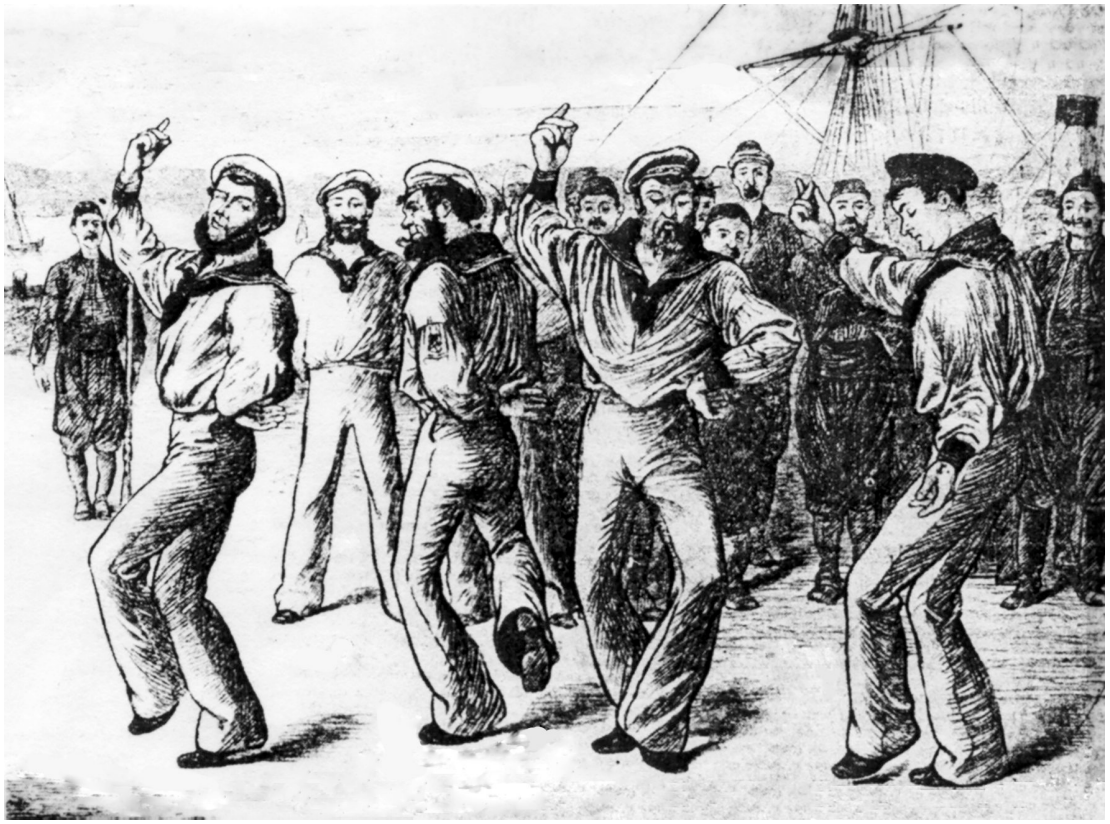
The Naval Historical Society of Australia Inc.

Clichés and Expressions

a Sailor's Contribution



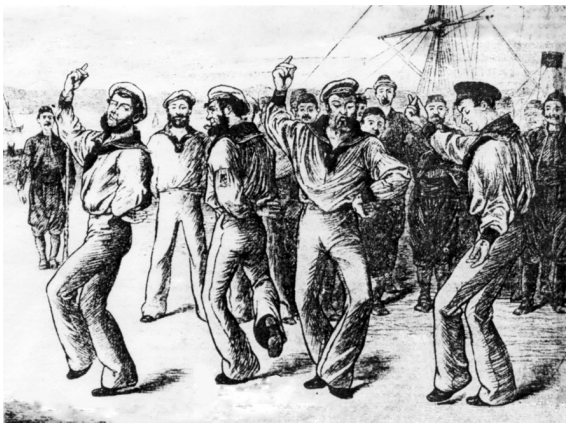
John Betty

MONOGRAPH 166

Clichés and Expressions - A Sailor's Contribution
John Betty
Monograph No. 166

CLICHÉS AND EXPRESSIONS

A SAILOR'S CONTRIBUTION



At least a quarter of the human race speaks English, either as a mother tongue or as a second language. It has become the language of international business, electronic mass communication systems and politics, notwithstanding ideological and religious differences. The language which the Anglo-Saxon invaders brought to Britain in the 5th, 6th and 7th centuries was closely related to modern German. Over the next millennium, it assimilated much of the vocabulary of Celtic, Scandinavian, Norman, French and Latin.[1]

Possibly due to this multilingual background, English has become a most predatory language, unashamedly borrowing from other languages and cultures as the English people travelled and expanded their influence to all quarters of the globe. As a seafaring nation, they and, in particular, their sailors, brought back new words and ideas to the mother country where they were readily adopted into the common language. Words such as "pyjama" (from the Hindi *pajama* - loose trousers); "verandah" (from the Hindi *baranda* - a porch); "rickshaw" from the Japanese *jinricksha* - a hooded two-wheeled vehicle); "lariat" from the Spanish *la reata* - the rope); "boss" (from the Afrikaans *baas* - a master), are examples of such adaptations.

At the same time, the exotic language of the seafarer developed over this period into a well-recognised *lingua franca* which readily identified sailors. Just as many household words were taken into the sailor's lexicon (eg apron, bonnet, braces, saddle, bridle) so has some of the colourful language of the sea returned to join the landlubber's idiom, mostly in the form of phrases and expressions, many of which have degenerated into *clichés* - words and phrases which once had meanings which were precise and sometimes colourful but have now lost their impact through overuse or misuse. In many cases the seafaring origins of such expressions may seem obvious although their derivation and precise meaning may not be fully appreciated.

