, Southampton Water is escorted through the Precautionary Area by a Harbour Master’s Patrol Launch, with an all round blue light at the masthead. The escort is generally performed from about 400 metres ahead of the vessel. On many occasions in the past, the Patrol Launch has been able to intervene to assist a small vessel in difficulty, or to intercept an attempt to cross close ahead, and I am in no doubt that lives have been saved. My point is that the Patrol Launch, for whatever reason, may not be able to intervene or intercept, to your benefit, and you will have placed your vessel, yourself and your crew in extreme danger.

After such an incident, as my representative afloat, the Marine Officer in the Patrol Launch will take your details and pass a report on the close quarters situation to me – I will then have to consider whether or not to pursue a prosecution under the Port’s Byelaws. Please make yourself aware of the relevant regulations, act responsibly and do not place yourself in this position.

I hope all who read this letter take its content seriously, but I also hope you have an enjoyable and safe sailing season this year and in the future.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'PHH', with a large, sweeping underline stroke.

Captain Philip Holliday
Harbour Master Southampton

“...Guys, just remind me – who’s supposed to stand on??...”

