

APPENDIX II

NAVAL TERMS AND CUSTOMS

Persons entering a new profession must learn the vocabulary peculiar to that profession to understand and make themselves understood by their associates. The Navy, too, has its own vocabulary, containing unique expressions for many commonplace terms. You will soon realize that the language of the sea has a great deal of merit. You will come to understand that, under certain circumstances, a word or a few words have a precise meaning or require a certain sequence of actions. You will notice that the use of such words will eliminate the need to accompany an order with extended explanatory details. When the proper order is given, the desired response is obtained.

You will notice, too, that when a chance for confusion exists, a strange, new term may be substituted for an old, familiar one. For example, the word *stop* may be used in orders for the ship's engines but never for the anchor windlass or for the helm. An officer conning a ship issues many different orders when a ship is getting under way, mooring, or anchoring. Yet, when couched in proper, seaman-like language, the orders are understood and are carried out by the proper individual or group. To stop all the engines, to stop the swing of the ship, or to stop the anchor windlass, the conning officer gives the order "All engines stop," "Meet her," or "Avast heaving." These terms leave no chance for confusion. The person on the engine-order telegraph rings up stop, the steersman puts the rudder over, or the proper talker relays the order, "Avast heaving," to the anchor detail on the forecastle.

An order or a term may have its origin in antiquity, or it may have been recently coined; but that is not important. What is important is that the expression conveys, in as few words as possible, an exact meaning with little or no chance for confusion. Those that fit this requirement live on as long as there is need for them; those that do not are soon replaced.

It behooves you to learn and use this language because it is a necessary tool of your trade.

This appendix describes many of the customs, terms, or expressions that form our nautical language.

ANCHOR WATCH

Years ago ships were equipped with anchor cables of hempen rope and oil-burning riding lights. While the ship was riding at anchor, special care was taken to see that these lamps were not extinguished, that the cables did not part, and that the ship did not drag its anchor. The watch responsible for this particular duty was designated the *anchor watch*. The anchor watch, as a sea term, is still retained although the duties of the watch have changed considerably since the old days. Today, the anchor watch is a detail of personnel on deck at night safeguarding the vessel when at anchor.

BELLS

Certain words and expressions preserve for us old customs, as in the instance of *bells* struck aboard ship. They are not primarily intended to replace clocks for telling time. But they do tell clock time by measuring the periods when certain members of the crew are standing watch.

This custom started with the hourglass—which really wasn't an hourglass but a half-hour glass. The quartermaster on watch turned the glass at the end of his first half-hour and struck the bell one time. He then struck the bell an additional stroke at the end of each half-hour after that. At the end of 4 hours, he would strike the bell eight times, signaling the completion of his watch and the beginning of the next 4-hour watch. So it went during the six watches of the 24 hours, ending at midnight. While the hourglass has long been out of date, the bells are still used aboard ship.

BILGE

Bilge usually refers to the bottom of the ship or, more correctly, to the curved part of the ship's hull. It also has another connotation. Midshipmen who are dropped from school for academic reasons are said to be "bilged." Thus, when used as a verb, the term means to be dropped out of the bottom—in this case the bottom of the class.

BINNACLE LIST

The *binnacle list* gets its name from the old nautical practice of placing the sick list on the binnacle (stand containing ship's compass). It was placed there each morning so that it would be readily available for the captain. The modern binnacle list contains the names of personnel suffering minor complaints that preclude their employment on strenuous duty. Today the sick list contains the names of personnel who are hospitalized.

BITTER END

Bitter end was originally the turn of a cable's end around the bits. It now refers to the end of the chain cable secured in the chain locker or the loose end of a line. In all cases the inboard end is referred to as the bitter end.

BLUEJACKET

Uniforms first adopted for the Royal Navy included a short, blue jacket. No universal uniform was prescribed for U.S. Navy enlisted personnel until the 1850s. Therefore, in the early days of that century, many men unofficially wore the blue jacket of the Royal Navy. Enlisted personnel are sometimes referred to as *blue-jackets*. The term *white hat* is used to refer to Navy enlisted personnel below the rate of chief petty officer.