However, one must be cautious; it is quite possible that seafarers gave a specialised sense to a word already in use, either in the general language, in areas such as farming, or in local dialects. Sometimes words of similar form but of different origins became confused or were amalgamated in the course of time; sometimes alternative explanations are possible. It is difficult to be precise about the origin of terms which may have originated in speech rather than in writing. Nevertheless, most of the words and expressions discussed were in common use in the sailor's lexicon during the 18th century when Great

1 The Anglo-Saxon invaders of the 5th - 7th centuries brought with them dialects closely related to the old Germanic languages, but already containing a number of words of Latin origin. In the course of time, some words were borrowed from the old Celtic inhabitants of the British Isles. The Viking invasions and settlements and, above all, the Norman Conquest, profoundly affected the development of English and ultimately its status as the "national language" to be used for all official purposes. A large part of the lexicon of Latin has passed into English; from Old English to the Reformation, the borrowings were chiefly from the religious vocabulary, while from the Middle Ages, they have been predominantly from scientific, legal and scholarly vocabularies. In many cases these words have developed new senses and have become part and parcel of our general vocabulary, often displacing "native" words.

Andrew Miller

Britain was at the height of its maritime power. Many of these derived from the Royal Navy but as there was a ready interchange between naval personnel and merchant seamen, they became common usage. Many of the words and phrases have an obvious nautical connection, but many others require some explanation.

However, many expressions have now fallen into disuse at sea due to technological development and the passage of time and even the modern day sailor may not be aware of their origins. In this discourse, an attempt has been made to list many of these clichés and to indicate their possible derivation.

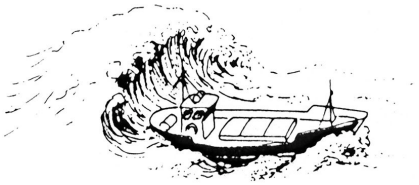
The Andrew, the sailors' term for the Royal Navy, is from the name of an infamous 18th century press gang operator, Andrew Miller. He impressed so many men into the naval service that he was said to own the Royal Navy.

A ship is said to be on **her beam ends** when she has heeled to such an extent that the ends of her deck beams are in the water and the deck is almost vertical. In such a situation she is on the verge of capsizing and is in a perilous position. In landsman's speech, it means "being virtually destitute".

A ship which has run firmly aground is said to be **hard and fast**. Today it has come to mean "strict, unalterable or fixed".

The hull of a ship was most vulnerable along the water-line where the side was alternately wet and dry. The term **between wind and water** has come to be used to describe "a very dangerous and vulnerable situation".

A ship is **pooped** when a heavy sea breaks over her stern or quarter (the poop) when she is running before the wind in a gale, usually when the speed of the ship approximates to the speed of the following wave. In such a situation the ship could be in considerable danger of broaching as the rudder may have little or no grip on the sea. In current language the term has come to mean "exhausted" or "in dire straits".



A vessel pooped

A fully equipped ship with all sails set is said to be **all standing**. To be **brought up all standing** was for such a ship to be abruptly stopped in her course - a dangerous situation. In general terms it has come to mean "meeting an unexpected obstruction".

When a ship in a storm has removed all sails she is said to be **under bare poles**. Figuratively it has come to mean a person is "reduced to the last extremity".

To **scupper** or **scuttle** is to deliberately sink a ship by opening the sea cocks or by blowing a hole in the hull below the waterline. In current landsmen's language it is used to mean "depriving any action or scheme of any chance of success".

Boats' crews were told to **rest on your oars** when ceasing rowing - to take a rest after hard work. The current meaning is to "take it easy". The phrases **all in the same boat** and **stick your oar in** have obvious connotations but **sweeping into the room** may not be so apparent. The sweeps referred to were the large oars used to move small ships when becalmed or when moving in and out of confined harbours.[2] Terms such as **abandoning ship** and **casting adrift** also have obvious marine origins but have entered everyday language in various ways.

2 This is one of those words which have been in general use before being adopted by sailors. The OED (Oxford English Dictionary) defines "sweep" as to "move majestically" and records its first use in 1590.

Attempts to calm a difficult situation are often referred to as **pouring oil on troubled waters**. This refers to the seafarer's practice of attempting to prevent waves from breaking over the ship by allowing oil to drip from a bag trailed over the side so as to form a slick.

On board ship, water was stored in casks. As they were emptied, they were "shaken" (taken to pieces) for easier stowage, the individual pieces being known as "shakes". Hence, **no great shakes meant** "of no great value". On the other hand, a **brace of shakes** denoted the period of time which could be measured by the sail shaking twice as the ship came into the wind. Another possible origin is the time taken to shake a dice box twice. This is another of those expressions whose origin is indeterminate but the nautical one is the most likely. It has found its way into everyday language to indicate a short period of time = "I will be with you in a brace of shakes".

The operation of cleaning a cask by rinsing out or soaking was known as a **binge** from a Lincolnshire dialect word meaning to "soak". It has come to denote a period of excessive indulgence in eating or drinking.

When two blocks in a purchase were up tight against each other, or "choked", they were described as being **chock-a-block**. Today it is used to indicate a "crowded condition".

The modern day use of expressions such as **giving someone a wide berth**, which came from the practice of steering a course well clear of or anchoring far enough away from another ship to avoid a collision.

Hand over hand (the action of hauling rapidly and continuously on a rope by passing the hands alternately one before the other) - now used to mean overtaking rapidly - has an obvious seafaring connection.

