

**Thoughts on single handing a small boat in shipping lanes.**  
**By Marty Still**

I love single handing my boat – love it. It's just my boat, the nucleus of the single handers world myself, the sky, the ocean and the wild life. Undescribably fantastic! However, you do have to understand your own situation in relation to the world around you. I am talking more about other shipping.

The rules of navigation state that power must give way to sail. Quite right – technically. But let's get this in perspective. This rule was made back when the steamers came into being. It was a rule made so that the quite maneuverable steam ship would give right of way to the bigger and more ungainly square rigged ship that would take 20 minutes to tack. However, the overriding rule of everything, including when you drive along the road in a car, is that you must avoid a collision at all cost. So does this rule necessarily apply when it comes to a 5 tonne, highly maneuverable yacht and a 60,000 tonne, not very maneuverable, bulk carrier. I don't think so.

I can see both sides of this coin.

1. I was a professional seaman for some years, I have been on the bridge of boats ranging from a 40' pilot boat to a 212,000 tonne crude oil carrier – that was a big ship.
2. I have been sailing since I was a kid and ocean sailing for the past 30 odd years.

I used to own an S&S 34 named "Shanty", now "Ella's Pink Lady", just 33' long and made of fiberglass. I covered over 30,000 miles in that boat, some racing, some coastal cruising and some ocean sailing, many of those miles were covered single handed. Okay, so much for my resume.

When you single hand a boat you must be aware of certain things.

1. You must be able to physically handle the boat and its gear.
2. You need to understand how others see you. (I mean ships).
3. Once you understand #2, you will understand the need to change your sleep patterns.

Okay, let's look onboard the bulk carrier.

Big ship, 700' long, not very maneuverable, doing 18 knots, probably on auto pilot. The mate of the 4 hour watch does keep a look out but he will kick back in his chair and relax a little, why wouldn't he, 4 hours is a long time to be peering intently into the darkness. He is also behind glass which may be salt encrusted further reducing clarity of vision.

Understand this, during daytime, from the bridge of a big ship, there is a very good chance you will be seen, your white sails will stick out like dogs balls against a calm blue sea. Not a bad time to be getting some shut eye.

Okay, let's add some wind.

We now have 30 knots of wind, you have two reefs in the main and a # 4 head sail, your "eyeball" target has been reduced by 60%. Add a load of white breaking seas and the chances of the lookout on a big ship seeing your reefed sails amongst the white caps has been reduced dramatically. In fact, I know I was barely visible to a ship in these conditions when he was just three miles away. (And then only once he knew I was there). If he were not made aware of my presence, he probably wouldn't have seen me at all. It takes just 10 minutes for a ship doing 18 knots to cover three miles.

Okay, let's add some darkness. Calm seas.

You have little or no chance of being seen by eye from a ship at night. You have these puny little 12 volt navigation lights that look nice and bright to you but how do they look to a bulk carrier doing 18 knots. He won't see them until it is too late, if he sees them at all. If you have a good radar reflector he may pick you up but don't bank on it – don't bank on anything. A radar screen can have clutter, especially if there is any heavy rain or squalls around, and the small signal return made by a reflector may well be lost in this clutter. If there is a sea running, the signal may be intermittent and the skipper of the vessel may consider it to be a "spurious echo". Remember also that he is mainly on the lookout for other ships.

Okay, it's still dark but with 30 knots of wind.

Now your chances of being seen are almost zero. Your radar reflector may well be hidden behind waves, and the waves themselves may be causing clutter. With the possibility of rain or spray, your navigation lights are doing little more than keeping you legal while wasting electricity.

Having done some racing, I tend to think about shorter distances in boat lengths.

Yacht.

"Shanty", 33' long, 5 tonne, very maneuverable, it can turn in its own length. If a ship passes by 200 meters away, I don't call that a "close call", I call it 20 boat lengths. When I'm racing we can miss boats by 500mm, (1/20<sup>th</sup> of a boat length) that's getting close.

Ship.

Bulk carrier, 225 meters long, 60,000 tonne, not very maneuverable, takes 2 kilometers to turn around, 200 meters is less than one boat length.

Given these two facts, I would seriously have to ask this question:

If this yacht and this bulk carrier were in open water and the bulk carrier was actually **trying** to run down the 33' yacht, would he be able to do so? I reckon that if the skipper of the yacht is awake and is able to make way, ether by sail or engine, it would be almost impossible for him to do so. The bulky simply cannot maneuver that quickly.

What do I do when single handing.

And this depends on where I am.

