

Roche Harbor cruise and Fog experience...

Our cruise adventure began the morning of Thursday May 4, 2017. Reveille was at 0315 all excited to begin the adventure. Sail plan called for getting underway about 0430 following the ebb current out of Everett, around Possession Point and through Admiralty Inlet and across the Strait of Juan de Fuca to San Juan Island and Roche Harbor. Les on Mahalo made the departure time, Hadley followed about 15 minutes later.

During preparation of coffee there was one major challenge discovered for our cruise, fog right down to the deck. We had varying degrees of visibility ranging from 1/4 mile to 100 yards. Departed Everett Marina under power then turning to port down the Snohomish River towards the river entrance trying to find the green channel marker. Heavy fog made it difficult to make out Mahalo as well as the shapes of the Navy ships on the piers 150 yards away, they drifted in and out of view.

The GPS tracking on my iSailor phone app and the chart plotter were useful tools providing confidence that I was in the river channel and would find our rendezvous up ahead. Suddenly Mahalo appeared next to the Green buoy at the end of the Navy piers.

We made contact and headed out in tandem, Hadley in the lead and Mahalo to Port as escort at about 5 knots. Mahalo fired up the radar, while Hadley monitored the AIS and chart track.

We made good time and crossed the ferry route for the Mukilteo Ferry without incident. Never saw the ferries. We heard them on the VHF. We monitored them on AIS and radar but not even their lights were visible in the fog; uncomfortable to say the least.

We could hear several boaters on the VHF discussing their fishing plans and fog conditions. Even though the sky began to turn from fuzzy black to grey the fog continued, unabated, in our face. We were cruising about 4.5 knots through the water but making about 5.8 over the ground thanks to the favorable ebb current. Our sail plan met our planned waypoint track and CG navigation markers giving us all a good feeling helping to boost our navigation confidence.

We rounded Possession Point about 0700 while observing the first towing tug on AIS heading northwest approaching from our stern. Seeing it moving at about eight knots made it a priority to watch. As the fog began to lift visibility improved allowing us to increase speed to 2300 RPMs to make up time following the ebb along the southern coast of Whidbey Island. Near Useless Bay the sun finally appeared through the clouds and visibility increased from 200 yards to five miles. We basked in the morning sun warming our backs. The autopilot was a great crew. It maintained course spot on, easily handling the minor tidal currents that tried to push Hadley onto a different heading. Time for breakfast a cup of morning joe and some oatmeal to recharge my spirits.

When approaching Double Bluff there was a Kodak moment of seals sunning on the green channel buoy. At 0746, outside the Coast Guard controlled shipping lanes, the sun invited a promise of cruising Puget Sound's marvelous venue. Sitting on the port side of the cockpit it was easy to chat about our progress with Mahalo. Sun, breakfast and cruising it doesn't get much better. I stood, stretched, and scanned the course ahead. Out about a mile the fog was hanging low trying to obscure our progress to Roche Harbor.

I hailed Mahalo, to warn of the fog ahead and to keep a port watch while I watch to starboard. Within a few minutes we were

again socked in to 50 yards visibility and back to our routine. Checking the AIS no targets in our one half nautical mile alarm circle. As I sat down I saw ahead in the fog four bright lights coming at me. Looked like the high beams on a car, four beady eyes heading for my starboard mid-ships. I had a very bad feeling. Immediately I flipped off the autopilot, turned hard over to port and advance the throttle to maximum power. I shouted fishing boat as the blurry shape took form, coming fast. I grabbed my air horn delivering five quick blasts to warn of an impending collision. The fishing boat continued to slice through the water at high speed out of the fog towards me and Hadley. I blasted the air horn again, then suddenly the fishing boat swerved towards me, not away. We're going to hit! I again blasted the horn, grabbed the binnacle guard to brace for impending impact, then at the last second the fishing boat veered away, but too late. The fishing boat slammed into my starboard quarter about six feet from the stern.

The impact threw me towards the port side hitting the wheel and binnacle guard, bruising my right arm and middle back. Immediately I got to my feet shut down the engine then sat down in the cockpit to regain my composure. The fishing boat continued on for about another 35 to 50 yards. His excessive speed and glancing blow made it difficult for him to stop. Mahalo circled back to the fishing boat while taking photos of the fishing boat. The skipper asked if he had hit Mahalo, Les said no, you hit the boat behind you. The skipper pulled his boat up along side and we exchanged information. Driver's licenses, boat registration number. The crew were not responsive to my questions while their skipper looked for his Driver's license, one of them volunteered they were trying to get to the shrimp fishing grounds. The skipper was from Port Townsend and said he had gone near Whidbey Island to avoid the commercial traffic.

We separated and I examined my boats damage. The hull looked sound, it was still seaworthy. No leaks but some damage to the rub rail and fiberglass on the starboard quarter above the waterline. The aluminum trim on the stern was ripped away and hanging in the air, but all looked ok. Mahalo came by. We discussed the situation and I said let's continue to Roche Harbor. When we arrived at Roche Harbor, I met with the local Border Patrol.

After discussing the event, the Agent recommended I call the Coast Guard 13th District Investigative Office. The Petty Officer on watch asked that I submit an incident report to their office.

Tuesday morning the 9th I got a message back that they considered it a local issue. This incident needs to be reported to the State using the State Boating Accident Form. Reports must be submitted to the law enforcement agency that has jurisdiction where the accident occurred. If you are not sure what agency has the authority, contact the Washington State Boating Program by email or call 360-902-8555.

Lessons learned:

TAKE PHOTOS of everything and person. Cell phone cameras are great. Having a friend and sailing partner wingman PRICELESS.

The Fishing boat Captain did not know who he hit nor slow down when I blew the horn warning. The way the boat came through the fog it looked like no one was at the wheel. Possibly they were operating the boat via autopilot. The speed of the boat in such severe fog conditions made it impossible for the unattended helm to respond to the impending collision. The speed factored into no reaction time from awareness to contact.

Damage to the Fishing boat seemed limited to one of the four led

running lights on the starboard bow.

What could I have done differently? Not much. We were sounding our fog horn, scanning the water ahead, monitoring our navigation aids, (AIS, radar, electronic and printed charts) and had an air horn in the cockpit ready to be used. We knew where we were and the location of our escort boat. We were progressing at moderate rate of speed consistent with the conditions. Crew was on watch and able to act to save the boat and life.

Turning the boat hard over to port gave the best chance of avoiding a collision. Regulations state that when two boats are heading towards each other, they should alter course to starboard passing port to port. That maneuver, however, would have resulted in a head on collision. With the fishing boat already on my starboard side, the only possible alternative was to alter course hard over to port.

Should you be unfortunate enough to experience a similar incident it is important that you collect as much evidence as possible including pictures and exchanging personal information about the skipper and their vessel.