BOATSWAIN

Boatswain is pronounced bo'-sun. *Swain* or *swein* is the Saxon word for servant or boy. In our Navy, boatswain refers to a warrant or petty officer in charge of the deck crew. It also refers to those responsible for the maintenance of the ship's hull and external equipment.

BOATSWAIN'S PIPE

The *boatswain's pipe* is an article of great antiquity. Originally employed to "call the stroke" in ancient row galleys, it became, in the early English Navy, a badge of office and of honor. Later the pipe became the distinctive emblem of the boatswain and his mates. Today boatswain's mates use the pipe when the "word is passed," when officers are piped over the side, and so forth.

BRIG

Lord Nelson used a brig (a type of sailing ship) in battle for removing prisoners from his ships; hence, prisons at sea came to be known as *brigs*.

BUMBOAT

The *bumboat* is a boat employed by civilians to carry salable provisions, vegetables, and small merchandise to ships. The term may have been derived from "boom-boat," indicating boats permitted to lie at the ships' booms.

CARRY ON

In the days of sail, the officer of the deck constantly kept a weather eye on the slightest change in wind so that sail could be reefed or added as necessary to ensure the fastest headway. Whenever a good breeze came along, the order to "carry on" would be given. It meant to hoist every bit of canvas the yards could carry. Pity the poor sailor whose weather eye failed him and allowed the ship to be caught partially reefed when a good breeze arrived.

Through the centuries the term's connotation has changed somewhat. Today, the Bluejackets Manual defines *carry on* as an order to resume work; work not so grueling as two centuries ago.

CAULK

Caulk, commonly mispronounced "cork," means to pack a seam in the planking of a ship. When caulking wooden ships in dry dock, workmen usually had to lie on their backs underneath the hull. In this position it was not difficult to fall asleep. Hence, to "take a caulk" or to "caulk off" is the sailors' expression for sleeping or taking a nap.

CHAINS

On many sailing ships, shrouds supporting the masts were secured to links of chain attached to the ships' sides. To get a better lead for the shrouds and to keep them from bearing on the bulwarks, a ship's leadsman led the chains up around thick planks jutting from the ship's sides. These planks made convenient platforms from which the leadsman could heave the lead, and the leadsman was "in the chains." Later, as now, shrouds were secured on deck inboard of bulwarks or lifelines. Special platforms were built for the leadsman, but the term *chains* was retained.

CHARLIE NOBLE

The term *Charlie Noble* refers to the galley smoke pipe. While its origin is obscure, it is generally believed to have been derived from the British merchant skipper, Charlie Noble, who demanded a high polish on the galley funnel. His bright copper galley funnel became well known in the ports he visited.

CHEWING THE FAT

"God made the vittles, but the devil made the cook," was a popular saying used by seafaring men in the last century when salted beef was staple diet aboard ship.

This tough, cured beef, suitable only for long voyages when nothing else was as cheap or would keep as well, required prolonged chewing to make it edible. Since men often chewed one chunk for hours, just as if it were chewing gum, they referred to this practice as *chewing the fat*. Today this term is used to describe a conversation.

CHIT

This term refers to almost any sort of paper used in everyday business transactions. Derived from the old East India Company and the hindu word *chitti*.

CHRISTENING A SHIP

Launching ceremonies have had a religious significance from the earliest days. The christening ceremony originated as an appeasement to the gods of the elements. In some countries as recently as a hundred years ago, a launching frequently resembled a baptismal ceremony and was performed by priests.

Early in the 19th century, women and those other than the clergy and high officials began to take part in the ceremony of launching ships.

Today the ceremony usually consists in the naming of the vessel by a sponsor and the breaking of a bottle of wine against the ship's bow as it slides into the water. People have been known to miss the ship entirely; so today the bottle is secured by a lanyard to the bow of the ship—as a safety measure for spectators.

