

TIME AND PLACE

FOR EVERY THING

By Capt. Don Rose

*Although some things are very important and must be done.
There is a right time and place as well as a wrong time and place.*

Choosing the right time sometimes requires a great deal of wisdom and logic, other times it only requires plain common sense.

The British Columbia Tow Boat industry when compared to other industries within the province is a very small work force. Although small, it is vital to the province's economy and the individuals who work within the industry are quite unique if not outright eccentric. It is totally amazing how a group of people can be so much alike in many ways yet so different in numerous other ways. Many of the regular duties are an art form rather than science although there are many that are totally scientific. There are a number of maintenance procedures that require being performed within particular time intervals and are performed within these intervals. However, there are others, although due to be performed, **must wait until the right time and place.**

Tidal currents that flow swiftly through the many narrow passages along the B.C. coast are on occasion a total art form when predicting their velocity. The published tide and current tables are usually considered accurate, because they are the only available yard stick. The tables only calculate the effects of the moon and the sun on the water that is consistent and predictable. Other unpredictable conditions such as wind, rain, river freshet and barometric pressure also have a great effect on the tide and current. Taking into consideration all the fixed and variable conditions is one of the many art forms practised while operating a B.C. Tow Boat. Often one makes a decision based on all the known conditions and relies heavily on their own experience and local knowledge. Surprisingly, the vast majority of times these are the correct decisions. However, there are times when due to unforeseen circumstances these are not and lead to some embarrassing if not emergency situations.

I had recently received my master's certificate and was still sailing as mate on the "MALASPINA STRAITS" waiting for a skippers position. At this stage of one's career the golden rule is do an excellent job, stay in the good books of the master you are sailing with (so he will recommend you) and demonstrate that you have the ability to be a competent tug master. Fortunately the captain I was sailing with was, although a crusty old salt, a good friend who had respect for my abilities and allowed me considerable latitude in decision making.

We were in transit from Crofton to New Westminster, towing a suction dredge and flat deck barge loaded with pipe. I had just come on deck for my 00:00 to 06:00 watch. The captain's instructions were, go via Porlier Pass and if I felt we could buck the ebb current go for it, if not wait till slack water. Before leaving, he reminded me that the flat deck barge had a light load. Should we slow down rapidly there is a possibility the weight of the line will cause it to hit the

dredge. I acknowledged his comments with agreement and assured him that I would carefully check our speed and make my decision on that information. I also assured him that if I decided to wait for slack, I would reduce speed gradually

The rule of thumb for bucking current with a tow is to have at least two knots of water speed greater than the maximum flow of the current. This allows for the speed lost when the tug is rolling and yawing in the eddies and tidal swirls. I checked our speed at several intervals and determined we were averaging 5.2 knots. The current table predicted a maximum ebb flow of 3.1 knots and we would be transiting after the time of maximum flow. There was a southerly wind blowing that would increase the flood current and usually decrease the ebb current. It was October with a usual amount of rain but none of the local rivers were in freshet. Considering these factors I made the decision that we could buck the current, although it would be slow, we would make it.

The engineer was on watch with me and in the wheel house when we entered the pass. The current was running faster than predicted, however, we were continuing to make head way. We were past the point of no return and about to approach the position where the current runs the strongest. The thought went through my mind that should we have any decrease in power we will have a problem. With 300 feet to get into slower water the engine started to slow down. Realizing, that if this continued we would quickly start losing ground, I said to the engineer, "the engine is slowing down." His reply was "I know" and continued to sit on the chair. My next comment was, "I do not want it to slow down, for @#&*%\$ sakes do something to get full power back. After I said that he got the message that if full power was not soon restored we could have an emergency situation. He immediately got up and went to the engine room. However, whatever he did was too little to late. The main engine continued to slow down and stop.

