

Keeping an ear and eye open on what's happening in the Port

The Squadron is one of a few large marinas in Australia located within a busy commercial port. For some Members, this is a source of great interest and the port radio frequencies are monitored as a matter of course. However, I suspect that for the majority it is of little or no interest, nor seemingly has it any relevance.

I must admit that I fall into the former category. And in talking to skippers and crew in the marina, there are quite a few others like me. So why do we take an interest?

I suspect there a couple of reasons. The first is that we have a broad interest in the sea, ships and port operations beyond just our own boat. Listening to the port's working radio channels gives us the opportunity to 'eavesdrop' on many aspects of port operations, be they arrangements for ship arrivals and departures, piloting ships in confined waters, the interaction between pilots and tugs, and the general business of running a large commercial port such as dredging and maintaining navigations aids.

The second and important reason is one of safety. Although at most times it is just 'useful to know' what is going on as a backdrop to sailing in the river or immediately off the entrance, there are other times when a knowledge of shipping movements is of direct use.

Let me give you a recent example of its use for safety. On this particular morning, a large car carrier was moored at #4 berth, restricting visibility to the south when exiting the Squadron. Making her way up river past #3 berth was a panamax size (40 000 tonne) bulk carrier. These are the largest vessels that can access the Inner Harbour and require a tug to be on hand to assist if needed negotiating the bend around Pelican Point. Tugs generally make their line fast as they pass the car carrier wharf and on this particular day, one was stationed off the starb'd bow. The area was crowded. A small sailing vessel, with all three crew to port balancing the boat, chose that moment to enter the main channel on a port tack. At that stage the panamax was only 150 metres away and travelling at 7 kts. It would seem that no one on the small sailing vessel looked behind them to port, as they continued to head west past the bow of the car carrier. Fortunately someone on the pilot boat (which fortuitously happened to be there), the tug or the ship noticed the small boat and sounded the alarm. The pilot boat sped to intercept, sounding it's horn, followed by a long blast from the ship (enough to raise the dead!) which got the required attention. The sailing boat, which fortunately still had it's outboard motor operating, was quickly ushered away to the north east by the pilot boat (see picture) and a potential tragedy was averted.



Picture shows car carrier far left, panamax and tug coming up river, the pilot boat stopped after shepherding the small sailing boat in question out of the way (under the X to protect it's identity).

My point is that this incident could have been avoided if someone on the boat had been monitoring the port frequencies (channels 12 and 6). Even using a handheld VHF, they would have been very aware of what was happening with respect to the panamax movement that morning – pilot on board (some 40 minutes earlier on Ch 12), passing the fairway beacon (some 30 minutes earlier on Ch 12), conversations between the pilot and the tug (some 15 minutes earlier and continuing up to the incident – Ch 6). As we all know, awareness and prevention are 9/10^{ths} of the game.

So how do we 'tune in' to port operations. There are three main channels used within the port, namely VHF channels 6, 8 and 12, with 16 used for emergencies and as the initial call channel.

Channel 12 is the general talk channel for the Port of Adelaide. Outer Harbour control and arriving ships use it to confirm arrival times, agree on pilot boarding times and arrangements such as location and height of the boarding ladder. Alternatively, when the ship has to wait to enter the harbour, instructions are given as to where to anchor and, once anchored, the ship confirms their position by bearing and distance from the Fairway beacon. The pilot boats use Ch 12 to give orders to incoming ships as to boarding speed and location, and notify Outer Harbour control of pilot boarding and disembarkation times. The dolphin cruise boats leaving from IH #1 notify Outer Harbour control of their cruise plans, the number of passengers and crew and ask for shipping movements that may affect them. If they meet any ships in the channel, the pilot will confirm the place and manner of the passing manoeuvre, with particular caution being taken if it is a tanker proceeding to or from M berth in the Inner Harbour.

At times, you will hear the pilot asking the tugs or pilot boat to take the registration number of a small boat that has behaved in an irresponsible manner, such as cutting too close across the bows of a large ship. A

couple of years ago this happened twice during the Port Line race, with the ship in question being a reefer going up to #18 berth in the Inner Harbour. Because she was empty, she was high in the water and hence was travelling relatively fast (probably 11 knots) to maintain steerage. Judging the speed of large ships is difficult at the best of times and the greater than normal speed, combined with the narrow channel, produced a potentially hazardous situation which called for greater caution by skippers of small boats, even if racing.

Channels 6 and 8 are used for conversations, albeit brief, between the pilot and tug captain(s) during berthing manoeuvres. The default channel is 6, with 8 being used if there are two ships being assisted at the same time somewhere in the port. The business of turning and laterally shifting a large ship as she approaches a wharf requires skill and cooperation between all concerned – pilot, tug captains and mooring supervisor – particularly if the wind is up and the tide is running strongly. Car carriers have significant windage, as do large container ships, and with a beam wind, even the combined bollard pull of two tugs (some 85 to 110 tonnes depending on the tugs used) can be overwhelmed by a strong gust. Pilots aim to 'land' the ship as gently as possible, as damage can easily result when a moving hull meets a fixed object (the wharf), even at slow speed. I suspect professional pride is also at stake, not to mention his job if it is a serious collision resulting in significant damage.

Another source of information about shipping movements is to use the web. *Flinders Ports* have a comprehensive web site, including a Shipping Schedule of planned arrivals and departures from all their ports (<http://www.flindersports.com.au/shipping4.html>). A click on [Shipping Schedule](#) in the second paragraph will bring up (albeit slowly) a table with ship name, date, time of pilot boarding for arrivals or departure from the dock, berth allocation and so on. Although it gets amended regularly to take account of changing circumstances – delays due to weather, etc – I make a practice of printing off a copy as part of my preparations for sailing in the southern part of the gulf, especially if it is to be a night passage.

In conclusion, we share the immediate waters with commercial ships of varying size and restricted manoeuvrability. It is our responsibility to be aware of what's going on around us, particularly as it effects the safety of our boat and the operation of larger ships. *Flinders Ports*, in conjunction with *Transport SA* have produced an excellent brochure with advice for recreational boaters called **BIG SHIPS, LITTLE BOATS**. Copies are available in the clubhouse foyer and I would urge you to read it. It is full of handy tips and advice.

Remember, just as with large trucks (if you can't see their rear vision mirrors, they can't see you) the same applies with ships – if you can't see the bridge, they can't see you!