COMMISSION PENNANT

The origin of the commission pennant is said to date back to the 17th century. When the Dutch were fighting the English, Admiral Tromp hoisted a broom at his ship's masthead to indicate his intention to sweep the English from the sea. The gesture was soon answered by the English admiral who hoisted a horsewhip to indicate his intention to chastise the Dutch. The British carried out the admiral's boast. Ever since, a narrow pennant has symbolized the original horsewhip as the distinctive mark of a vessel of war.

The *commission pennant*, as it is called today, is blue at the hoist, with a union of seven white stars; it is red and white at the fly, in two horizontal stripes. The number of stars has no special significance but was arbitrarily selected as providing the most suitable display. The pennant is flown at the main by vessels not carrying flag officers. A vessel carrying an admiral, a squadron commander, a group commander, or a high-ranking civil official flies that person's personal flag or command pennant in lieu of the commission pennant.

CONN

To *conn* means to control, or direct by rudder and engine order telegraph, the movements of a ship. When someone has the conn, it indicates that person is the one and only person who can give orders to the wheel and engine order telegraph at any one time. The exact derivation of the word conn is not known.

COXSWAIN (COCKSWAIN)

This term is derived from "cock," a small boat, and "swain," a servant. It signifies an enlisted person in charge of a boat in the absence of a line officer. Pronounced cox'-un.

CROSSING THE LINE

The boisterous ceremonies of *crossing the line* (equator) are so ancient that their derivation has been lost. It is said that this custom had its origin in offerings to pacify the deities of the sea by mariners who thought that gods and goddesses controlled the elements.

Today when naval ships cross the equator, those members of the crew (called “polliwogs”) who have never before crossed the line are initiated by the more experienced members of the crew (called “shellbacks”). The usual formula is for the shellbacks to attire themselves in strange costumes representing Neptune, Amphitrite, and other mythological gods and goddesses of the sea. A court is held among Neptune’s subjects, and the novices are summoned to trial. The fate administered to each is in the nature of ridicule, such as a parade of the person’s particular idiosyncrasies and a caricature of the person’s foibles. The victim is usually lathered with some frightful concoction, shaved with a wooden razor, and ducked backward into a tank of water. The victim is then issued a certificate, signed by Neptunus Rex, documenting the fact that the person has crossed the line and is now a full-fledged “shellback.”

CUT OF HIS JIB

The nationality of the early sailing ships was frequently determined by the shape or cut of their jib sails. Use of the phrase as applied to man originally referred to his nose—which, like the jib, is the first feature of its wearer to come into view. Ultimately it was extended to describe a man’s general appearance.

DIPPING THE ENSIGN

Dipping the flag in salute is a relic of an old-time custom of merchant vessels. These vessels were required not only to heave to when approaching a warship on the high seas, but also to clew up all their canvas to indicate the ship’s honesty and willingness to be searched. Since delays resulted, the rule of dipping the flag was authorized in later years as a timesaving substitute. Ships of the U.S. Navy return such salutes dip for dip, except for dips rendered by ships under the flag of nations not formally recognized by the United States. No ship of our Navy initiates a dip.

DITTY BAGS

A *ditty bag* (or box) was originally called a “ditto bag” because it contained at least two of everything: two needles, two spools of thread, two buttons, and so forth. With the passing of years, the “ditto” was dropped in favor of “ditty” and remains so today.

Before World War I, the Navy issued ditty boxes made of wood and styled after foot lockers. These boxes carried the personal gear and some clothes of the sailor.

Today the ditty bag is still issued to recruits. It contains a sewing kit, toiletry articles, and personal items such as writing paper and pens.

DUNGAREES

In the past *dungaree* referred to a coarse kind of fabric worn by the poorer class of people and also used for tents and sail. We find it hard to picture our favorite pair of dungarees flying from the mast of a sailing ship. However, in the early days of sailing ships, sailors often made both their working clothes and hammock out of discarded sail cloth.