Stemming the tide is another phrase of nautical origin which fits readily into the landsman's language. Although the word "stem" has many meanings, it is used in nautical language to refer to the foremost member forming the bow of a ship joined at the bottom to the keel. The phrase is used to indicate that a vessel is holding her own against a contrary tidal stream or current. In modern language it is used to mean "stopping or checking the flow". A ship making progress against wind and tide is said to be **making headway**. This is another of those terms adopted by sailors from the common lexicon and given a specific meaning. It has re-entered everyday speech to imply "struggling effectually against opposition".

Tiding over was an old seaman's expression to describe the method of working the tides by anchoring until the tide turned in the vessel's favour. Today it is used to mean to surmount a difficulty or to "get by".

A ship moving at speed was said to **cut a feather** or to **have a bone in her teeth** in allusion to the foam set up by her bows. The former expression has come to mean "to cut a dash" and the latter to mean "at full speed".

Smoking was not practised much by seamen in the days of sail. Below decks it was too great a fire hazard and above decks weather conditions often made it impractical. Chewing tobacco was the obvious alternative for those needing a nicotine "fix". Sailors usually kept their "quid" of tobacco in the lining of their hats which over time became saturated with tobacco juice. When out of tobacco and things were desperate, they would take the lining out of their hats and chew it - hence the phrase **I'll eat my hat**, which today refers to an event too improbable to conceive.

Stocks are the keel blocks on which a ship is built; a ship under construction is said to be **on the stocks** and when it is transferred to its natural element, it is **launched**. When the vessel is finally proceeding under its own power or under sail, it is said to be **under way**. These terms are used by non-seafaring persons to describe stage of a project or enterprise - when it is in course of preparation it is said to be "on the stocks". When it is finally presented to public gaze, it is "launched" and when it is progress, it is "under way".

The wind was, and still is, of major interest to the sailor and reference to the wind appears in many of the seafarer's expressions. The following lists some of these, their original nautical meaning and their use in modern everyday speech.

	Original Nautical Meaning	Modern Usage
close to the wind	Sailing as close as possible to the direction from which the wind is blowing.	Taking a calculated risk.
in the teeth of the wind	sailing directly against the wind.	Against opposition.
see how the wind blows	Observe the direction of the wind.	Ascertain the likelihood.
raise the wind	According to legend, sticking a knife into the mast and whistling will raise a wind during a calm.	Obtain the necessary finance.
take the wind out of one's sails	Cause the ship to "luff" so as to spill the wind out of the sails.	To frustrate.
throw to the winds	Throw something overboard.	To discard recklessly.
three sheets in the wind	So inebriated that, even with three sheets to the sail, the helmsman would be unable to steer a straight course.	Very drunk.

Another expression to describe a drunken man is to say he is **half seas over**. Sailors said this to describe a stranded ship with the seas breaking over her, under which circumstances she was unable to ease her situation. When the decks were swept clean by a wave washing over the ship, this was known as a **clean sweep**. Today, it means "taking all before you".

To sail **by the wind** is to sail close hauled, that is as close to the wind as possible. To sail **at large** is to sail with the wind "free". A ship's capability is evaluated by her performance sailing **by and large**. In today's speech it is used to mean "from an overall or general view".

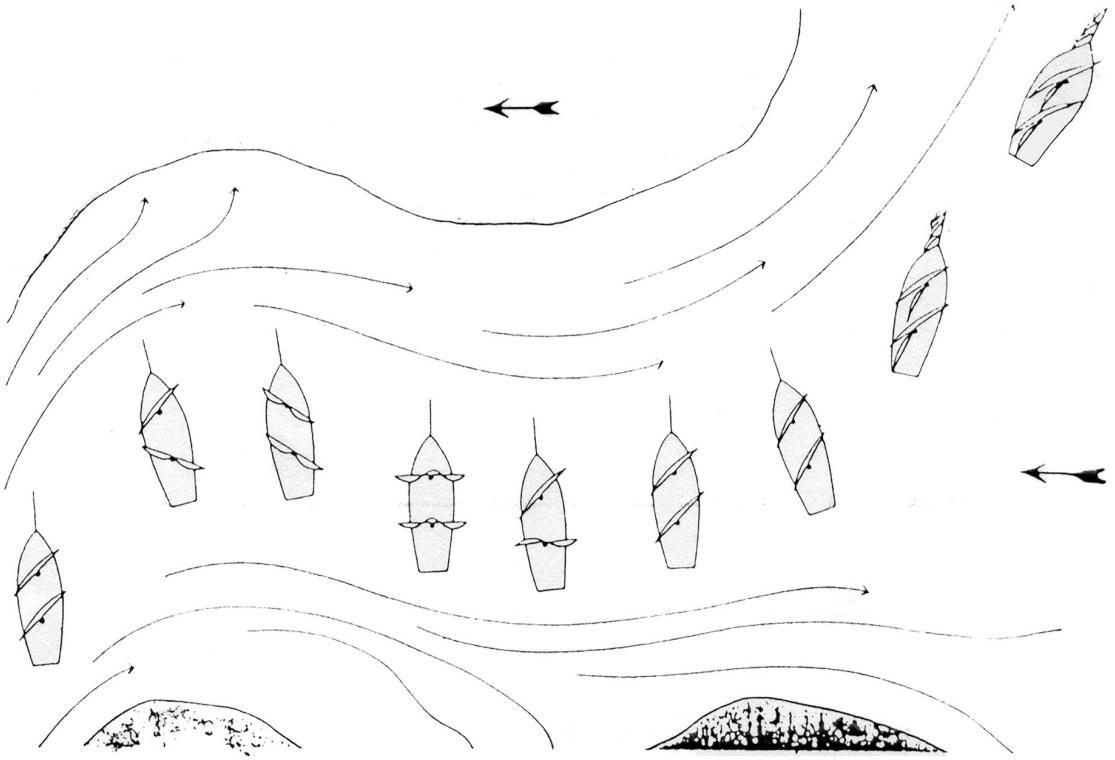
Plain sailing is a term which has come into everyday English to mean "anything that is straightforward and easy". The term arose from the use of plane charts in the 16th century which pre-dated Mercator's charts. For over a century after Mercator's charts became widely used, many navigators continued to use the plane charts, being easier for them to understand. Navigation by this method was known as "plane sailing", often written as "plain sailing".

