

VESSEL TRAFFIC SERVICE PUGET SOUND

By Mark E. Ashley

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I was delighted to have a few members of the Port Townsend Yacht Club visit Vessel Traffic Service (VTS) in early December, and was happy to be given the opportunity to follow up with a few comments to the club in this newsletter.

VESSEL TRAFFIC SERVICE (“SEATTLE TRAFFIC”)

Vessel Traffic Service Puget Sound is a marine traffic service operated by the U.S. Coast Guard at Sector Puget Sound on the waterfront at Pier 36 in Seattle. It has been around since 1972 when it was established under the authority of the Ports and Waterways Safety Act. VTS, also known as "Seattle Traffic," provides navigation assistance to the maritime community similar to the methods used by Air Traffic Controllers, although less directive in nature. Its primary mission is to prevent collisions, groundings and the environmental damage that would result. VTS monitors over 230,000 vessel movements a year in the largest VTS of 12 in the U.S. That equates to 635 per day (75% are ferries).

VTS operates with the following sensors: 12 Radar sites, 13 Automatic Identification System (AIS) sites, 13 Closed Circuit Television Cameras, and a network of 15 VHF-FM communications sites. It uses Channel 14 in Puget Sound south of Bush Point and 05A in the Strait of Juan de Fuca, San Juan Islands and east of Whidbey Island. (Channel 11 is monitored by the Canadian Coast Guard in Haro Strait to the approaches to Vancouver Inner Harbour.)

WHY DO WE HAVE A VTS IN PUGET SOUND?

Multiple User Groups are vying for use of the same water. The main purpose of VTS is to help instill order, predictability, and safety on the water among all those user groups.

When you ask professional mariners what they consider the biggest maritime safety concern on Puget Sound, they won't say foreign vessels, single hull tankers, or poorly trained crews, they will often say individual recreational vessels that don't understand the Navigation Rules.

As an organized group, I know you are part of the solution. You meet regularly, understand the navigation rules, invite speakers to come to your meetings, and want to help spread the word on navigation safety and recreational boating safety in general. So I will focus on what you can do as an organization to help and what you should share with other recreational boaters:

WHAT ALL BOATERS SHOULD KNOW:

- The recreational boater is exempt from participating with VTS, but must comply with the NAVRULS, and any directions which may be provided by VTS.
- Passive listening to the appropriate VTS frequency is highly encouraged (Channels 14 and 05A within the Puget Sound area, channel 11 for Victoria Traffic).
- Calling VTS to obtain navigation safety information, particularly in low visibility is highly encouraged.

- Monitor Channel 13 to hear navigation safety and passing arrangement communications between larger vessels. Channel 13 is a requirement for vessels 20 meters and larger.
- Do not use Channel 16 to hail larger vessels over 20 meters to make passing arrangements. They are not required to listen to Channel 16 in a VTS Area.
- Treat the Traffic Separation Scheme as a highway system like I-5 on the water (two traffic lanes with a median or separation zone between them that divides traffic). Keep the separation zone and TSS buoys on your port side and you should always pass opposing traffic port to port.
- Know the locations of the traffic lanes and avoid them if not using them. Don't impede the safe passing of deep draft vessels following the lanes.
- If it is foggy, do not leave the dock. Don't be the pleasure craft that calls VTS in the traffic lanes off Shilshole marina to ask for navigation assistance in pea soup, and state the only thing they can hear is 5 short blasts very loud and don't know what that means.
- Remember - an "extra-long blast" of a ship's whistle is likely a signal to attract attention.
- Most large commercial ships require 10 or more ship lengths to stop. This equates to 1-2 miles and may take 10 minutes.
- Encourage organized clubs to support making changes to the State of Washington Adventures in Boating course to enhance an understanding of the TSS and Rule 10 which covers the TSS.
- Wear your lifejackets no matter what your age: WA statute says 12 years old and younger on a vessel under 19 feet long. Bodies do not do well when immersed in the cold waters of Puget Sound. You really can't last long without a PFD. One of USCG District Thirteen's primary objectives is reducing Recreational Boating Accidents and Fatalities. CAPT Ferguson, the Coast Guard Sector Commander and Captain of the Port is sick of having to be in someone's living room and telling their next of kin that a family member has died. He has done that 65 times in his career.
- And of course, boat sober.

I encourage you or any yacht club in the Puget Sound area to arrange to visit VTS. Thanks for this opportunity to communicate with you and for your interest in promoting boating safety.

Mark Ashley is a 1978 graduate of the U.S. Coast Guard Academy and a retired Coast Guard Captain. He served aboard six Coast Guard cutters during his career and commanded three including the 110-foot patrol boat CUTTYHUNK, the 378-foot High Endurance cutter MELLON. In August 2007, he assumed his present duties as a civilian employee of the Coast Guard serving as the Director of the Puget Sound Vessel Traffic Service.