



# Rules of the Road

## A Cruising Family Has a Frightful Freighter Experience on the Black Sea

By Christine Myers

As its invisible wand swept clockwise around the screen's concentric circles, radar revealed nine neon smudges, each representing a freighter or tanker traveling at 30 knots in the Dardanelles shipping channel, the neck of the bottle that was the Black Sea. Each was less than 12 miles away. At 18-20 knots, a freighter chews a mile every few

minutes. When I pressed the button that enlarged its range to 36 miles, I counted a dozen more. I set electronic bearing lines on the nearest two to double-check their courses, then returned to the cockpit to take a visual bearing.

Avery looked up from the last of her third grade schoolwork. "Mommy, as soon as I finish today, Daddy's going to read the end of *We Didn't Mean To Go To Sea*."

"Sounds like fun," I replied automatically.

Spring's final southeasterly puffed so quietly that there might have been no wind at all, except that the heat would have been unbearable. We were puffing unevenly downwind with *DELOS'* genoa and mainsail each poled to opposite sides, wing-on-wing. First the mainsail billowed and we surged ahead slightly to port, then the breeze coming over the

stern filled the genoa, edging us back to starboard in a gentle slalom.

### SWIMMING WITH THE BIG BOYS

My only clear line of sight lay along the mast, between the sails. I angled myself over the wheel until I could see what the big boys were up to. Ten freighters heading in different directions funneled toward or fanned from the entrance to the straits. We were crossing the channel, so the only collision danger would be broadside.

The nearest vessel, the one the radar reported at six miles away, filled 10 degrees of horizon off the bow. Another lay 60 degrees off. Sometimes big boats stacked with containers were welcome company, when we could watch them through our binocs. We looked up their flags, observed cranes on deck or guessed what they were carrying.

"Avery, did you see any big ships out here?"

"Lots. There's one behind us." She pointed east, where Lesvos lay 10 miles off our stern. "See?"

"That's right." A freighter four miles away could hit us in eight minutes. "Is it coming toward us?"

"I can't tell." She squinted back toward the Turkish coast. "I don't think so."

"Want to help me make sure?"

Avery was happy to abandon her times tables. I demon-

strated how to pick a landmark like a mountain or island, then watch its position directly behind the ship. "If the ship looks like it's moving to the front of the island, that means it will pass in front."

As we watched, the vessel slowly slipped back from the island.

"It's dropping back," she said confidently.

"That means it will pass behind us, so it's going to Istanbul."

Avery wanted to know if the boat always went forward or backward. I said no, that was why we had to watch. If it stayed in the same position, we had to do something.

"Why?"

"Because of the Rules of the Road. If nobody did anything, we might crash."

"Like what kind of thing?" she demanded.

"It depends. Sometimes it's our job to change course; sometimes it's the other ship's job." I explained that

because we were under sail and the freighter was using a motor, it would be the give-way vessel. Our job was to clearly signal our intentions. If the freighter could not maneuver easily, our jobs changed. "Then she would be the stand-on vessel and we would give way to her."

She looked at me suspiciously. "Why do you talk like boats are girls?"

I said maybe they used to be dedicated to goddesses, and that was why they used to have female names. She seemed satisfied with that answer. "What if you're still scared you're going to crash?"

"You can do lots of other things, like flash your lights or make noise. The best thing is to call the other boat on the radio and talk to them."

Avery liked that idea. "Can I phone one of those boats?" she asked.

"School first. Now I'm going to see what this other freighter is doing. Remember, it's everyone's job to





## *Remember, it's everyone's job to watch out for each other, because sometimes people aren't paying attention.*

watch out for each other, because sometimes people aren't paying attention."

She nodded and returned to her arithmetic. I climbed back below to check on our company electronically. None of them posed a threat and, under sail, we had right of way.

### **LIVING IN THE MOMENT**

"Mom, James, Drew, hurry up!" Avery called. "We're going to read."

We all looked forward to Stephan's reading. Drew gave up on her algebra and James happily left behind his own reading. Stephan leaned into the starboard side. Avery snuggled with her head on his lap. James, on Stephan's other side, stretched his legs across two lockers. Drew took out her drawing pad and began to sketch the mizzenmast from her corner of the port locker. I took the comfy captain's chair and Stephan began to read.

We all returned to the thrall of the Swallows, wooden ships, the challenges of wind and tide and the romance of the sea. I stared dreamily

to port at lapis waves with a hint of froth, wishing that every sailing day could be so calm, Drew so content, Stephan so engaged. Cruising was beginning to change us. The children were better friends, Stephan and I were calmer parents, and the kids seemed to respect us more, now that they saw how we spent our days. The winter in Turkey made us more aware of how others saw us and what we offered them, and we had begun to live more in the moment.

