

THE COXSWAIN SHACK

SURFACE OPS PATROL TIPS & TRICKS

By: Bob Peterson, Coxn / QE / Air Crew, ADSO-OPT, D11 NR May, 2009

Mastering the Long Tow

Last month we got into the basics of the Side-Tow. This month we tackle the much more common Long-tow. Most know about the requirement to circle the disabled vessel a few times, but when asked, often can't supply an answer why. So let's discuss that point.

Look at the deck layout on the disabled boat. Do they have a Samson post and/or strong cleats up forward? Is their foredeck area clear of debris? Can you decipher the boat's registration number? If so, pass it to the Station holding your OPCON so they can run the ID through the DMV database and warn you of any issues there.

Check for excessive tow-lines, anchor lines and other gear scattered about the deck, which will make it difficult to pass your tow-lines over and tough for them to secure them. Make sure you assign a crewman to act as Safety Observer to warn you of vessels and/or wakes approaching you. Determine if you will want to use a heaving line. If so, have it made ready. Make sure all your crew is given the specifics of your planned tow, what rig will be used, who will pass the line, and that all gear is made ready.

Once your gear is ready and the tactics discussed with the crew, approach the disabled boat, into the wind and seas, preparing to station-keep once alongside. When the disabled boat has a crewman forward to receive the line and all else is ready, give the command to "send the line over". Remind your crew to heave the line over and beyond their bow. If a heaving line is used, remember to allow sufficient time for the other boat's crew to disconnect the heaving line from the tow-line and attach your tow-line to their post or cleats.

Designate a member of your crew to focus exclusively on watching the tow-line, keeping it out of the water and away from your props. They should have no other assignment! Loud, decisive commands must be issued by the Coxswain and echoed back by the crew.

If the disabled boat has no center Samson post, or it is blocked by extra gear, anchor line or a windlass, consider using a bridle attached to her two forward cleats. Your crew must brief their crew on this technique. A trailer eye aboard smaller boats is often the strongest hardware to use for towing. After your line is made fast to their vessel, direct their crew to move aft, away from their bow.

Inform your crew before moving ahead. Have your line-handler pay out tow-line as needed to keep a minimum amount of line in the water. The line-handler and Safety Observer must be ready to haul in line to avoid an excess being sucked into the prop(s). If using a towing post on your boat, a single turn around the post will permit the line to be eased out as you move forward.

Maneuver to start the tow by pulling the towed boat straight ahead if possible. Once the slack in the tow-line is out and you begin to take a strain, listen and watch for signs of any problems in the line or towing hardware. Be sure none of your crew is in line with the tow-line, to prevent injury if it snaps.

Make sure all personnel on both boats are wearing PFD's, staying clear of the tow-line snap-back path, and watching for nearby boats and wakes. Have a workable communications strategy for use between the tower and towee.

Most texts emphasize keeping the towed vessel "in-step", riding up on a following crest. That may be needed well offshore, but in 35 years of Bay Area SAR work, I've always found a half dozen wave sets from different directions preventing such "in step" tow placement.

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