An enemy ship approaching another vessel from windward, otherwise referred to as the weather side, has a distinct advantage so it is important to keep a good lookout to windward, that is, to **keep one's weather eye open**. In other words, "be alert", in which sense it is used today. The same applies to **getting one's bearings**; in coastal navigation, taking compass bearings to two or more topographical features enabled a mariner to fix his position. Today the sense of the phrase is "to establish one's position in relation to circumstances". When a sailor has **lost his bearings**, he was said to be **all at sea**. Today these mean to be "wide of the mark" or "in a state of error".

A square-rigged ship was said to be **taken aback** when the wind was brought to bear on the forward side of the sails. This could be done purposely to stop the ship's way or to assist her in tacking; it could also be done inadvertently by an unexpected change in the wind direction or by lack of attention by the helmsman. The layman today uses the term to indicate "being taken by an unexpected confrontation or check".

When a sailing ship was properly rigged and equipped it was said to be **shipshape**. Today it is used to mean that "everything is in proper order". A ship riding upright and without a list is said the be **on an even keel**. Figuratively it is used to mean "in a state of stability or balance".

Tacking a square rigged ship against the wind in a narrow, winding channel when the tide or current was with the ship was known as **backing and filling**. At the end of each leg, the sails on the foremast were **backed**, trimmed so that the wind pressed on the forward side of the sails, causing the vessel to stop and, if required, gather sternway. The ship drifted with the current until forward progress could be resumed when, the sails were again trimmed round and filled. Today the term has come to mean "to vacillate" or to be "irresolute".



Backing and Filling

Tacking was also known as **beating**; to **beat about** now means "to keep trying various options to obtain a solution".

The word "board" has two origins - from an Old English word meaning a plank, a table or a shield and from an old Teutonic word meaning a rim, a border or a side. The two words became associated and confused at an early date and today it has wide variety of meanings. Its principal nautical use is to denote the ship's side.

On board came to mean "in the ship" and the verb **to board** meant "to enter the ship". Anything on the ship was said to be **aboard**. When something was on deck and therefore open and visible it was said to be **above board**. Nowadays this phrase is used to denote "open and fair dealing".

The order to **clear the decks** was given to remove all extraneous fittings and equipment prior to engaging the enemy. In everyday language it means "get ready". Items not required on deck were consigned **down the hatch** - the phrase having now become a drinker's "toast". When bad weather threatened, the order was to **batten down the hatches**. The hatches were then sealed and made secure by battens or wedges. Today it has come to mean "making oneself secure".

There were two log books kept on a Naval ship - one by the (Sailing) Master and the other by the Captain. The Master's logbook contained a record of all matters pertaining to the sailing and navigation of the ship. The Captain's logbook was usually a copy of the Master's logbook to which the Captain added comments in relation to the management of the ship in compliance with his orders from the Admiralty. The Master's logbook was not kept on deck, but in his cabin safe from water damage. In the (compass) binnacle was kept a slate on which the midshipman of the watch recorded details of the weather, changes of course, change of sails, ships sighted and the like which occurred during his watch. This information was transferred to the Master's logbook at the end of each watch and the slate wiped clean so that each watch started with a **clean slate**. This expression now refers to "making a fresh start". Slates were in use as writing tablets from earliest times so it is probable that this is one of those terms which the sailor adopted from the general lexicon and gave it a specific sense. The use of a slate to keep a record of a patron's expenses in an inn may have arisen from its use at sea and the expression used to indicate that the patron had discharged his debt.

Some midshipmen believed that the sand in the hourglass would run faster if the hourglass was warmed, thus shortening their watch. This was achieved by holding the glass under their clothes next to their body. This was known as **warming the bell**. The term has come to mean "doing something before the proper time".

On merchant ships, the crew were often advanced a month's pay to buy necessities for the forthcoming voyage. The period before the next pay was due became known as the **dead horse** and its termination was an excuse for a celebration. To **flog a dead horse** was to expect, usually in vain, to get extra work out of a crew while they were working off the "dead horse". The term "dead horse" was probably given a specific meaning by sailors from an earlier use in the general language meaning "work which has already been paid for".

Terms associated with sails or sailing naturally form a large part of sailor's talk. The following lists some of these expressions, their original nautical meaning and their use in modern everyday speech:

	Original Nautical Meaning	Modern Usage
to sail into	To sail towards the enemy to initiate an action.	To attack or reprimand forcefully.
to sail against the wind	To beat to windward	To oppose a popular or current trend.
to trim one's sails	To adjust the sails according to the wind.	To modify one's opinion to meet circumstances.
sailing under false colours	To show false colours (flags) to escape apprehension.	To pretend to be what you are not.

The word **skyscraper** to describe a very tall building probably came from the name of the small triangular sail set above the skysail.

