

Why is that guy honking at me?

It's a pretty nice Saturday morning in the Oakland estuary and I'm at the helm of the USS Potomac on our way out for the fleet week festivities in San Francisco Bay. Being Saturday of fleet week, I think that just about everybody that owns a boat is heading to San Francisco for the air show. As we make our way down the estuary is it quite crowded with both powerboats and sailboats, some of them even under sail, making their way to the bay. On the Potomac, the bridge is crowded as well.



When the USS Potomac goes out on a charter it is usual that there are several visitors on the bridge, especially on popular days such as fleet week. This morning not only is the lead captain of the Potomac, and my mentor, Capt. Skip Eltringham, in command of the vessel, he has a half dozen of his friends on board. As I take a quick look around the bridge we are two deep and five wide with

Skip standing directly behind me. Next to him on one side is a USCG retired Admiral and on the other, two active duty USCG Captains, one that is currently in command of the Coast Guards flagship icebreaker. If that isn't enough, there are several retired Navy officers on the bridge along with the Potomac crew for the day. There is a lot of energy on the bridge as there are several different conversations taking place among the heavyweights. They are discussing a variety of subjects as the crew concentrates on navigating among the 50 or so other vessels within a quarter mile of us. Lookouts on both wings are keeping an eye for overtaking vessels while one of the crew is standing next to me keeping a RADAR watch. That group of officers behind me has probably 200 years of combined seamanship experience and I'm trying hard to not look like a rookie, so I just focus on navigating.



For the first 20 minutes we are able to keep a fairly steady course and maneuver around the myriad of recreational boats. Just ahead we are about a quarter mile from overtaking a sailboat that is under power. He is dead ahead of us and just to the right of center in the channel. There are dozens of vessels on his port with no clear path for us, and a fair

amount of room to starboard between him and the docked container ships. As I'm mulling over the options the port lookout announces that there are several small power boats overtaking on our port side, while the Chief Mate takes time away from the story telling

session behind me to check the starboard side to be sure there are no vessels over there. Decisions, decisions. I apparently took a little too long to decide when I hear in a soft voice from behind, "he hasn't seen us, one whistle." That pretty much was the conclusion that I was just about to come to, except that part about the sailboat hadn't seen us. Capt. Skip has this ability to be fully engrossed in several conversations while still fully aware of what is going on around the ship. Even though in the middle of a story, he saw the situation developing, and in a low voice so as to not disturb everyone else, gave the order to come right, overtake the vessel on his starboard side, and give one short blast to signal our intentions.

Using whistle signals on the Potomac is not done unless absolutely required. The ship's whistle is very loud and anyone on the foredeck will be startled out of their shoes if not warned before its use, so an announcement over the PA system to cover your ears is made beforehand. The announcement is made, a check of the passengers on the foredeck shows them to be covering their ears, and we give one short blast. The sailboat up ahead almost immediately veers hard to the right, then snaps 180 degrees to left and then back to the right. Apparently he didn't know we were back there and intending to overtake; the whistle startled him out of his shoes! After his zigzag maneuver he has moved abruptly to the right and looks to be staying over there. We decide to overtake on his port side as he has left us a lot of room towards the center of the channel and almost none to the right. As we pass we get the shoulder shrug and the one finger salute as he is apparently mouthing the words "why are you honking at me". Not exactly the expected response and unfortunately since we used the very loud whistle just about everyone on board is watching that small sailboat and his apparent unhappiness with us.

The rest of the day went well, with plenty of other boats to maneuver around, lots of opportunities to apply the navigation rules, and of course a spectacular air show.

We make our way back to our berth at Jack London Square, disembarked the passengers, and the engineers secure the engines for the night.



After the deck crew has the boat cleaned up and the salt spray rinsed off, we are now ready to relax and take a much needed break. As usual, the crew meets at the fantail for a glass of wine and conversation. Unfortunately smoking cigars is not allowed on the Potomac so I have to settle for just a good glass of Petite Syrah. I'm just getting started on the first glass of wine when the sea stories come out. One of the topics of discussion is the use of whistle signals to communicate maneuvering intentions and how our use of the whistle to signal the sailboat earlier didn't result in the expected response. This is the perfect time to review what the Navigation Rules have to say about the use of whistle signals. Rule 34 describes the

use of the ships whistle for maneuvering and warning. The rule states in part that “a power-driven vessel intending to overtake another power-driven vessel shall indicate her intention with one short blast to mean I intend to overtake you on your starboard side, or with two short blasts to mean I intend to overtake you on your port side”. The Inland rules further state that the vessel being overtaken shall, if in agreement, sound a similar signal. Or if in doubt shall sound the danger signal of 5 short blasts. We followed the rules; having only enough sea room to starboard we gave one short blast indicating our request to overtake on the other vessels starboard side. The expected responses would include one short blast for agreement or 5 short blasts for doubt/danger. The overtaken vessel (Rule 13) is also the stand-on vessel and is required to maintain course and speed (Rule 17). By the other vessel either not knowing or not following the navigation rules, or just thinking that we were honking at him, created a potentially dangerous situation. Since he thought we were honking at him and not communicating his response was a predictable one finger wave. Not understanding the rules is unfortunate as the use of whistle signals is common and actually required. Rule 34 part (h) allows for making meeting, crossing, or overtaking arrangements with another vessel by VHF radio, but states, “If agreement is not reached, then whistle signals shall be exchanged in a timely manner and shall prevail”. Pretty clear, especially as the word “shall” is used several times.

An easy way to remember one or two short blasts of one second; is if I intend to alter course to the right, then one short blast, if I intend to alter course to the left, then two short blasts. The other vessel should answer with the same if in agreement. Three short blasts are used to indicate that I am operating astern propulsion and are not answered by other vessels. Five short blasts are used to indicate doubt or danger. If a vessel proposes a maneuver with one or two short blasts and you have doubt of their intentions or believe it to be dangerous, then, sound five short rapid blasts. One prolonged blast of 4-6 seconds is used to indicate that the vessel is leaving a dock or approaching a blind bend where other vessels may be obscured. Only a signal indicating a blind bend needs to be answered by vessels within hearing range with the same one prolonged blast.

One last word on whistle signals. There is significant difference between the International Rules and the Inland Rules regarding the use of whistle signals. In International Rules the whistle signal indicates intent. For example, one short blast means that “I am altering my course to starboard”. In the Inland Rules, the whistle signal is a request and requires agreement. For example, I wish to overtake a vessel on their starboard side by sounding one short blast, the other vessel shall signal agreement by sounding the same one short blast. Shoreward from one mile west of the Golden Gate Bridge the Inland Rules apply.

So what lesson did we learn? Whistle signals are used to communicate, that guy is not honking at you, he is indicating his intentions or request. We also learned that not everyone knows or understands the rules as they apply to sound signals. It is common for commercial vessels on San Francisco Bay to use whistle signals. Take few minutes to read rule 34. It is one of the easier ones to understand and may one day come in handy when that ship behind you gives you one or two short blasts. Now back to my glass of wine and imaginary cigar.

More on the USS Potomac



The USS Potomac was built in 1934 as the Coast Guard cutter Electra. The 165-foot vessel, displacing 416 tons with cruising speeds of 13 knots, was commissioned as a U.S. Navy vessel in 1936, renamed the USS Potomac, and served as Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Presidential Yacht until his death in 1945. Rescued from the scrap yard and with a \$5 million refit, the USS Potomac opened to the public in the summer of 1995. Since then more than a quarter of a million people have visited and sailed aboard former President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's beloved "Floating White House," the USS Potomac. For more information or to book a cruise navigate to www.usspotomac.org



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