Passage Planning

is it really worth it?

PAUL GLATZEL DISCUSSES THE IMPORTANCE OF PASSAGE PLANNING AND HOW TO KEEP AHEAD WHEN PLANNING YOUR ROUTE.

"Out of the harbour, turn right and keep the land on your right hand side - you can't go wrong!" There have probably been many thousands of coastal passages undertaken over the years in RIBs and every other shape and type of boat where the planning and preparation didn't extend much beyond this. After all why bother, electronics can surely get us where we want to be pretty easily nowadays.

Before considering what sort of effort we should put into planning a passage (if any) what is the legal position? Since the amendment to the SOLAS ("Safety of Life at Sea") regulations a few years ago, all pleasure craft leaving Categorised Waters need to prepare a passage plan. Many harbours, rivers and even the Solent are considered as 'Categorised Waters' - ie not technically speaking the sea at all.

Whilst SOLAS V makes it clear that you need a plan what it doesn't do is give any guidance as to what the plan should contain, the level of detail it should go to or indeed whether it should be a written work of art or simply be held between your ears. It leaves that sort of decision up to you - the skipper - and it's up to you to decide given the particular passage that you intend undertaking the shape and form of the plan you prepare.

Before we look at some examples of a passage plan what should a passage plan contain and what does a skipper need to consider before heading off? Ultimately a passage plan is simply an amalgamation of all of the things you need to think about when moving between two places. Fundamentally you need to: Get out of your marina/harbour etc into open water safely, find a suitable route to your destination, safely enter that destination and also consider all of the other issues that could affect any aspect of this passage. Obvious things to factor into to your planning are:

The Route:

Make sure you have charts of a suitable scale for the route and harbours that will (or may be) entered; from these create the route and document headings, waypoints, distances, times, speeds, depths etc. Make a note of dangerous, key or useful features on route. Don't assume you'll reach your destination in daylight; create a fallback plan that assumes you run late and have to enter your destination at night, doing so ahead of leaving avoids the need for hasty re-planning at sea.

Weather:

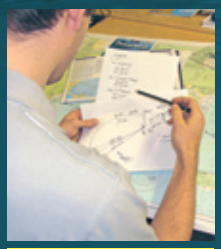
What are the conditions likely to be and how is it predicted to change during the passage? Will the weather affect your passage (eg wind against tide) and how will you get weather updates as your passage progresses.

Tidal Heights and Streams:

Confirm there is enough water to enter and exit the harbour and undertake the passage and work out what is the best time to leave to make the best use of the tidal conditions (eg avoiding wind against tide) and to ensure safe entry to the destination port.

Pilotage:

Plan harbour entry or exits, note important features such as marks and lights, make sure that you also do this for ports of refuge. Think about drawing out the plan for your entry clearly so that it is easier to visualize than a series of words and numbers.



Passage Planning: Is the preparation of a plan that helps you safely navigate between two points. There is no legal requirement though to submit a passage plan to the Coastguard.

Pilotage: Is what you do at either end of your passage and is the use of buoyage, transits, clearing and leading lines to safely manoeuvre your craft into or out of a harbour or marina.

TIP: The MCA's document SOLAS V summarises some of the responsibilities of the skipper of a vessel. Download a copy at **www.mcga.gov.uk/c4mca/solas.pdf**

Background Data:

Have the phone numbers and relevant VHF channels/ call signs listed for marinas, harbour masters, Coastguard control rooms, Sea Start, fuel stops etc - even if they are not on your route they may form part of your escape plan in the event of crew or engine problems or a deterioration in the weather.

Boat and Crew:

Are both suitably equipped for, and capable of, the passage and are you aware of any relevant medical conditions of the crew. Make sure they are suitably briefed and prepared for the passage?

The Plan:

Firstly, imagine you are undertaking a trip of about four miles from within a harbour (categorised waters) out to sea to a beach a short distance along the coast. You and the crew know the area well, there are many other boats about and aside from keeping to buoyed channels there are only a couple of hidden dangers to be aware of. You've considered what the tidal situation is and the weather is good and realistically if it does turn, getting to safety will prove very simple. In terms of the plan it may be that you decide that by having considered all of the relevant factors and having shared the plan with your crew that you've adequately satisfied the requirement to plan a passage, it's not written down but you've prepared and executed a plan in keeping with the nature of the trip being undertaken.

Secondly if you were undertaking a 15 mile trip along the coast you would do well to create a fairly detailed (but simple) document addressing all of the elements of the plan. Everyone has a slightly different way of preparing a plan and ultimately there is not a right or wrong way to do things. If it works for you, is clear and simple and covers all of the points, then it is probably a good plan. Many find that an effective plan is a combination of a variety of documents:

Data Document:

Containing details of tidal data for the various ports or areas to be visited, phone numbers and channel numbers, weather printouts etc.

Pilotage sketches:

Simple sketches of the areas to be navigated at the start and end of the passage and also other ports of refuge. It is helpful to clearly annotate these with the times at which access is feasible and the phone and channel numbers relevant to that location. These sketches help you to 'lift' the key elements you will need to consider when approaching the harbour/ marina etc and is easier than considering a chart alone which has a huge volume of data to assimilate. Sketch(es) of the main body of the passage detailing the key features of the passage, the headings and distances between waypoints and the approximate timings for each element of the route. Onto these sketches highlight the key danger areas and the leading/clearing lines that will assist your passage.

TIP:

A sensible skipper ensures that someone (be it the Coastguard or a friend) knows where he intends going and when he should be there. The Coastguard CG66 scheme invites a skipper to record detailed information about his boat and its equipment. (**www.mcga.gov.uk/c4mca/mcga-hmcg_rescue/mcga-hmcg-cg66.htm**). This information is then entered onto a database and will be available to all co-ordination centres in the event of an emergency.

Given that safe passage making is a combination of forethought and planning coupled to an effective execution of the plan, it would seem pretty sensible to encapsulate this all within a plan available to you and your crew.

So is a preparing a Passage Plan the right thing to do or does SOLAS V place unreasonable burdens on us? Ultimately it all seems fairly sensible, you as the Skipper are left to decide in what level of planning you need to undertake in light of the passage that you are making. Given that safe passage making is a combination of forethought and planning coupled to an effective execution of the plan, it would seem pretty sensible to encapsulate this all within a plan available to you and your crew. By investing a small amount of time ahead of departure passages can be safer, more relaxing and therefore more fun, equally from a slightly negative standpoint if it ever all does hit the fan you will be able to evidence the forethought and planning that you put into the passage you undertook.

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