

Nautical

Nautical Origins

- contributed by Capt S.R.Vijayraghavan

As the Crow Flies -

When lost or unsure of their position in coastal waters, ships would release a caged crow. The crow would fly straight towards the nearest land thus giving the vessel some sort of a navigational fix. The tallest lookout platform on a ship came to be known as the crow's nest.



Dressing Down -

Thin and worn sails were often treated with oil or wax to renew their effectiveness. This was called "dressing down". An officer or sailor who was reprimanded or scolded received a dressing down.

Footloose -



The bottom portion of a sail is called the foot. If it is not secured, it is footloose and it dances randomly in the wind.

Groggy -



In 1740, British Admiral Vernon (whose nickname was "Old Grogam" for the cloak of grogram which he wore) ordered that the sailors' daily ration of rum be diluted with water. The men called the mixture "grog". A sailor who drank too much grog was "groggy".

The Bitter End -



The end of an anchor cable is fastened to the bits at the ship's bow. If all of the anchor cable has been payed out you have come to the bitter end.

Windfall -

A sudden unexpected rush of wind from a mountainous shore which allowed a ship more leeway

To Know the Ropes -



There was miles and miles of cordage in the rigging of a square rigged ship. The only way of keeping track of and knowing the function of all of these lines was to know where they were located. It took an experienced seaman to know the ropes.

Chock-a-Block -

Meaning something is filled to capacity or over loaded. If two blocks of rigging tackle were so hard together they couldn't be tightened further, it was said they were "Chock-a-Block".

Buoyed Up -

Using a buoy to raise the bight of an anchor cable to prevent it from chafing on a rough bottom.

By and Large -

Currently means in all cases or in any case. From the nautical: by meaning into the wind and large meaning with the wind: as in, "By and Large the ship handled very well."

Overhaul -

To prevent the buntline ropes from chaffing the sails, crew were sent aloft to haul them over the sails. This was called overhauling.

Taking the wind out of his sails -

Sailing in a manner so as to steal or divert wind from another ship's sails.

Cut and Run -

If a captain of a smaller ship encountered a larger enemy vessel, he might decide that discretion is the better part of valor, and so he would order the crew to cut the lashings on all the sails and run away before the wind. Other sources indicate "Cut and Run" meant to cut the anchor cable and sail off in a hurry.



Above Board -

Anything on or above the open deck. If something is open and in plain view, it is above board.

Overwhelm -

Old English for capsize or founder.

The Devil to Pay -

To pay the deck seams meant to seal them with tar. The devil seam was the most difficult to pay because it was curved and intersected with the straight deck planking. Paying the Devil was considered to be a most difficult and unpleasant task.

A Square Meal -

In good weather, crews' mess was a warm meal served on square wooden platters.

Overbearing -

To sail downwind directly at another ship thus "stealing" or diverting the wind from his sails.

Son of a Gun -



When in port, and with the crew restricted to the ship for any extended period of time, wives and ladies of easy virtue often were allowed to live aboard along with the crew. Infrequently, but not uncommonly, children were born aboard, and a convenient place for this was between guns on the gun deck. If the child's father was unknown, they were entered in the ship's log as "son of a gun".

At Loggerheads -

An iron ball attached to a long handle was a loggerhead. When heated it was used to seal the pitch in deck seams. It was sometimes a handy weapon for quarrelling crewmen.



In the Offing -

Currently means something is about to happen, as in - "There is a reorganization in the offing." From the 16th century usage meaning a good distance from shore, barely visible from land, as in - "We sighted a ship in the offing."

Skyscraper -

A small triangular sail set above the skysail in order to maximize effect in a light wind.

Toe the Line -



When called to line up at attention, the ship's crew would form up with their toes touching a seam in the deck planking.

Slush Fund -



A slushy slurry of fat was obtained by boiling or scraping the empty salted meat storage barrels. This stuff called "slush" was often sold ashore by the ship's cook for the benefit of himself or the crew. The money so derived became known as a slush fund.

Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea -

The devil seam was the curved seam in the deck planking closest to the side of the ship and next to the scupper gutters. If a sailor slipped on the deck, he could find himself between the devil and the deep blue sea.

Start Over with a Clean Slate -



A slate tablet was kept near the helm on which the watch keeper would record the speeds, distances, headings and tacks during the watch. If there were no problems during the watch, the slate would be wiped clean so that the new watch could start over with a clean slate.

Taken Aback -

A dangerous situation where the wind is on the wrong side of the sails pressing them back against the mast and forcing the ship astern. Most often this was caused by an inattentive helmsman who had allowed the ship to head up into the wind.

Fly-by-Night

A large sail used only for sailing downwind and requiring rather little attention.

No Great Shakes -

When casks became empty they were "shaken" (taken apart) so the pieces, called shakes, could be stored in a small space. Shakes had very little value

Garbled -

Garbling was the prohibited practice of mixing rubbish with the cargo. A distorted, mixed up message was said to be garbled.