In the 18th century, the nationality of a ship could often be determined by noting the **cut of her jib**, that is, the shape of the jib: Today it has come to mean "determining the status of a person by their dress and general appearance". The term "jib" meaning to stall or back out, seems to come from the word "gybe", an action in which a vessel running away from the direction of the wind is brought by the lee; that is, the vessel is turned so that the wind is brought on to the other quarter.

Flags or banners denoting nationality or affiliation, referred to as "colours", were displayed at all times at sea unless the vessel wished to conceal its identity. The following expressions refer to this practice:

	Original Nautical Meaning	Modern Usage
colours nailed to the mast	Colours so fixed could not be lowered in submission.	Committing oneself to a party or action.
see things in their true colours	To see the correct colours.	To see things as they really are.
to come in with flying colours	A victorious ship came into port with all flags flying to announce success.	To be completely triumphant.

Traditionally, a ship's flag flown upside down has come to be adopted as a sign of distress.

When conditions were safe enough for sailors to land or put to sea, they said that **the coast was clear**. It was also used by smugglers to indicate that it was safe to land their contraband. It is used today to report "the absence of danger". During the 17th and 18th century, merchant ships operating in areas frequented by pirates or privateers would sometimes erect barriers known as **close quarters** across the quarter deck to facilitate defence against boarding. It came to mean direct and close contact in a fight. Today it means "operating in a confined or narrow space". Sometimes, in order to avoid another ship, it was necessary to "luff up" or "stand a-luff" - that is, to head into the wind. This is the origin of the term **to stand aloof** meaning "to keep clear or disassociate oneself".

Any fixed object on the land whose position is marked on a chart is called a **landmark** by mariners. The term is used by laymen today to refer to "any prominent feature or event".

A **leading light** is a light placed on shore or on a fixed object in the sea which, when aligned with another similar light, will lead a ship clear of danger or along a prescribed course. In colloquial language today it is used to refer to "a person outstanding in a particular sphere".

The timbers forming the ship's side (strakes) and the deck (deck planking) were not laid close together in contact with each other but a gap was left between the individual pieces to allow the timber to expand and shrink as the moisture content varied. This gap, or seam, was "caulked" by driving in oakum (or "junk"), made from teased out lengths of discarded hemp rope mixed with tar. The seam was then sealed with some composition (usually pitch or a mixture of white lead and tallow) to prevent the oakum from rotting.

Tar is a thick dark-coloured, viscid material obtained from the destructive distillation of organic substances such as wood or coal or from the gum extracted from pine trees (Stockholm tar). Tar was widely used aboard ships for the preservation of ropes or the waterproofing of canvas. Tar was also used as an antiseptic as occurs in the song "Click Go The Shears" when the call was "Tar here, Jack!". Large pieces of canvas coated with tar to make them waterproof were known as **tarpaulins**. From their practice of using tar to waterproof their hats and clothing and for holding in place their hair tied in a queue, seamen became known as **Jack Tars**.

The name **Jack** has a long and complex history. Its earliest use was as a generic term for a "lad" (just as **Jill** was used for a "lass" - Jack and Jill). It is best known as a familiar version of the font-name John. Sailors adopted the name as familiar term to address another sailor whose name was unknown ("Where are you going, Jack?"). The cynical expression "Pull up the ladder, Jack, I'm aboard" has re-appeared as "I'm all right, Jack".

"Jack" was also used to denote smallness or subsidiary. The British Union Flag is often incorrectly referred to as the Union Jack - the Union Jack is the small white bordered Union Flag flown on a jack staff at the stem of Royal Navy ships at anchor. Sailors used it to denote a subsidiary use such as Jack-staff or Jack-stay. It is also used to define appliances which obviate the need for an assistant - a screw-jack or a boot-jack.

Pitch, often used for sealing seams, is a dark-coloured resinous substance, hard when cold, fluid when heated, obtained from the residuum from the boiling of tar or from the distillation of turpentine. It was more flammable than tar and heating it in a cauldron on an open fire to make it fluid was dangerous. It was therefore heated by cast iron bails on the ends of long metal handles, known as "loggerheads", which had been heated to a red heat in the blacksmith's forge and inserted into the pitch cauldrons. These loggerheads sometimes became handy weapons in the event of a dispute among seamen - when this occurred the combatants were said to be **at loggerheads**. After caulking, the deck seams were sealed, usually with hot pitch, the heated loggerheads being used to smooth out the joint. A "loggerhead" was also the name for a heavy wooden block fastened to the leg of a horse to prevent it from straying. This is probably one of those terms adopted from the land and modified by sailors to their own meaning.

The two most difficult seams to caulk and seal were the seam between the outermost deck plank (the "waterway") and the topmost strake of the ship's side and the seam between the garboard strake (the lowest plank on the ship's side) and the keel into which it had been slotted. These seams were known as "devils". Hence the expression **there's the Devil to pay and no pitch hot**. Today the expression **there's the Devil to pay** has come to mean "very serious trouble will arise from this". These seams are also the origin of the expression **between the Devil and the deep blue sea** - meaning "between two evils or alternatives".

