BOAT CREW BASICS

A GUIDE FOR BOAT CREW CANDIDATES & MENTORS

BY: BOB PETERSON, COXN / QE / AIR CREW, ADSO-OPT, D11 NR FEBRUARY, 2008

"Stand a Lookout Watch"

Last issue, we dealt with the demanding but seldom-used (these days) task of standing a tow watch. This month we review a far more often-used skill: Lookout Watch.

Basically, the Lookout points, verbally identifies and reports the range and bearing to critical objects nearby. The Lookout needs to be prepared to repeat the report until the Coxswain acknowledges it.

Sounds simple enough, but this business about "reporting the range and bearing" to critical objects has many variations, some of which confuse candidates. You will hear about using "relative bearings", "clock face bearings", and even "magnetic bearings", all of which can and should report the same thing.

Which bearing system should you use? Well, as a qualified Crew Member you are expected to be conversant with all of them. But typically, Coxswains prefer one system over the others and a competent crewman quickly identifies which system is preferred. Let's examine each of the systems and see their strengths and weaknesses.

Magnetic bearings – "Debris in the water, bearing 230 degrees", sounds proper. But sometimes the mental gymnastics to convert the relative bearing to magnetic can foul things up, either for you or the helmsman! If you're heading on a course of 200°m, and you sight debris 30 degrees off the starboard bow, then it's a straightforward matter to add 30 to 200 and arrive at a relative bearing of 230 degrees. But if the debris lies 45 degrees on the port side of your boat, you need to subtract the bearing and if you're cruising along at 020°m, then you have to add 20 degrees to 360, get 380 and then subtract 45 degrees to arrive at 335°m. Not so easy, given a bumpy ride, a squawking radio, and other distractions; plus doing the math in your head is not everyone's cup of tea. Since you have to determine the relative bearing first anyway, I'd recommend shying away from magnetic bearings.

Relative Bearings – Since the first step in developing a magnetic bearing is determining the relative bearing of the object, why not just pass that information? It doesn't require the mental math to compute a magnetic bearing, for either the helmsman or Lookout.

Clock Face Bearings – The system used by many aviators is equally useful aboard the boat. Imagine a clock face painted on the deck of the boat, with 12 o'clock dead ahead. Any object observed off your starboard beam is at "3 o'clock", one off your port beam is at "9 o'clock", with the other hour numbers useful in between.

What do you identify? Some things are obvious, others less so. Persons in the water and debris must be reported. Buoys and other ATON's are typically reported, as are other boats, especially those close enough to be a concern and on a converging course. But consider the demands on the helmsman and govern the frequency and duration of your Lookout reports accordingly. Reporting every ATON when there are many around and the helmsman is quite familiar with the area is over-kill.

Use of binoculars – Certainly when trying to identify a buoy number or a boat's registration number or name. But practice to determine when it's too rough for them.