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GCMA Report #R-294  
Date: October 29, 2001

## 45 MUSTS FOR EFFECTIVE WATCHKEEPING

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[This article came from the May 2001 GCMA Newsletter.]

*[STCW stands for the Standards of Training, Certification, and Watchkeeping. In light of recent failures in watchkeeping that resulted in several serious accidents and loss of life in the Gulf of Mexico, a few thoughts on this subject are in order.]*

The term "watch" means to be alert, attentive, or vigilant. The older connotation of the word was to continue without sleep, keeping vigil, or continually being on one's guard.

The "officer of the watch," which we will shorten to "watch officer," is the licensed officer in charge of the watch who is responsible for navigating the vessel in the absence of the Master or commanding officer-to use military terminology so we do not ignore naval watchkeeping responsibilities which parallel those of the merchant marine.

The most interesting point about watchkeeping revolves around the size of the vessel. On a small commercial vessel with only a licensed Master and deckhand, these two individuals make up the entire watch and are responsible for every one of the points of standing an effective watch on deck, in the engineroom, on the radio, while at anchor or when underway, during daylight or darkness, and in varying degrees of visibility. This is a tall order for any mariner and covers much more than you may think. Collisions between very small and very large vessels is well documented and not uncommon. In many cases, this is the result of a human error—often a failure of "watchkeeping."

Consequently, the "Operator" of the smallest uninspected passenger vessel, Master of a tug or OSV, and the Master of the largest cruise ship or tankship have something in common. Each must know how to maintain an effective watch on their vessel with the personnel they have available to them. While the terminology on small boats may differ from that used on large ships, the watchkeeping principles are basically similar. What you read here is what you would expect to find in a perfect world where there are no maritime accidents. At any rate, it contains a prescription for avoiding accidents and averting maritime disasters. By learning as much as possible

from the experience of others, your experience at sea should be safer and more rewarding. It will probably never be perfect because there is always the "other guy." Study this carefully so you are not somebody else's "other guy!"

## MAINTAINING A PROPER LOOKOUT

Nothing can be more positive or absolute than the obligation to maintain a proper lookout. Rule 5 of the Navigation Rules that applies in both international and inland waters under all conditions of visibility states that: "Every vessel shall at all times maintain a proper lookout by sight and hearing as well as by all means appropriate in the prevailing circumstances and conditions so as to make a full appraisal of the situation and the risk of collision." Reread this statement as it serves as the basis of what follows.

Rule 5 is so short and straight forward that it may mislead you as to the large number of points it really covers. As it applies to small vessel operators, you must consider and balance quite a few factors to be sure you have established a "proper lookout" in compliance with Rule 5. You must then continually evaluate your lookout's effectiveness. This is a tall order if you happen to be doing the entire job single-handedly as is common on many small vessels! It is particularly difficult if your employer expects you to violate the 12-hour rules that were established to protect mariners.<sup>(1)</sup> *[<sup>(1)</sup>Request a copy of GCMA Document #R-258 (USCG G-MOC Policy Letter #4-00) that describes the 12-Hour rules.]*

A "lookout" has been defined by the federal courts as a person who is specially charged with the duty of observing the lights, sounds, echoes, or any obstruction to navigation with the thoroughness that the circumstances permit.

In considering the duties of a lookout, you must not only consider vessels of the size and type your license will cover but also the entire spectrum of vessels you may encounter at sea because a collision obviously is not restricted to another vessel of the same type and size as your vessel. Over the years, considerable case law has evolved concerning the duties of a lookout. Therefore, the following list serves a set of guidelines to what is expected of you in complying with Rule 5. As a licensed officer you will be called on to perform lookout duties as well as to monitor and instruct other lookouts. In many cases you may find it difficult to comply with the letter of these guidelines. However, you will be expected to be "effective" in avoiding collisions no matter how you handle each individual situation.

Lookout guidelines. You must consider these points in regard to establishing a proper lookout:

1. The owners of a vessel in a collision may be liable for damages for neglecting to maintain a proper lookout unless the other vessel was discovered as soon as a proper lookout, if properly stationed, could have discovered her.
2. The vigilance of a lookout is often judged by his effectiveness in preventing a collision. Failing to discover