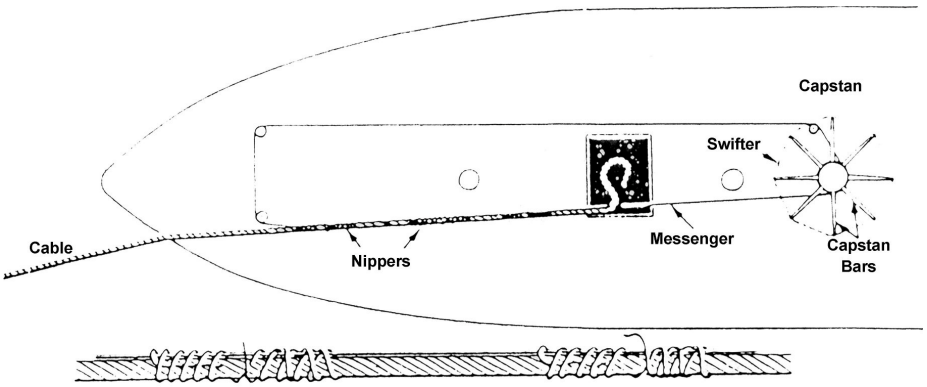
Marines are soldiers specially trained for marine warfare. Originally known as the Lord Admiral's Regiment or The Marine Regiment of Foot, they were referred to as "Marines". Since 1775, the Royal Marines, as they eventually became officially known, have served aboard all Royal Navy ships of any significant size as an integral part of the ship's company. In the days of sail, they performed many duties on the ship but principally they acted as guards and watchmen. In battle, most of them were stationed on the upper deck and in the "tops" equipped with smooth bore muskets to act as sharpshooters. Sailors often referred to Marines as "Jollies".

Samuel Pepys, when retelling to Charles II stories gathered from the Navy, once mentioned flying fish. Courtiers scoffed at the idea but when a Marine Regiment officer confirmed the story, the King accepted his advice saying "Henceforth, ere we ever cast doubt upon a tale that lacks likelihood, we should first **tell it to the Marines**". Sailors, who as a rule looked down on Marines as ignoramuses who would believe anything, adopted this saying in an ironic vein; a variation was **go and tell it to the Horse Marines**, an obvious absurdity. These expressions are used today "to express scepticism".

A wine or spirit bottle, empty after its contents have been drunk, is called a **dead marine**. This term reputedly arose from an incident when the Duke of York (later King William IV), was dining aboard a Royal Navy ship; he ordered the steward to "remove those dead marines" indicating some empty bottles. When the senior Marine officer present protested at the implied slight, the Duke attempted to mollify him by observing that, like Marines, they had done their duty and were ready to serve again. They were "dead" in the sense that "the spirit had departed from them".

The muskets used by the Marines were smooth-bore guns with a bore of between 0.69 and 0.75 inches, firing leaden balls. Due to the variation in the bores of individual guns, many Marines preferred to cast their own musket balls. For this purpose they carried a small mould into which molten lead was poured. A soon as the lead solidified, the mould was broken open and the hot balls were dropped onto a brass plate called a "monkey" to cool. This is believed to be the origin of the saying that the weather was **cold enough to freeze the balls on a brass monkey**. The saying has nothing to do with the anatomical problems of an anthropoid.

The use of the term **nipper** to refer to small boys has a seafaring origin. Chain anchor cables did not come into use until the middle of the 19th century. Up to that time, anchor cables were of hemp and in major vessels they could be of very large diameter - too large to be taken around the barrel of a capstan or even around the bitts (twin posts in the deck of a ship for fastening cables or belaying ropes). To hoist the anchor, a smaller endless rope, known as a messenger or viol, was passed several turns around the capstan barrel and led through blocks forward so that it ran parallel to and alongside the run of the anchor cable. As the capstan was turned, the cable was lashed to the messenger by a seaman using a short length of rope called a "nipper". As soon as it was secured and the cable commenced to follow the messenger, the seaman stepped forward to tie another nipper leaving a ship's boy to accompany the cable and messenger aft while holding the end of the nipper in his hand. As soon as the nipper reached the hatchway down which the cable descended to the cable locker, the boy unlashed the nipper and ran forward with it to the seaman tying the nippers so that it could be used again. The boys themselves became known as nippers.



Heaving on an anchor windlass was often accompanied by tune from a fiddler. On merchant ships, he was paid for the service in liquor, hence the expression **drunk as a fiddler**.

When at anchor, the cable was lashed to the bitts if it was too large to be taken around them. That part of the cable secured to the bitts was known as the **bitters**. Down in the cable locker the end of the cable was secured to one of the twin posts forming the bitts which descended to the level of the keel; this was known as **the bitter end**. Today it is used to indicate "the very end". If it was necessary to make a rapid departure without hoisting the anchor, the cable was severed and it was a case of **cut and run**. Today the general sense of this term is to "leave unceremoniously in great haste". In the case of a small boat, the term was to **cut the painter**. To **slip the cable** is to release the anchor cable by letting it run free. Sailors

came to use it as an euphemism for "dying"; the term is sometimes used in everyday speech today.

The end of any rope, particularly when the strands had become unlaid or frayed, was known as the **fag end**. This term was probably borrowed from earlier use meaning the last part of something - literally or metaphorically. Its first use seems to have referred to the end of a bird's feather but it may have been applied to a variety of things. Today its most common use is to refer to the stub of a cigarette.

A **clinch** was the method of fastening or knotting large ropes to heavy objects by a half hitch with the end stopped back on its own part. It was also used generally to refer to the method of turning over, or clinching, the ends of copper nails to secure them. Nowadays it is used in the sense of "making secure" as in "clinching a deal".

To be **born with a silver spoon in his mouth** is an old naval saying to indicate that a young man became a naval officer by virtue of birth or connection and that his promotion was assured. These men were said to enter the Navy "through the cabin windows" in distinction from those who were born "with a wooden ladle" and who entered the Navy "through the hawse hole". The phrase seems to have been applied quite generally and was probably one of those borrowed by the Navy from current language. It was common practice for wealthy godparents to give a silver spoon to their godchild.

