

Tugs, Barges And Pleasure Boats

BY TOM SHAW

Tug with two loaded barges about a quarter mile ahead," reports our faithful lookout as we cruise up the ICW. The skipper has three logical reactions to the news: "so what," "man the panic stations" or "what do I know about tugs and barges that will enable me to have a safe and comfortable passing?"

Assuming the third option, here are some of the things the skipper needs to know—things that, oddly enough, are not often found in the "how to be a better boater" books.

First, the Intracoastal Waterway was not devised for the pleasure boater. In a very real sense, we recreational boaters are the "guests." All that government money that was and is spent on building and maintaining the ICW is from the U.S. Department of Transportation and is primarily for commerce.

Joe Cruiser and Bill Fisherman are the fortunate sharers in thousands of miles of dredged and well-marked channels. Instead of cursing that tow, we need to remember that he has every right in the world to be there. We share the waterways with him.

One of the most apt slogans of the Coast Guard Auxiliary is "know before you go," and there are some essential things that recreational boaters need to know about the tugs and barges we will meet or

overtake.

Fact One about a tug and tow is that he is "restricted in ability to maneuver." His draft constrains him to the center of the channel. His size makes fast turns impossible. His visibility, especially under his bow, is severely limited, even from a high pilot house.

He must maintain speed to have any steerage way (and with a following tide this may mean that he is moving pretty swiftly) and HE CAN'T STOP! A tug with two loaded barges may take as much as a mile to go from cruising speed to dead in the water. Newton's "first law"—force equals mass times velocity squared—cannot be denied.

While the tug's "velocity" may be a conservative 8 to 10 knots, the "mass" means there is a very significant time and distance in which the tugboat captain is essentially powerless. The message is clear: we, in our maneuverable recreational boats, need to get out of the way.

Fact Two is that a tug pushing deeply loaded barges in a narrow and shallow channel such as much of the ICW displaces an astonishing amount of water. When the tow passes, all that water rushes back into the tug's wake, creating what is improperly called "tug suction," a force that "sucks" small boats and other objects from the edge of the channel towards its center.

A small boat passing too near the

stem of a large tow may be pulled off course and be temporarily out of control long enough for disaster. Be ready to apply full power to break away.

The same force of water rapidly returning after being displaced by the tow can draw a crab pot and its buoyed line into the path of a passing boat where it can wrap itself around the propeller shaft with most unpleasant results.

How does the small boat skipper safely "share the waterway?" First, he has real respect for the forces generated by the tug and barges. He is keenly aware of the tug's severely restricted ability to maneuver. In a head-to-head passing, he stays as far to the side of the channel as his draft will allow, passes slowly to avoid the tug's wake and keeps his hand on the throttle ready to apply power if his vessel experiences the "suction" caused by the tow's passage.

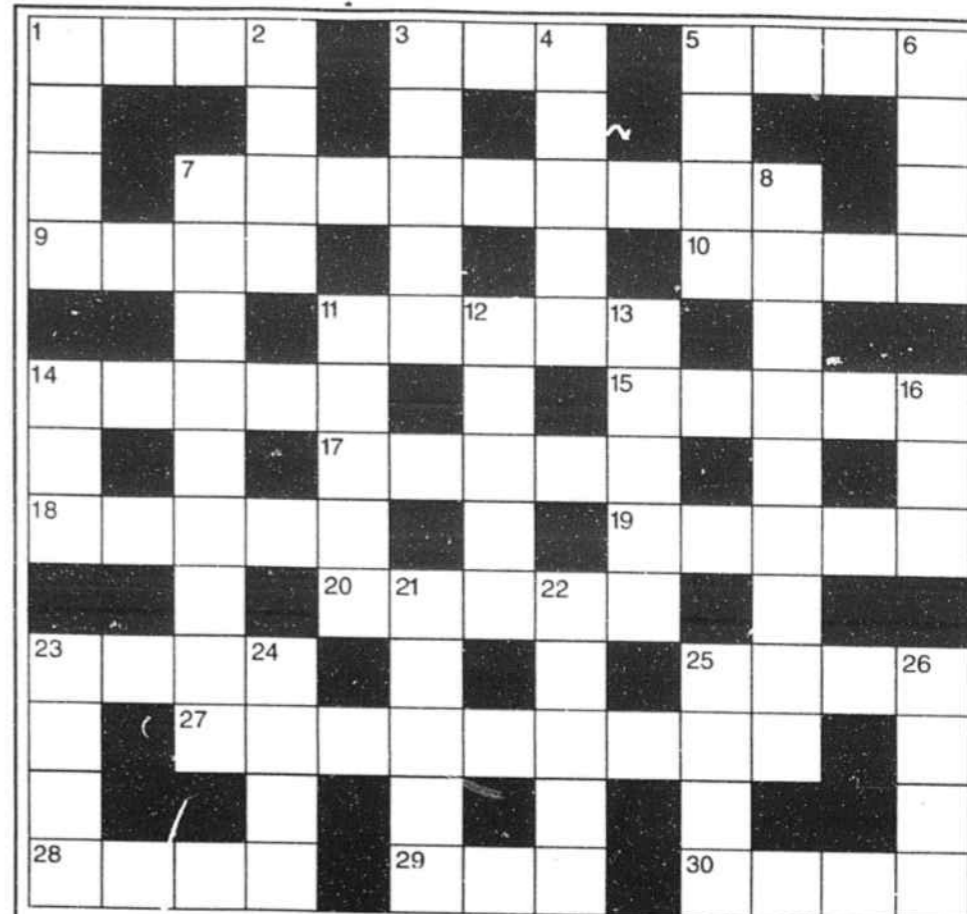
When overtaking a tow the wise skipper uses his VHF radio on Channel 13, the "ship-to-ship channel."

"Northbound tug passing day mark 144, this is the 24-foot cruiser 'Happy Time' astern of you. Will appreciate your advice on when and how to pass."

And the response from the tug's captain will be something like this: "Happy Time, this is the tugboat Hefty. Please wait till we pass day mark 142. Then pass on my starboard side I'll be watching for you."

All that remains is a brief "Thank You" when Happy Time has safely passed the tow.

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CLUES ACROSS

- 1. Dread
- 3. Interval
- 5. Be sullen
- 7. Boundary
- 9. Calm
- 10. Clang
- 11. Tribal quarrels
- 14. Regal
- 15. Freight
- 17. Active
- 18. Upper air
- 19. Wanderer
- 20. Bird of prey
- 23. Bell
- 25. Intertwine
- 27. Extolled
- 28. Wholesome
- 29. Arid
- 30. Tilt

CLUES DOWN

- 1. Replete
- 2. Bobbin
- 3. Ingrained dirt
- 4. Entreat
- 5. Trickle
- 6. Slay
- 7. Toy
- 8. Rebuke
- 11. Signal light
- 12. Employing
- 13. Vista
- 14. Whiskey
- 16. Aged
- 21. Ventilated
- 22. Towering
- 23. Clutch
- 24. Adhesive
- 25. Flat-bottomed barge
- 26. Lacerated

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For Solution, See Page 58

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