

Ship Report Transcript
Wednesday, May 8, 2024

By Joanne Rideout

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It's time for the Ship Report the show about all things maritime. I'm Joanne Rideout. It's Wednesday, May 8th, 2024.

Today, I thought I'd pull something from the Ship Report archives for the show. Part of an interview I did some years ago with the now retired Columbia River Bar pilot named Captain Robert Johnson. We did many interviews over the years about all sorts of maritime topics. This one is about a subject we haven't talked about in a while here on the show: the lights you see on ships at night.

This is a real insider's look from a maritime professional's point of view. A quite detailed look at something we folks on land don't think about much, and that's the lights that are on ships at night. These lights are designed with serious purpose to enable other vessels to see the ship and know where it is heading in relation to them, and also to allow people to work at night on those vessels. Here's Captain Johnson.

“The ships that you see going by in the middle of the night, you're seeing running lights, which for a ship that consist of a masthead light, which is a white light that shows 225 degrees, a four mast light, the one that's up on the folks all the same, white light, 225 degrees and a green light on the starboard side and a red light on the port side, which shows half of that. So 125 degrees and a white light on the stern that completes that arc.

So as you see an approaching vessel, you can tell by the aspect of those lights and which lights you can see what the aspect of the ship is, the same as you could see it in the day. So that's the whole purpose of those running lights. The two white lights, the mast headlight and the foremost light are very important. When they're in a line, the ship is coming directly at you as that those lights open. That tells you the relative angle, either going to port or going to starboard. And then the side light tells you which side you're seeing. So those are the lights that you see go by at night all the time.

Most ships turn your running lights on when you leave port. Turn them off when you arrive in ports. They're on in the daytime.

In times gone past, they were turned off in the daytime and turned back on at night. I don't think many people do that anymore. It's safer just to have more and then you don't forget to turn them on.

I had a situation in the Straits of Malacca where a very large tanker was going between me and another ship, and we were a mile apart. He was going between us with no lights on and a I saw him on the radar after when it was too late to do anything but just hold your breath and let him go by.

But so for that reason, normally the lights are just left on day and night when you're at sea. But in addition to those lights, for a ship going by, a story I hear very often, you're going to see a light out on the wing of the bridge and there's a light that normally comes on fairly quickly. Some of those mercury light lights take two or 3 minutes to warm up enough to come on.

But there's a light that comes on that shines down on the deck. And there's one on the port wing of the bridge and one on the starboard. And that's specifically for lighting up the deck for pilot operations. So when I get up on the deck of the ship, there's some light there. A little guy with his penlight flashlight doesn't do much good on a deck that's cluttered with paddies and this, that and the other thing. So that light is normally turned on. You also very often see a light that's just a cargo light that's been hung over the side at the pilot ladder and that's shining down the side of the ship on the pilot ladder. And that's just to light up the ladder.

In addition, the pilot boats all have lights so that even if the ship isn't properly lit up, we can see a especially our pilot boats outside have many very bright lights, so it's as bright as day and the whole side of the ship is lit up and it's enough that you even can see up on deck quite a bit.

The typical ship coming or going at night, you'll see the running lights, the white lights and the side light. You'll see a stern light after it turns and you're just seeing the stern of the ship. You'll see the light on the wing of the bridge shining down and you'll see a light over the side on the pilot ladder. There are other lights with other uses of the lights that we see on the ships that are out at anchor. Those are your normal in port lights and ships are well lit because there's people out working day and night. So when you're alongside the dock doing cargo at night, you want very good lighting so that people can see and nobody gets hurt. And those are the same lights that the ship turns on when they're out there in the anchorage. So the lights that you see at the anchorage or what I call the import lights, which are really designed for doing cargo work and lighting up the whole main deck of the ship.

There are other signal lights on the ship that we don't normally see. However, once in a while somebody turns them on and the mast that's above the bridge, the radar mast, it's the one that the radars are on. It's also the one usually that the mast headlight is on has what's called the Christmas tree. And there's arms that come out from that usually a three or four on either side. And at the end of each of those arms, which they're maybe three or four feet out, there's a light on the top and a light on the bottom. And those some of them are colored, some of them are white. There's red, green and white, are the colors on those. You can turn them on from inside the bridge.

And those are used in many ports to signal either the type of ship that it is or what berth it's going to, especially in Japan. We normally the pilot would write down what lights he wanted. So I want a a red, red, green. And that signaled that we were going to a particular berth and you'd go in and turn those lights on. We don't use lights that way here. However, I have seen many ships turn on either a red light indicating it's a tanker and we have dangerous cargo on board. Another one that every so often I walk out and see they've turned on red over white, which is the signal for a pilot. And as I say, we don't use those. If I see them, I tell them to turn them off. But once in a while they get turned on.

And that was an excerpt from an interview I did sometime in the early 2000s with Captain Robert Johnson, who was, at the time an active duty Columbia River Bar pilot. And he's talking about the lights that are used on board ship at night.

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