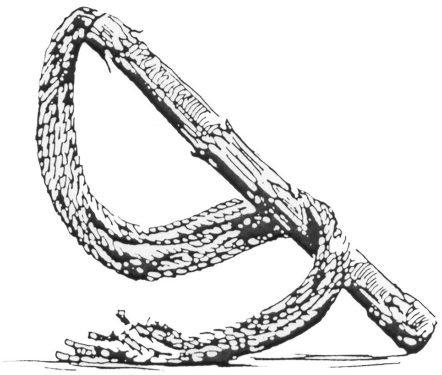
Firearms on board ship were referred to either as "small arms" (hand guns or muskets) or "great guns" (cannons). During violent storms the wind was often described as **blowing great guns**, indicating the noise of the wind was similar to cannons firing. Each gun was numbered, those on the port side having even numbers and those on the starboard side having odd numbers. These guns were quite massive. A thirty-two pound cannon (that is one firing a 32 lb shot) weighed about 2¾ tons and required a crew of eleven men to manhandle, load and fire it. Occasionally, a gun would break free in heavy seas and bringing it under control and making it secure again was a difficult and dangerous operation requiring considerable effort. A **loose cannon** could cause enormous damage and injury. The expression is used today to refer to "someone out of control". The expression **to cannon into**, meaning to collide with, probably comes from this situation. Today it has come to mean "to bump into unexpectedly".

A shot in the locker appears in "Naval Tracts" (1642) - "*The gunner is to have his shot in the locker near every piece*". In the 19th century the term **not a shot in the locker** came to be used figuratively meaning "no money in one's pocket". In the heat of battle, gun's crews were told to stick to your guns, meaning do not desert your posts. Today it is used to mean "maintaining one's position in spite of opposition".

Discharging all the guns on one side of the ship simultaneously was known as a **broadside**. Today it is used to describe a telling verbal onslaught.

To **turn a blind eye** is to pretend tactfully not to see, usually to avoid embarrassment. It has a naval origin. At a critical stage in the Battle of Copenhagen (1801), Admiral Sir Hyde Parker signalled the fleet to break off the action. Nelson's squadron was in a critical position in shoal water and to have obeyed the order would have been to court disaster. On his attention being drawn to the signal, Nelson put his telescope to his blind eye (he was blinded in the Battle of the Nile, 1798), remarking that he "had a blind eye and sometimes had the right to use it". His action is disobeying Hyde Parker's order resulted in the defeat of the Danes. When the Admiralty learned of the circumstances, Hyde Parker was recalled and Nelson made Commander-in-Chief in his place and created a Viscount.

In the days of sail, punishment in the Navy usually meant hanging or flogging. The instrument of flogging was the "cat o' nine tails". It comprised nine lengths of quarter inch diameter line about two feet in length spliced into a rope handle about an inch in diameter, also two feet long. The handle was then covered in red baize and the finished "cat" then placed in a red baize bag. In the eyes of seamen, the worst crime a man could commit was stealing from a shipmate. On such occasions, and only for stealing from a shipmate, three knots were sometimes tied near the end of each strand to increase the severity of the punishment. Such



a "cat" was known as a "thieves cat". A new "cat" was made for each punishment - the same "cat" was never used twice. There was a ritual attached to the flogging. The full crew was mustered on the upper deck and the Captain read out the crime, the particular item in the Articles of War of which the miscreant was guilty and the number of lashes decreed. The man was then tied to a grating taken from one of the hatches and set up near the mainmast or lashed to the rigging.

A **spread eagle** was a device used in heraldry denoting an eagle with wings outstretched; it was often used as a royal or imperial emblem. In the Navy, a man was said to be **spread-eagled** when lashed to a the rigging or a hatch grating for flogging. The term is now in general use to describe "having arms and legs outstretched".

The punishment having been confirmed, the bosun then **let the cat out of the bag** which he was carrying, the grating having been set up so that the bosun had **enough room to swing a cat**. Both these expressions have been adopted into everyday language but not, of course, in the same context. The first term is used today to indicate "revealing a secret" while the latter is used to suggest "a very confined space". There is no connection with the word "cat" meaning "feline".

On the other hand, ship's boys were punished by spread-eagling them across a gun known as the **gunner's daughter** and beating them on their bare buttocks with a rod. This was known as **kissing the gunner's daughter**. This punishment was traditionally carried out on a Monday morning, sometimes as a matter of routine; it was widely held that ships' boys needed routine punishment to account for misdeeds not discovered. Apart from occasional appearance in army speech, the phrase was not widely used outside the Navy and rarely appears today.

An old naval punishment said to have been invented by the Dutch is **keel-hauling** which consisted of dragging the offender under the keel of the ship from one side to the other. The result was often fatal. Today it is used figuratively to mean to "haul over the coals" or to "castigate harshly".

When ships spent a long time in port, the crew were often allowed to have their wives on board although the definition of "wife" could be rather loosely interpreted. The crew were divided into messes of six or eight men and they hung their hammocks and ate their meals in the spaces between the great guns. The womenfolk also hung their hammocks there and when the crew were called in the morning they were allowed to stay in their hammocks for a little longer. The bosun's mate's cry "Out or Down!" ("Out of your hammock or it will be cut down") did not apply to them but they were told to **show a leg**. They then hung a leg over the side of the hammock to show that they were women. It was a "perk" of the bosun's mate to run his hand along the leg to make sure it was smooth and not hairy. Its modern use is "to get out of bed" or "to make an appearance".

Inevitably babies were born on board a ship. The event was recorded in the ship's log noting the names of the mother and father. As, in many cases, the paternity of the child was in doubt, the father was recorded as "Number X Gun", quoting the number of the gun adjoining the mess where the birth took place. A boy born in such circumstances was known as a **son of a gun**.

