

BOAT CREW BASICS

A GUIDE FOR BOAT CREW CANDIDATES & MENTORS

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Crewmember Boat Crew Tasks

This month we tackle a special Boat Crew task that puzzles some Crew candidates. Specifically, we examine how to effectively “Stand a Tow Watch”.

The Tow Watch used to be quite familiar to all Crewmembers, since most patrols involved one or more tows. Today towing is less often conducted, given the general down-turn in towing done by Auxiliary vessels. Understandably then it’s not unusual for Crew-members to have forgotten some of the basics of the Tow Watch when doing their recurrency training and exams. So let’s review the basics of the Tow Watch.

Primary among the Tow Watch’s duties is the need to maintain constant surveillance of the towed vessel, in order to immediately become aware of any problems aboard the tow. These include watching the all people aboard the tow, noting any signals they may send. Some of their crew may become sea-sick or suffer other problems which must be dealt with. Passengers may decide to remove their PFD’s or clamber around the tow into dangerous places. These developments must be communicated to your Coxswain immediately so that corrective action may be taken.

Next in priority is watching how the towed vessel rides, noting any signs of danger. These could include yawing back and forth, veering off to one side or the other, shock-loading the towline, overloading it or the deck hardware, or allowing the towline to slacken excessively dipping quite low into the water. Coxswains are trained to be able to remedy any of these danger signs; this may involve changing speed, repositioning passengers on the towed vessel, or changing heading to improve the tow’s ride.

The crewman standing Tow Watch must constantly be alert for any persons standing in a position to be injured by towline snap-back. This includes both those aboard the towed and towing vessels.

These are the most essential tasks needed by all crewmembers. The qualification criteria include several other tasks which are seldom observed in today’s common tows but need to be learned. These include the placement and observation of chafing gear, maintaining the proper catenary, and keeping the tow “in step”.

Chafing gear is appropriate for tows lasting longer times than is typical; however the strain that towlines and bridles are subjected to may demand chafing gear. When used, it must be visually monitored in order to detect any excessive wear.

The proper “catenary” or dip in the towline is recommended in order to reduce shock loads on the towline and both vessels’ deck hardware. However, particularly in the confined waters of the Bay, Delta and Inland Lakes, it can be difficult to achieve in that it may require longer lines than can safely be used in our local crowded waters.

Keeping the tow “in step” is stressed frequently in our training references and check-lists, but problematic in local waters. It is more likely achieved in offshore waters rather than the confused seas common to our Bay, Delta and Inland Lakes.

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