When the engine stopped, alarms came on with bells ringing, whistles blowing and lights flashing. My first concern was that the tow would hit the tug. With the rapid decrease in engine noise and all the bells and whistles sounding, I felt the off watch crew would be well alerted so did not call any of them. The tug stopped making headway, the towline sank and started dragging on the bottom causing the tug to list over from the reaction of the current. I went immediately to the tow winch and released the brake enough to allow the tug to right itself and fortunately the tow missed us. There was quite a bit of action happening with most of it totally out of our control. We were in relatively shallow water with many rock pinnacles, one of which the towline caught. I was able to slip out enough line to allow the tug and tow to drift into slack water. The tug went between the dredge and barge, over top of the wire connecting them. The tug, dredge and barge came to a nice gentle stop along side one another with the tug in the middle. At this point until the current changed direction, the towline would hold us in a relatively safe position. Once the current changed direction would be an entirely different matter.

From the time the engine stopped, until we came to a stop, only took about ten minutes. Fortunately, there had not been any violent movements on the tug. The engineer was in the engine room, I assumed trying to start the main engine. The captain and the rest of the crew came on deck and asked if I knew why the engine had stopped. I told them that I did not know. The captain said the engineer probably forgot to switch fuel tanks and ran it out of fuel. I went to the engine room where the engineer indicated he was OK and would soon have the main engine started. Although the main engine was down, the generator engine was still running, making communication in the engine room difficult. I returned on deck and relayed the engineers comment to the captain. We were stopped up in a safe position just out side the pass but still in the shipping lane. The navigation lights were turned off and the anchor light turned on (*we were technically anchored*). The captain felt the situation was under control so he returned to his cabin as there was nothing that could be done until we had the main engine operational. The remainder of the crew that was off watch also returned to their quarters. Before leaving he said “when the engine is running we will try to untangle our tow line.” This was not going to be too much of a problem if we started before the current changed direction, which was going to be in two and a half hours. At one hour before slack, the current would be slow enough. We planned to winch ourselves back from between the dredge and barge, over the wire connecting them and then over top of where the line was hung up on the bottom. Once in that position we would hopefully be able to free our towline from the bottom. There was an hour and a half window to get operational. Since we were in the middle of the southern entrance or exit (*depending on the direction you are going*) it was necessary that I stand watch in the wheel house. By doing this, I could warn other traffic of our position and situation. Except for making a quick run to the engine room and back to check on the engineers progress, that is where I remained.

The engineer had a very heavy footed walk that I could hear as he clomped around the engine room. On numerous occasions I could hear the air starting motor slowly turn the engine but not enough to start it. Each time I checked on him he indicated that he was OK and would soon have the engine running. He had the valve covers off the engine so I assumed the problem was a little more involved than just running one of the four fuel tanks dry.

An hour and twenty minutes after we had come to a stop, the captain came back on deck and asked if I knew why the engine was not running yet. I told him that the valve covers were off the engine so the problem must have been more serious than simply running one of the fuel tanks dry. He acknowledged what I said, then proceeded to the engine room to find out what the problem was.

Since it was not a very large tug with the wheel house only one deck above the engine room, I could hear the captain and engineer talking. I could not make out what they were saying at first. After a very short time the captain's voice became very clear over the generator noise. He was telling the engineer that it was his stupidity that caused the engine to stop and that even a ***@%\$%&@* idiot** would have more brains than to do what he was doing now. He was ordered to have the engine running in ten minutes or he would wish he had not been born.

The captain returned to the wheel house and since we were good friends with much mutual respect for each other, I knew I could ask him what had upset him. His reply was that the reason the engine had stopped was because the engineer had let a fuel tank run dry. Because it was time to do a hot set on the valves and since the engine was stopped any way, he figured he may as well do that to.

Porlier Pass with two vessels in tow and your towline hung up on bottom was definitely not the **TIME OR PLACE TO DO THAT.**

A very short time after the captain came out of the engine room, the main engine started. The current was now slowing down so we did what we planned to do and fortunately it worked. Amazingly the towline was not damaged and we were able to continue to destination.

For the next few days the engineer did his best to not have any close contact with the captain. It would be nice to say that he never let the engine run out of fuel again. Unfortunately, this was not his first or last time, but those are other stories.