

Stupid Is Bad

Recently there was a collision at sea between a destroyer and a merchant ship in the western Pacific.

When I had the USS Holder (DD-819), we were enroute from Norfolk to Boston in real heavy fog off New York harbor entrance. The Ambrose light ship is a good navigational fix in that area and most ships like to get a “fix” off the light ship.

I was in my sea cabin, just aft of the bridge, and the Officer of the Deck called me to say we had a contact with a “steady bearing and decreasing range”. The contact was about 12 miles off our starboard bow doing 20 knots. Being off the starboard bow made us the “burden” vessel and he was the “privilege” vessel according to the Rules of the Road. So, according to the Rules of the Road, the “privilege” vessel must maintain course and speed; the “burden” vessel must maneuver to avoid the “privilege” vessel. So I decided to come to starboard and pass astern of him.

A few minutes passed and his bearing remained constant and the range was decreasing. That told me that he had changed course to port. I again changed course to starboard. After a few minutes it was determined that the bearing was still constant and the range was down to about 5000 yards and decreasing rapidly. At that point I told the OOD to go to “hard right rudder”, increase the speed to “all ahead flank”, and set new course to 180 degrees. That had us reverse course and get the he—out of his way. After he had passed to the north of us, I reduced speed and returned to our basic course for Boston.

Lessons learned:

- A. He was going too fast in dense fog.
- B. He should not have changed course being the privileged vessel.
- C. And I was not going to play with stupid.