

Underway In A Fog

Boating Tips

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My first real experience with fog along with radar was on a friend's boat crossing Lake Ontario to Toronto Canada. Two boats followed because neither had radar. I had the helm of my friend's boat.

The fog was a combination of open patches then pea soup. On the distant horizon in one clear patch I saw what appeared to be a lake freighter's the bow and stern. The radar was on 5 mile range so I tuned it out to 25 miles yet no blip. I tuned it out to fifty miles yet still no blip. So what am I seeing?

I radioed the boats behind us to throttle back as I was doing. We doubled lookouts, proceeding slowly back in to the pea soup open patch then pea soup. Still no blip on the radar at 50 miles. I had the boat owner make additional radar adjustments. No blip.

Entering a large clear patch the freighter came into clear visual view. Rather than a freighter, it was the Toronto skyline. Everyone on all three boats saw it so I was had. I and the "Toronto Freighter" were the brunt of everyone's jokes for the rest of the trip. However, everyone agreed that as the captain, I did the right things for everyone's safety.

In the days of Loran, before GPS & chart plotters, Loran was prone to signal loss when changing towers. On a trip on our boat that also had no radar, we slowly transitioned from the Detroit River into western Lake Erie. Here the shipping channel has two sets of markers, inside and outside, on either side of the main down bound channel.

In a late morning, light fog with 100 yard visibility, I followed the starboard, outside channel markers, slowly into the lake. We passed two anchored freighters as well as two Canadians in a john boat fishing. We waived, they waved.

I momentarily diverted my eyes from the Loran then looking back something seemed wrong. The Loran read we were going east, not southeast. I altered course back to the south east. Still, it didn't feel right, so I altered course again. We passed another two anchored freighter now to our port. Next we passed the two fisherman, this time on the starboard. They waved, we waved. It was then I realized that I had done a wide, slow 180 degree turn when I looked away from the Loran then attempting to correct course.

We went up river, did another 180 turn to head back into Lake Erie, again passing for a third time the two fisherman who waved and we waved. What was on the minds of those two fishermen? "Stupid Americans"!

In our defense, in both cases we proceeded slowly, had lookouts posted with one person sounding the bell then listening intently.



Both funny stories are one hundred percent true. Ask my wife.
Were we in danger? Doubtful. As captain, did my actions contribute to what could have been a dangerous situation?
Reflecting, again doubtful. I posted look outs, used the sounding devices plus proceeded at a slow speed. I could have waited until the fog cleared or anchored outside of the channel. However, the latter not an option due to being in shipping channels in both cases.

Encounter fog, unless your boat is equipped with Radar, GPS/Chart Plotter plus AIS and automatic sounding on your horn or bell, I suggest remaining in port until the fog clears. If you go, even with all the technology, proceed slowly as well as post look outs.

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