Now we were headed to northern Greece before the meltemi returned. I was looking forward to relaxing for a couple of weeks before our summer guests began to arrive.

### **FREIGHTER! HELP!**

Stephan's reading voice was delicious, but I roused myself. Time to look around again. I leaned out over the wheel to peek under the genoa. The bow of a small, rust-smattered freighter was bearing down on us hard at 11 o'clock, not more than 200 yards away, its bow wake already churning water higher than our cockpit.

"Stephan!" I shouted, jumping up and knocking the binoculars to the floor. "Freighter! Help!"

Stephan looked up from the book, startled. He snatched the binocs from the cockpit sole and vaulted onto the coach roof. We didn't need binoculars to see the freighter captain watching from the bridge, or the crew members gaping at us.

"What do we do?" I yelled, panicked by how close and how big death looked. It was happening in slow motion.

Think. Changing course would be difficult and dangerous with the mainsail's boom tied in place to prevent an accidental swing. Turning upwind would backwind the sail and stall us. I realized I had 30 seconds to pull myself together. We could probably manage 20 degrees to starboard, possibly enough to avoid collision. "Should I furl the genoa?"

"No." Stephan believed in rules. He continued to watch the freighter captain watching us. "We're obviously under sail. We're the stand-on. All we do is let him know our intentions."

My intention at that point was to wet myself. What if he didn't do anything?

Maybe I should drop the sails, turn on the engine. Had the other captain been daydreaming, too? Had he seen us all along, only waiting until the last minute to determine our intentions? Or had he waited until a crew member alerted him? The two captains continued their technologically-enhanced staring contest. We were too close to turn to starboard, come about or take any sailing-mnemonic action.

Avery asked if we could phone the other boat. I didn't answer.

### **GO SLOW**

The Liberian-flagged vessel eased



slowly to our port side, passing so close I could read the writing on one of the Filipino crew's t-shirts: 'Go Slow.' Its wake bobbed *DELOS* like a bathtub toy.

James and Avery waved merrily. A couple of crew raised their hands in response. Drew, facing starboard, continued to sketch. I was grateful she didn't realize how close to disaster I had just brought us, or maybe she, too, had finally relaxed. Stephan was even calmer. Each vessel had done what was expected of her. He lowered the binocs and nodded toward the passing bridge as if to say, "Well done, Captain."

I sat back down in the captain's chair, shaking violently.

"Do we have the right of way?" Avery asked.

"Yes, Ave, we're under sail." But we hadn't talked about the law of gross tonnage, which trumps the Rules of the Road.

James was still enjoying his close-up view of the enemy. "Remember what David taught us? *Here lies the body of Michael O'Day...*"

The rest of the family joined in.  
...Who died maintaining his right of way

*He was right, dead right as he sailed along*

*But just as dead as if he'd been wrong!*

After we shouted the final line, my son added, "Way to be a stand-on vessel, Mommy." ≈



## THE LAW OF GROSS TONNAGE

The Law of Gross Tonnage goes like this: "The heavier vessel always has the right-of-way."

This is based on simple Newtonian physics. Newton's first law says that an object in motion stays in motion unless another force is acted upon it. In other words, if a boat is moving east at 5 mph and you were in the vacuum of space, it would never stop traveling east at 5 mph. However, we all know that when we stop our engine, we slow down.

How long it takes to go from 5 mph to 0 depends on wind and current. Even if there was no wind or current, we'd still slow down, because the water itself provides friction upon the hull of the boat, and that in itself acts as a brake.

We all have, by observation, found that the bigger the object, the longer it takes to slow down. Newton's second law of physics talks about how the amount of force required to move an object is inversely proportional to the mass of the object.

So, if a tug and barge were traveling down a narrow channel, and you stopped your boat 1,000 feet away, right in front of the tug and barge; **and**, if the master of the tug saw you immediately; **and**, if the master of the tug immediately began to stop the tug and barge, you'd have less than one minute to move your vessel.

Because if you didn't move your vessel in less than 60 small seconds, the tug and barge would run right over you. It would be impossible for the master of the tug to stop, based on the collective mass of both the vessel and the barge, in 1,000 feet.

**The law of gross tonnage is unrelenting. It is a fact of life. What is also a fact of life is that you should not depend on the master of the tug or any other large vessel to be able to see you, either visually or on radar.**

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