1. If I am leaving one coastal port for another and both are ship ports, I would consider the chances of encountering a ship to be quite high. I will snooze during the day – all day – like a cat. Just before dark, I will assess the weather conditions and whether I can reasonably expect an increase or shift in the wind overnight. I may reduce canvas for the night depending on conditions. When darkness falls, I am up and awake. My proposed course will be marked on the chart and any potential dangers along the way will be highlighted. I may read in the cockpit with a small light and check for shipping every 15 minutes or so. In the early hours of the morning, I inevitably get tired, so will set my egg timer alarm to go off at 15 minute intervals. If I see a ship, I will watch it carefully until I can assess its course and approximate speed. I will not stop watching that baby until it is clear of me. If I believe we are on a closing course, I will immediately change my course for evasive action before trying to make radio contact with the vessel. I always carry a hand held VHF especially for this purpose so that I have no need to go below. Radio contact usually works but in the event it doesn't, I hit them with a spot light – that always works. And don't forget the fishing boats, these can be around in great numbers near some coastal locations, they can be maneuvering erratically and at varying speeds. Unless I have actually spoken to a ship or other vessel, I never, ever, assume they have seen me. Never!

2. If I am leaving on an ocean passage between ship ports, where there is a significant chance of meeting a ship on the direct course, I will deliberately steer on a tangent to my course to get well clear of the direct line of the shipping lane for the first sailing day out. This tactic means I cover more miles but it gets me away from shipping that is either leaving or approaching the port I have just left. After this, I head for my destination. The only time I really have to worry about shipping is my first day out and the last day before I get in. I still maintain my sleep in the day and stay awake at night routine.
3. When leaving, approaching or crossing an approach to a busy ship harbour, such as Brisbane, Newcastle, etc, I will stay extra vigilant. In this situation, the ship may be slowed down or even almost stopped pending instructions from the pilot. Depending on how close in you are he may be maneuvering to kill time or to position himself in readiness to pick up a pilot. Close in to a busy ship harbour can be a very dangerous place for a small vessel and you cannot afford to drop your guard.
4. When on the Australian East Coast, you have a great South going current that can assist or hinder you. I did a delivery from Brisbane to Melbourne with a novice family, new to offshore sailing. We went 20 miles offshore to pick up the 2 knot current. When taking watches during the night, I stressed the importance of not looking forward so much as looking back. A 2 knot favourable current is great for a small yacht but is also great for the big ships who will save lots of dollars in fuel by using it.

I note some of the comments placed on the ABC News web site in relation to the collision between Jessica Watson in Ella's Pink Lady and the bulk carrier. Many people were out to lynch the bulky's skipper. Oh this poor little young girl in her fragile little pink fiberglass glass boat against the big steel foreign monster. Get real!

Many of the comments were from professional mariners who know the reality of the situation and they were unanimous that it is difficult or impossible to see a small yacht from the bridge of a big ship. One guy said this: [The onus is on the yacht as a matter of self preservation](#). He's dead right!

Fact is, the way I see it, is that the power gives way to sail so long as common sense prevails over the technicalities of the official safety regulations and rules of the road. One bloke on the ABC web site hit the nail on the head with this comment: [Basically it's like the man who crosses at a pedestrian crossing without looking and gets hit by a car. They may be in the right, but they are still in hospital](#). He's dead right!

Apparently Jessica has said she was down below at the time of the collision, which leads me ask this.

1. What was she doing down below if she knew a ship was close by?
2. Why wasn't she taking early evasive action if she knew a ship was close by?
3. If she didn't know the ship was close by - why not? **She was in a major shipping lane!!!**

After reading this I wonder if any of the lynch mob would still hold the skipper of the bulky responsible. Yes, I know what the rules say but I kind of like staying alive. I will no more cross a major shipping lane without staying awake and on deck, than I would pick a fight with three Hells Angels in the pub - all 70kg of me. I like my life and if Jessica likes hers, keep clear of shipping.

If you take a look at a story I wrote years ago about a single handed trip down the coast, "[Shanty and the Night Wind](#)", in "[Feature Articles](#)", you will see a real life encounter with a ship. It wasn't a problem and I never considered that it would be a problem – but I wasn't going to ignore it - because you just never know. The sailors motto that has been around for ever – "Constant vigilance" – holds fast.

In my opinion, if I have a collision with a large ship, it is, in all likelihood, my fault, and therefore, my conclusion about who was at fault in the collision between Ella's Pink Lady and the Bulky is very clear.

Happy single handed sailing. With your eyes open.