The cloth used then wasn’t as well woven as that of today, nor was it dyed blue; but it served the purpose. Dungarees worn by sailors of the Continental navy were cut directly from old sails. The dungarees remained tan in color, just as they had been when filled with wind.

After battles, the captains of both the American and British navies reported more sail lost in battle than actually was the case. This practice provided the crew with cloth to mend their hammocks and make new clothes. Since the cloth was called dungaree, clothes made from the fabric were called by the same name.

EYES OF THE SHIP

In the early days the bows of ships usually were carved to resemble heads of mythological monsters or patrons. The fore part of the ship was called the “head.” The term *eyes of the ship* was derived from the eyes of the figures carved on the bow.

FLAG AT HALF-MAST

During times of mourning in old sailing days, ships displayed loose, suspended yards and slack rigging. The ships purposely exhibited this lax appearance to show that grief was so great that

keeping things shipshape was impossible. Today the half-roasting of the colors is a survival of the days when a slovenly appearance characterized mourning on shipboard.

FORECASTLE

Forecastle is pronounced “focsul.” In the days of Columbus, ships were fitted with castle-like eminences fore and aft. While both structures have disappeared, the term *forecastle*, referring to the same general part of the ship as the original “forward castle,” still remains.

GANGWAY

The word gangway is taken from the anglo-saxon word gang, meaning to go, make a passage in, or cut out (or cut through). It is commonly used as an order to sailors to stand aside or to stand clear.

GEEDUNK

To most sailors the word *geedunk* means ice cream, candy, potato chips, and other assorted snacks or even the place where they can be purchased. No one, however, knows for certain where the term originated; there are several plausible theories:

- In the 1920s a comic strip character named Harold Term and his friends spent a great amount of time at Pop’s candy store. The store’s name was the Sugar Bowl, but Harold and company always called it the geedunk for reasons never explained.
- The Chinese word meaning a place of idleness sounds something like “gee dung.”
- “Geedunk” is the sound made by a vending machine when it dispenses a soft drink in a cup.
- It maybe derived from the German word *tunk* meaning to dip or sop either in gravy or coffee. Dunking was a common practice in days when bread, not always obtained fresh, needed a bit of “tunking” to soften it. The “ge” is a German unaccented prefix denoting repetition. In time it may have changed from getunk to geedunk.

Whatever theory we use to explain the origin of geedunk, it doesn’t alter the fact that Navy people enjoy the treats associated with this term.

GROG

Admiral Edward Vernon of the Royal Navy is responsible for the term *grog*. He was in the habit of walking the deck of his flagship in a boatcloak of grogram cloth. That habit suggested a nickname for the popular flag officer, and Admiral Vernon came to be known affectionately as “Old Grog.” In 1740 he introduced West Indian rum aboard ship by having a mixture of rum and water served as a ration to the crew. It was intended as a preventive against fevers, which so often decimated expeditions to the West Indies. This innovation was received with enthusiasm by the men on the flagship *Burford*, who promptly named the beverage after their illustrious leader.

Forty years later verses were composed on the cruiser *Berwick* that bespeak the popularity of the officer and the drink; the last two stanzas are as follows:

A mighty bowl on deck he drew,
And filled it to the brink;
Such drank the *Burford’s* gallant crew,
And such the gods shall drink.
The sacred robe which Vernon wore
Was drenched within the same;
And hence his virtues guard our shore,
And grog derives its name.

GUNDECKING

In the modern Navy, falsifying reports, records, and the like is often referred to as *gundecking*. The origin of the term is somewhat obscure, but at the risk of gundecking, here are two plausible explanations for its modern usage.

The deck below the upper deck on British sailing ships-of-war was called the gun deck, although it carried no guns. This false deck may have been constructed to deceive enemies as to the amount of armament carried; thus, the gun deck was a falsification.