- the lights of a vessel in time to avoid collision is equivalent to not posting a proper lookout.
3. A lookout's duty is considered to be continuous and unbroken while other watchstanders (i.e., persons on watch) often may have other types of duties to perform.
  4. A lookout must be assigned no other duties that could detract from keeping a proper lookout. He must devote his complete attention to being a lookout. Consequently, a helmsman or officer in charge of the watch cannot properly fulfill the duties of a lookout.
  5. After a collision, courts may take into consideration the number of seamen available on board in considering whether a vessel maintained a "proper lookout."
  6. There have been more reported cases of improper lookouts aboard merchant vessels with smaller crews than with comparably-sized naval vessels with larger crews.
  7. About three times as many cases of improper lookout are reported on inland waters as on the high seas. This may be a result of the relative congestion of inland waters.
  8. Lookouts must be stationed in sufficient numbers as circumstances require so that the vessel can avoid risk of collision. Avoiding collision is of paramount importance.
  9. A vessel must maintain a proper lookout for both up-bound and down-bound vessels on a river before starting and while making a turn.
  10. The absence of key personnel from the pilothouse or bridge invariably leads to charges of maintaining an improper lookout.
  11. Using radar as a general lookout does not relieve a vessel of maintaining a visual and aural<sup>(1)</sup> lookout. [<sup>(1)</sup>**Vocabulary:** *Aural = listening by ear.*]
  12. The fact that visibility is clear does not eliminate the need to maintain a general radar lookout at night.
  13. Vessels can be faulted for maintaining a bad radar lookout and for faulty evaluation of available radar information.
  14. Lookouts must be both vigilant and alert at all times.
  15. The lookout's vigilance must not be reduced because his vessel may have the right of way.
  16. The degree of vigilance required of a lookout underway in fog is greatly increased. If he cannot see through the fog, at least he can listen. Remember that no vessel has the right of way in fog.
  17. Large vessels in fog have a positive obligation to station enough lookouts to give the earliest possible warning of vessels approaching from any direction.
  18. Lookouts must be properly stationed and must know exactly what their duties are.
  19. Lookouts must be trustworthy, perform their jobs faithfully, and must be qualified by their service at sea for a reasonable period.
  20. The proper position for a lookout is as low down and as far forward as the conditions allow. This position allows his eyes to follow the surface of the water and detect anything low down that his vessel may be approaching. In Us position, he is best able to hear as well as see. Additionally, his hearing may be less impaired by the noise of the engines or by radios. Although you may believe that some other position is "just as good," the burden of proving this may fall on your vessel in event of a collision.
  21. The pilothouse may not be the proper place to station the vessel's lookout unless one has been first stationed in the bow.
  22. A lookout freezing from exposure cannot be expected to be vigilant. Adequate clothing and protection from the weather are factors that require a watch officer's consideration.
  23. Seamen who divide their attention among other duties are not proper lookouts. Such distractive duties, no matter how welcome or admirable, may include running errands and serving hot coffee to the crew.
  24. A watch officer who simultaneously uses an automatic pilot and undertakes clerical duties rather than focusing his full attention on being a lookout is not considered to be a "proper lookout." In other words, do not try to do all the work by yourself.
  25. A tug with a long tow (or other vessels with their gear extended) must extend their watchfulness to include the full length of the tow.
  26. A tug must keep a lookout at the bow of a tow "on the hip" where it projects beyond the tug.
  27. There is a recognized obligation to maintain a proper lookout on the bow of the lower deck of a ferryboat.
  28. The Master of a sailing vessel standing abaft the wheel is not in a proper position for a lookout when sailing full and free with a strong wind. Observations reported from such a position may be partial, interrupted, incomplete, and

- entitled to less weight in court than those of a properly stationed lookout.
29. Lookout reports must be made promptly and correctly in all conditions of visibility.
  30. Failure of a lookout to promptly report a vessel with which his vessel could possibly collide or that could in any way affect the navigation of his vessel is considered neglect of duty.
  31. Lookouts should report every light that might be material or meaningful in the existing situation as soon as it becomes meaningful. Perfection only comes with experience, good training, and a thorough briefing at every assignment to lookout duties.
  32. A lookout should report navigation or anchor lights and be able to determine what course another vessel is following. Reporting lights, vessels, and objects comes first; identification of these reported targets comes later! A lookout should report an "object" immediately even if not certain it exists.
  33. The watch officer should be able to properly appreciate a developing situation based on his own observation as well as accurate and timely reports from his lookouts. Proper appreciation also involves a certain knowledge that his vessel's navigation lights and navigational equipment are functioning properly.
  34. A lookout must be watchful for small vessels and objects both adrift and stationary.
  35. A proper lookout is expected to listen for and, if possible, hear sound signals.
  36. A proper lookout is expected to observe another ship's alteration of course.
  37. A lookout, once he reports the light of another vessel, must not leave his post, unless properly relieved.
  38. Making use of "all available means appropriate" is not restricted to the use of radar. Binoculars should be used not only by the lookout but also by other personnel in the pilothouse<sup>(1)</sup> and, when necessary, through an open window or from the bridge wing or equivalent location. *[<sup>(1)</sup>Comment: In the 1912 allision (and subsequent sinking) of the RMS TITANTIC with an iceberg, there were not enough binoculars on board the ship for the watch officer and the lookouts each to have a pair. If there had been, the accident might have been avoided.]*
  39. Failure to make accurate observations of compass bearings constitutes an improper lookout.
  40. Maintaining a proper lookout involves listening and giving adequate consideration to VHF radio information. This implies listening to the correct channel(s).
  41. On occasion, such as when backing from a slip or backing while turning in a channel, a vessel requires a lookout in the stem. However, an overtaken vessel is not required to station a lookout on her stem. Nevertheless, it is always "good seamanship" to look astern before making a turn so as not to "embarrass" an overtaking vessel.
  42. A vessel securely anchored in a safe harbor displaying the proper lights in ordinary weather generally does not require a lookout. However, under certain extreme weather conditions and in places where navigation is dangerous or difficult, such a lookout may be required. In these cases providing a watch on deck may not be sufficient if there is no one specifically detailed as lookout to warn off an approaching vessel.
  43. A vessel is liable for damages to other vessels caused by dragging her anchor. This makes a proper lookout imperative when conditions make dragging anchor a possibility.
  44. The Coast Guard in certain geographic areas has specific requirements for vessels at anchor near and while servicing oilfield installations.
  45. The rules for maintaining a proper lookout apply to small as well as large vessels.