BOAT CREW BASICS

A GUIDE FOR BOAT CREW CANDIDATES & MENTORS

By: Bob Peterson, Coxswain / QE / Air Crew, ADSO-OPT, D11-NR July, 2007

Toughest Boat Crew Tasks?

Last month we discussed typical Crew candidate problems with the Heaving Line. This month, we examine the most frequently seen problem Coxn candidates have with aligning their boats for the alongside tow.

If asked what they plan to do, before starting an alongside tow, few Coxn candidates forget to mention "toe-ing in" their vessel toward the disabled boat. But, for a variety of reasons, very few actually get their towing boat "toed-in" toward the disabled boat!

Invariably, an overzealous crewman at the stern insists on cranking in the two boats' sterns until they nearly touch each other! Often, by that time, the composite rig is beginning to drift toward shore and so proper alignment is sacrificed in the interest of safety. A sharp QE will notice the error right away and ask the Coxn candidate to turn away from the side tow.

If the disabled boat has been rigged on the towing vessel's port side (the preferred side to free up the tower's danger zone) any turn toward starboard will be quite a bit more difficult than a turn to port. Larger, heavier tows can be nearly impossible to turn away from. The explanation is that the towed boat acts like a huge weight (which it is) resisting forward movement. Unless the towing boat is properly "toed in" toward the tow, the tow's dead weight presents considerable resistance to movement and acts like an anchor. If not adjusted for, the towing vessel would simply spin around the disabled boat, turning in left-hand circles!

Today's powerful engines will tempt a Coxn candidate to simply "power through" the maneuver, cranking in full right rudder and using high RPM settings to try to force the rig to starboard. This may or may not succeed. Years ago, the relatively less powerful engines of the day couldn't pull off this trick and the Coxn would soon see the error of his (or his crew's) ways.

A sharp Coxswain (or Coxn candidate) who is able to watch what all his crewmembers are doing may detect the problem early at the stern and direct the crew there to slacken the aft lines. But many don't. Or, some find that they have waited too long to issue corrections and the crew up forward has gone aft and isn't in place to tighten the bow line once the stern line is eased.

These days we tend to work with other boats our own size in practice towing drills and so may be able to make the turn away from the side-tow, even when improperly aligned, using brute force. But when attempting to side-tow a larger, heavier boat, skipping the "toe-ing in" process and ending up parallel to the tow can totally prevent any turns away from the tow! And that's a problem when you attempt to moor the tow.

Years ago, returning from a Central Bay Patrol to my home dock at the San Leandro Marina, as we turned from the channel into the marina, we encountered an old 100' cruiser not under power, drifting away from the fuel dock in a freshening NW breeze, with numerous persons aboard running around and yelling! As we neared the cruiser, it had drifted halfway from the fuel dock to the opposing rock seawall and was in a desperate spot. Even if they had been able to free their anchor and set it, they didn't have enough room to stay off the rocks!

Wearing our uniforms, flying the flags and patrol signs made it difficult to cruise on past. I had one of my 'A' crews and gave the word to set up for an alongside tow. As I nudged up to the disabled boat's starboard quarter, the crew passed our lines over. Within a few seconds we were removing the slack from the towlines and taking a strain. I was really glad we'd toed in our boat as the cruiser was easily four times our displacement. In two minutes we had her back at the fuel dock, where the marina crew tied her up to avoid a sure catastrophe.