A more plausible explanation may stem from shortcuts taken by early midshipmen when doing their navigation lessons. Each midshipman was supposed to take sun lines at noon and star sights at night and then go below to the gun deck, work out their calculations, and show them to the navigator.

Certain of these young men, however, had a special formula for getting the correct answers. They would note the noon or last position on the quarterdeck traverse aboard and determine the approximate current position by dead reckoning plotting. Armed with this information, they proceeded to the gun deck to “gundeck” their navigation homework by simply working backwards from the dead reckoning position.

HAWSER

Hawser is a heavy line of hemp, used for mooring and towing. It was formerly used as anchor cable (before chains). It is derived from the French *hausser*, meaning “to haul.”

HEAD

The ship’s lavatory is called the *head* because these facilities in the old days were located in the forward part of the ship.

LASHING BROOM TO MASTHEAD

A popular custom in the U.S. Navy is that of lashing a broom to the masthead of a ship when it has participated in a complete victory over an enemy force. The broom signifies the ship’s ability to sweep the seas. (A ship making the highest gunnery or engineering record in the fleet also displays a broom.) As noted earlier for his unusual display of victory, Admiral Tromp originated this custom (see Commission Pennant).

LUCKY BAG

Formerly, a *lucky bag* was a bag in which personal possessions that had been left adrift were stored. Today, the term refers to any storage area for loose gear picked up by the master-at-arms force.

MAST

The term *captain’s mast*, or merely *mast*, derives from early sailing days when naval justice proceedings were held on the weather deck near the ship’s mainmast.

MIDSHIPMEN

In early days the crew was quartered in the forecabin, while officers lived in the aftercabin. The title “midshipmen” was originally given to

youngsters of the British Navy who acted as messengers, carrying orders from officers aft to the men forward. These lads, who continuously passed back and forth amidships, were regarded as apprentice officers. The ancient term has survived, and today officer candidates at Annapolis (and other midshipmen’s schools) are called *midshipmen*.

PIPING THE SIDE

To the new officer the custom of *piping the side*, a heritage from the British Navy, seems one of the strangest of all naval customs. It originated in the days of sail when captains visiting one another at sea were hoisted on board in a net or basket if rough weather prevented the use of ladders. Piping was necessary in setting taut and hoisting away the cargo net or basket containing the boarding officer. Thus, we acquired the custom of piping the officer alongside and over the gangway.

The officer of the deck ordinarily summoned from the crew several hands to assist the visitor in making the landing on deck. If he were young, a lieutenant perhaps, two men were required to help him; if older, a commander perchance, having increased his girth as well as his grade through the years, he might require four. If, however, he happened to be a captain or an admiral, he may have required six or eight to enable him to secure a stable footing. Thus, there came about the custom of having “side boys” to meet officers. When the custom became a regulation courtesy, the side was similarly attended upon their departure.

QUARTERDECK

There is evidence that the marked respect paid the *quarterdeck* aboard ship today had its origin many hundreds of years ago. In the days of Greek and Roman sea power, obeisances were made to the pagan altar, which was placed aft. Later the same respect was paid the shrines of the Virgin similarly located. Still later the “King’s colors,” which were a symbol of church and state combined, became the object of respect. One is impressed with the thought that the quarterdeck has always been the honored part of the ship. It retains its “sanctity” today. (The name *poop deck* derives from the Latin word *puppis*, a name given the sacred deck where the pupi or doll images of the deities were placed.)

ROPE YARN SUNDAY

On the day the tailor boarded a sailing ship in port, the crew knocked off early, broke out rope yarn, and mended clothes and hammocks. One afternoon per week at sea, usually a Wednesday, was reserved for mending. Since it was an afternoon for rest from the usual chores, much like Sunday, it was dubbed *rope yarn Sunday*.

The Navy adhered to the custom up to the years immediately after World War II; men used Wednesday afternoon for personal errands like picking up their laundry and getting haircuts. They paid back the time by working half a day on Saturdays.

