

By Wilbur B. Scott

LOST?

Like many of you, I too have been on the waters of the Gulf of Mexico on a nice day with good visibility and still in sight of land with not a care in the world. “Happy as a clam” as the saying goes, just drifting along enjoying some good fishing. Sure I saw that cloud bank way off in the distance but it did not appear to be anything threatening, no lightning or thunder. The clouds were not black or fearsome looking. The weather forecast had not mentioned anything about any approaching thunder storms or even rain for that matter. So my fishing partner and I continue to drift along concentrating on our fishing and the next thing we knew we were in the middle of a very large fogbank! No visibility at all, I mean zero, really socked in **and** with no sight of land. No problem I say to my partner, I **know** the shore is directly behind us. Um, ah, oops, or is it? Darn! Sure wish I had bought that GPS I was looking at the other day! Not to worry though because I have my compass and before you know it we will be back at the dock. Sounds easy enough doesn't it?

Of course you and I know that in reality this not going to be easy at all! Without a GPS system onboard you **DO NOT** know exactly what your position is! Obviously in heavy fog there is no shoreline or channel marker to see. Your fish finder will tell you how deep the water is under your boat, which is obviously very important information to have, but it will not tell you in which direction you are headed. Only your compass can do that. Unfortunately what happens next is all too common. As you continue to follow your compass heading and time wears on without sight of land, many boaters begin to doubt the accuracy of their compass and instead rely on their own instincts, which in many cases are wrong. They are then unpleasantly surprised when they discover they are headed further out to sea! In my opinion the compass, along with the marine radio, nautical charts and a GPS is one of the most important pieces of equipment one can have on their vessel. Obviously radar would be very nice too however few small fishing boats that I am aware of in this area have this pricey piece of equipment installed. If you do not have a compass installed on your boat you really need to go out and purchase one.

I would not advise purchasing the cheapest one either! You can purchase a reliable model for forty to eighty dollars. Perhaps you feel that is too much money to spend

on a compass. Trust me they can sell for much higher prices than that! Anyway, when you find yourself caught in heavy fog or on the water after dark you will be glad that you spent that extra buck or two for a reliable compass!

Now listen up! Even the most expensive compass will do you little good if it is not properly mounted. Try to mount your compass so that the line on the compass, (lubber's line), which indicates the reading, is mounted directly over or as close as possible to the keel or centerline of your vessel. In order to reduce the possibility of compass error, mount the compass as far away from any metal objects and electrical wiring as possible. If you fail to do this your compass will probably need to be readjusted from time to time for variation and deviation, (difference between true north and magnetic north), caused by the metal objects or the electrical wiring.

I mentioned nautical charts earlier as a part of the equipment a boater should have onboard his/her vessel. This is especially true if you are a visitor to our area waters or you are boating in any unfamiliar waters! The nautical chart is the boater's road map and shows the location of major landmarks, aids to navigation, depth of water as well as the composition of the bottom. When you observe an approaching storm, the chart will show you the locations of protective bays. Of course the nautical chart will do you little good if you do not know how to read it! To obtain instruction on how to read nautical charts and to obtain other valuable training and information you need only to check this website for the time, dates and locations of the courses offered or check our area newspapers for periodic announcements. Until next time we at Homosassa Flotilla 15-4 of your U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary wish you a safe and fun filled time on our beautiful area waters!

Scotty

Wilbur B. Scott may be contacted via email at, seacapt34447@yahoo.com.