

FORUM

Reversal of the Traffic Flow in the Dover Strait

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SOME publicity has recently been given to a new plan proposed by Trinity House and the Honourable Company of Master Mariners for the separation of traffic in the Dover Strait. This would reverse the direction of flow established by Imco in 1967 according to which the main streams of traffic between the Channel and the North Sea keep to the right.¹

The authors of the scheme suggest that the number of collisions in the Sandettié–West Hinder area has increased dangerously since 1967 because of an unforeseen increase in the size, draught and speed of ships. Their aim is to prevent, in this area, crossings between traffic coming out of the Scheldt and traffic bound for Rotterdam, Germany, Scandinavia and the Baltic.

It is quite true that, after a significant drop, the frequency of collisions in the Dover Strait has once again mounted though not to the level of the years before 1967. On the other hand, it is quite untrue to suggest that most of these collisions have been in the Sandettié–West Hinder area. Of the twenty-five collisions which have occurred in the Dover Strait between June 1967 and November 1969, only one took place in the area in question. Whereas, fifteen occurred along the English coast, that is to say, in the area through which before routing almost the entire traffic proceeded in both directions, and where there is still a marked tendency to navigate in a direction opposite to that recommended. Traffic separation was introduced in order to reduce the risk of end-on encounters, and if most of the collisions have taken place precisely in the area where end-on encounters still occur, it should be obvious that the only solution is to strengthen respect for the recommended routes.

The reversal of the direction of traffic flow in this respect can produce no good. Even in the area where it is supposed to improve the situation, it can achieve nothing positive. No doubt the present crossing situation would be done away with, but it would be replaced by another series of crossings, which would prove equally inconvenient, of ships bound for the Scheldt and those bound for the Strait from the North. It would also produce a type of encounter which the present system does not, notably, end-on meetings between ships bound to and from the Scheldt. This is the most serious aspect of the whole plan, not only because this type of encounter is the most dangerous and is precisely the type of encounter which the organization of the traffic seeks to eliminate but also because a host of other encounters of this kind would be produced on either side of the Strait in areas where, up till present, this danger did not exist. In fact, of course, the direction of flow at present in force in the Dover Strait, as elsewhere, is the direction which conforms to the Collision Regulations. If one accepted a reversal of flow in the Strait, the traffic going in the normal direction at either end of the Strait would somehow have to cross over. This would greatly

increase the risk of collision, and it would be better to abandon traffic separation altogether.

In these circumstances it is not surprising that the Trinity House and Honourable Company plan has been poorly received; even in Great Britain. It is quite possible that it will not get as far as Imco where, in any event, its chances of success are practically nil. [Since this note was written, Imco has in fact agreed not to discuss the proposal. *Ed.*] Nevertheless the plan, which has the support of experienced seamen, has been widely circulated among British and other mariners together with a questionnaire form intended to secure support for the measures proposed. Confidence in traffic separation is going to be severely damaged.

One can but be surprised that seamen of repute should have compromised themselves by backing an indefensible scheme. The explanation emerges from one of the arguments appealed to in the Trinity House-Honourable Company document. 'Historically ships have always sought the shelter of the English coast where their landfalls are prominent, well lit with good navigable water.' Helped by this indication, a careful examination of the charts illustrating the plan reveals an enlargement of the inshore zone on the English side, and detailed recommendations for ships picking up the London pilot at Folkestone. On the other hand, the plan totally ignores the inshore zone on the Continental side to the point of suggesting no usable routes from the Strait of Dover to the Scheldt or Rotterdam.

It may well be, even if the authors themselves are not conscious of the fact, that the plan is nothing but an attempt to re-organize traffic in the Dover Strait in a manner more favourable to English ports. The plan is practically the same as one of the first drafts to be submitted to the Dover Strait working group: two NEMEDRI-type routes, one on the French, the other on the English side of the Strait. Here eight years after its initial rejection, the scheme turns up again to divide the Dover Strait into two streams: one reserved for British traffic, the other for the rest.

The Strait is not big enough for that, a fact which is acknowledged in the United Kingdom as much as elsewhere. It is worth noting that the system actually in operation sprung from an English plan. Its author was the late Captain Lynes who was master of the cross-Channel ferry, *Maid of Orleans*. The plan was presented by the English members of the working group in 1962, adopted by Imco in 1964, and brought into force in 1967. The present system is imperfect, incomplete and incompletely observed but, to improve matters, one should not destroy it but rather seek to improve and complete it, applying, for example, some of the principles proposed in the January number of the *Journal*.² One should also try to improve its observance. It is highly desirable that shipowners and governments should assume the responsibilities in this regard placed on them by the Safety of Life at Sea Conference of 1960. Before improving the system, it must be upheld. Otherwise it will be in danger of losing its efficacy. It is quite clear, in fact, that in 1967, in the first days of traffic separation, masters arrived in the Dover Strait awake to danger because of the situation before routing. Now the danger has lessened, and they have become less aware and the risk of collision again mounts. This situation will not be helped by organizations like Trinity House and the Honourable Company of Master Mariners backing a project which might be held to justify indiscipline.

For seamen devoted to the international interests of navigation and faithful to the letter and spirit of the Collision Regulations, this would be a source of dis-

quiet. To which might be added the lamentable fact that none of the twenty-five collisions which have occurred in the Dover Strait between June 1967 and November 1969 has produced any lessons. Nothing is known about the circumstances, the legal decisions, and the tribunals. The degree to which the attribution of responsibility takes into account the recommendations to follow a particular route is totally ignored. Is it, one might ask, by this silence that ship-owners and insurance interests hope to profit from this water-shed in the history of navigation?

Since 1967 the idea of recommended routes has spread like wildfire. Having been engendered in an atmosphere of almost total indifference, it is now presented as a panacea for the prevention, without effort, of the risk of collision. This phenomenon is not new; it is exactly what happened in the case of radar twenty years ago. No more than radar, should traffic separation be an invitation to rest on the laurels of an ephemeral success. What we know today is simply a rough plan. It has yielded the results that were expected of it as a matter of urgency. But from the very beginning one could foretell difficulties which would arise as a matter of second urgency. At the time, one said let us achieve the essential and bother about the minor difficulties later. Now it is later, and the foretold difficulties have arisen, with others that were not foretold. It is time to stop diversionary activities and to pursue the work undertaken with tenacity and in the spirit in which it was undertaken. This is the only way in which to perfect the plan.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Richey, M. W. (1970). Reversing the Dover Strait routes (Review). *This Journal*, 23, 272.
- ² Oudet, L. (1970). Accident black spots in the Lower North Sea. *This Journal*, 23, 108.

An Examination of some Ship Radars with Automatic Computation

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It is generally accepted nowadays that, to obtain full value for anti-collision purposes from the use of radar by a ship proceeding in poor visibility, it is necessary to plot, or to compute in some other way, the raw data which may be obtained from the radar. It is also usually conceded that, for this to be done effectively in frequented areas, without the aid of mechano/electronic devices, a great deal of time and expertise is demanded from the radar observer and a great deal of responsibility thereby rests upon his shoulders.

To reduce the load of work and the possibility of human error and to give the observer more time to use his intelligence in appraising the situation and keeping it under review, radar engineers are already pressing forward the development of automatic devices which, in one way or another, produce computed information in the form ultimately needed.