

'Stay the heck out of the way of ships'

By JoAnn W. Goddard – Senior Reporter

Authorities say two sailors were lucky to have escaped serious injury when their rented J/22 sailboat collided with a barge on Rhode Island's Narragansett Bay.

The Aug. 14 incident was one of several collisions this summer between commercial vessels and recreational boats. On Aug. 11 one man was killed, and one was missing and presumed dead after the 52-foot sailboat they were aboard collided with the cargo ship Canada Senator in a narrow channel on the St. Lawrence near Quebec City. The boat sank quickly after the 6 a.m. collision. The Coast Guard rescued two other people, who were clinging to debris from the boat. Authorities says the recent accidents underscore the importance of knowing the rules of the road and remaining vigilant on the waterways, particularly in areas of heavy shipping traffic.

"Be aware of your surroundings" says Mike Scanlon, boating safety program coordinator for Rhode Island's Department of Environmental Management, which investigated the Rhode Island collision.

These types of incidents often involve skippers of recreational boats who aren't paying attention, or who just aren't savvy enough about the limitations of tugs, barges and commercial ships, according to experts.

That appears to be the case in the Rhode Island accident. Scanlon says the two men, both in their 20s, were sailing in the bay near Newport. One of the men was in the water, hanging onto the boat's stern; the other probably was watching his friend and didn't see the barge and towboat, Scanlon says. The captain of the towboat tried to alert the sailors and even slowed his vessel, according to Scanlon. He says the decrease in speed caused the tow cable to slacken and sink into the water, providing space for the sailboat to pass between the barge and tow.

The sailboat's skipper apparently couldn't maneuver between the two, and jumped to safety seconds before the barge hit the sailboat. A crew from Coast Guard Station Castle Hill, on patrol in the bay, rescued the two men and transported them to shore.

Scanlon says he doesn't know how much sailing experience the sailors have. The boat reportedly sustained minor damage.

"We've had a lot of near misses," says Scanlon. Fortunately, he says he hasn't had to deal with any fatalities.

In the fatal accident on the St. Lawrence, authorities believe the man at the helm, a friend of the captain's, either fell asleep or was incapacitated prior to the mishap. Witnesses say the boat was turning in circles.

"We don't know for now," says police spokesman Richard Gagné.

The crew of Canada Senator, which had set out earlier from Montreal and was headed to Italy, attempted to alert the sailboat of the impending collision with warning sounds. The captain and owner of the boat was asleep in the cabin and died when the accident occurred, according to Gagné. The two people rescued were a woman - a friend of the captain - and a crewmember.

Authorities say there were patches of fog that day, but it is unclear how much that contributed to the accident. Canadian officials cleared the ship's captain and crew of any wrongdoing.

"Stay the heck out of the way of ships," says Capt. Bill Brogdon, a Coast Guard veteran and longtime boater who also is a contributing writer for Soundings.

It may seem obvious, but Brogdon says some boaters don't realize how fast ships are traveling and misjudge their ability to safely cross in front of them. "That's not something you want to mess with," he says, adding that it can take a mile and a half for a ship to stop. "A quarter-mile away is too late for [the commercial vessel] to do anything."

Brogdon says visibility is another common problem. "A boat is almost invisible to ships' radar," he says. A ship's crew primarily is on the lookout for other ships. Additionally, the ship's pilot can't see small boats crossing the bow.

Barges, which have minimal lights, can be difficult to see at night, says Brogdon, but tugs or towboats usually are well lit. "If you see a tug or towboat, look for a barge or stay as far away as possible," he says.

Even during the daytime, barges might blend into the surroundings, he says.

Again, a sharp lookout can prevent most accidents.

Overall, authorities say the key to safe boating is being educated.

"Boating is a wonderful recreation, but people have to know what they're doing," says Scanlon, a former Coast Guardsman with nearly 35 years of experience. "Knowing what you're doing makes boating more fun."