Today, uniforms require less attention, so rope yarn Sunday has been turned to other purposes—mainly early liberty or a time for catching up on sleep. Some, however, still adhere to tradition by breaking out the ditty bag for an afternoon of uniform PMS.

SALLY SHIP

Sally ship was not a ship but a method of loosing a vessel run aground from the mud holding it fast. In the days before sophisticated navigation equipment, ships ran aground much more often than today. A grounded ship could be freed with little or no hull damage if it could be rocked out of its muddy predicament.

To free the ship, the order was given to “sally ship.” The crew gathered in a line along one side and then ran back and forth athwartships from port to starboard until the vessel began to roll. Often the rolling broke the suction of the mud so that the ship could be pulled free and gotten under way.

SHIP'S HUSBAND

Sometimes when a ship is heading for the yards, an old salt says that she is going to her husband now, which causes novices to wonder what he's talking about. A *ship's husband* was once a widely used term describing the man in charge of the shipyard responsible for the repair of a particular ship. It was not uncommon to hear the sailors of creaking ships lament, “Ah, she's been a good ship, lads, but she's needing her husband now.”

In the course of a ship's life, she may have had more than one husband; but this had little bearing upon her true affections. Tradition has it, her love was saved solely for her sailors.

SICK BAY

Admiral Horatio Nelson, who was responsible for many British naval customs, forerunners of our own, originated the term *sick berth* in his order to the Mediterranean fleet in 1798. In a line-of-battle ship, the sick berth was placed in the bow. When round bows were introduced in 1811, the sick berth, keeping its same position, found itself in a bay (semicircular indentation). Thus, in 1813 the British began the use of the term *sick bay*. It is customary today for officers to remove their caps when entering sick bay. It maybe that this custom stems from the early sailing days when men were not admitted to sick bay until they were about ready for “slipping the cable” (dying).

SKYLARK

To *skylark* is to be inattentive or engage in horseplay, usually when one is supposed to be working. The term came about when young sailors would climb to the skysail yardarms and slide down the stays.

STARBOARD AND PORT

In the old Viking ships, ships were steered by means of a heavy board secured to the right side of the ship. Therefore, the right side of the vessel (looking forward) was called the “steerboard” side. Loading was avoided from that side because of the possibility of damaging the steering gear. Gradually the term *steerboard* was corrupted to *starboard*.

The left side of these old ships (the place of loading) was called the “load board” side. This finally became “larboard.” Because “starboard” and “larboard” sounded so much alike, the term *port* was substituted in the United States Navy for *larboard*. A General Order (18 February 1846) reads: “It having been repeatedly represented to the Department that confusion arises from the use of the words ‘Larboard’ and ‘Starboard’ in consequence of their similarity of sound, the word ‘Port’ is hereafter to be substituted for Larboard.” (Perhaps the term *port* was used because, as ships became larger and rose higher in the water, loading took place through openings in the sides called “ports.”)

SUNDOWNER

A *sundowner* is a harsh disciplinarian. The term is derived from the practice of strict captains

in the early days who ordered all hands to be aboard by sunset.

TAR

Sailors once covered their clothes with *tar* or oil to make them waterproof; hence, the nickname often applied to mariners.

TATTOO

Tattoo is derived from the old Dutch term *taptoe*, meaning the time to close the taps or taverns. At the appointed hours, drummers marched from post to post in the town, beating their drums. "First post" was the signal given when they had taken their place and were ready

to commence their rounds (this signal survives in the Navy as "first call"), while "last post" was sounded when they had reached the end of their rounds (this signal survives as our present "tattoo"). The "first call" is sounded 10 minutes before "taps"; "tattoo," 5 minutes before "taps." "Taps" is the signal for lights out.

TONNAGE

Today *tonnage* refers to a ship's displacement in the water or the gross pounds of cargo it is capable of carrying. In the days of sail, tonnage was spelled "tunnage" and referred to the number of "tuns" a ship could carry. A "tun" was a barrel normally used for transporting wine, and tunnage specified the number of barrels that would fit into the ship's hold.