From the earliest days, British naval personnel, from the Admiral down to the ship's boys, were entitled to receive a daily ration of half a pint of spirits (236 ml), originally brandy, and a gallon of "small" (weak) beer (3.785 litres), wine measure. The spirit issue was, no doubt, to compensate for the harsh and dangerous living conditions and the beer was to supplement the water which rapidly became foul and contaminated from long storage in casks. After the growth of the sugar industry in the West Indies, rum was substituted for brandy.

In 1739, Vice Admiral Edward Vernon, known throughout the Navy as "Old Grog" from his habit of wearing a sea cloak made from grogham, a coarse fabric woven from silk and mohair and stiffened with gum to make it waterproof, was appointed Commander-in-Chief of a naval squadron to attack the Spanish possessions in the West Indies. In August 1740, convinced that the excessive consumption of rum contributed to the high death rate from fever in the West Indies station, he made a celebrated order for the watering of the rum ration in the ratio of one part of rum to four parts of water.

The resulting mixture became known as **grog**, in honour of its inventor and the amount of the issue

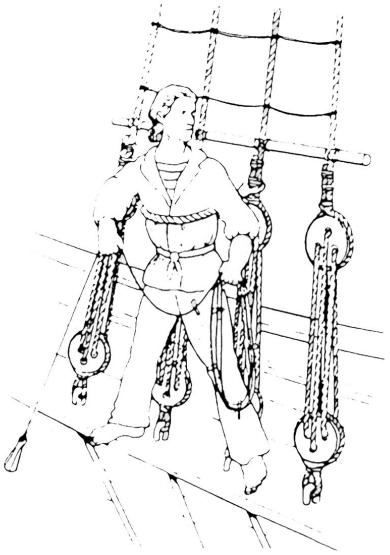
known as a tot. The former term has entered the common language to refer to alcoholic drinks generally and has given rise to the word **groggy** to indicate someone whose stability was affected by alcohol. The word **tot** had many uses but sailors adopted it from the meaning "a minute quantity of anything". It was a dialectical word first applied to "a very small child". It came to mean any small drinking vessel. **Black Strap** was the sailors term for strong dark liquor. Today it is often used to describe strong red wine. Rum was often referred to as **Nelson's Blood**.

Splice the main brace is a traditional term in the Royal Navy for serving an additional tot of rum of grog after a period of extreme exertion, more as a pick-me-up than a reward. The origin of the term is obscure but it became the term for celebrating with alcoholic drinks. An expression among naval officers to indicate that it is time to have a drink is **the sun is over the foreyard (or yardarm)**. In higher latitudes, this would be near noon. The expression has come into the common lexicon.

Before the days of sonic echo sounders, the only way to determine the depth of water (known as sounding) was to use a leadline. This was a length of plaited or cable-laid rope (to reduce stretching under load) with a large lead cylindrical weight on one end. These leads usually weighed 7 lb although larger ones (14 lb and 21 lb) were used for deeper water. The leadline was marked in **fathoms** by strips of leather and cloth in a set sequence so that the leadsman (the sailor measuring the depth) could determine the amount of line paid out by feeling the markers as they ran through his fingers.

The word **fathom** is derived from the Old English word faethm meaning "outstretched arms". Hence it became a measure of the length between the outstretched arms of an average man and was eventually standardised as six feet (1.83 m). Its use as a measure of length was mainly confined to seafarers although it was also used in the timber industry and in coal mining where it meant "a quantity six feet square in section whatever the length may be". It was also used as a verb meaning to measure the depth by sounding. Today we speak of trying to **fathom** a mystery, that is, "to reach the bottom of the problem".

To take a sounding, the leadsman stood in the "chains" (the narrow platforms at deck level extending out over the water on each side just abaft each mast so as to increase the spread of he shrouds setting up the masts). The lead was swung back and forth gradually increasing the arc until the leadline was horizontal at each end of the swing. At this point, the line was jerked so that the arc was turned into a complete circle; the leadsman increased the speed of rotation until the lead had enough momentum to send it far enough ahead of the ship when the line was released so that, when it reached the seabed, it was directly beneath the leadsman and vertical. The whole operation required great skill and judgement and no little effort. Sometiines a leadsman, to avoid the extra effort entailed, let go the line before converting the swing into a complete rotation or unduly protracted the swinging operation. This was known as **swinging the lead** and now refers to "malingering or not doing a proper job".



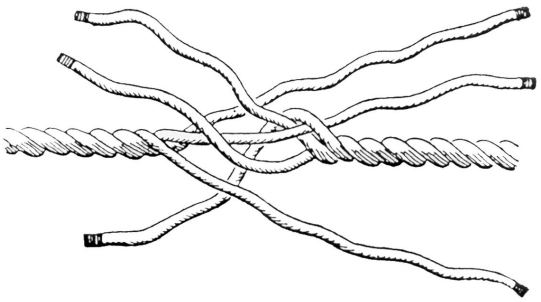
A Leadsman in the Chains

Ropes and ropework played a very large part in the life of the early sailor. Sailors adopted or invented many words and terms for this aspect of their work but, surprisingly, very few have made it into modern everyday use.

One of the many types of cordage used on a sailing vessel was "spun yarn" - a light line made by twisting together a number of threads between the palms of the hands or by rubbing them along the thigh. It was used for serving, parcelling and stopping and was usually made by the sailors in quiet moments when they would gather together in groups for the task and exchange gossip and stories - giving rise to the phrases **yarning** and **spinning a yarn** and the use of the word **yarn** to mean a "tale or a story".

Splicing was a method of joining two ropes together by unlaying the strands at the two ends and relaying them together according to the nature of the splice required. It followed that getting married was known to sailors as **getting spliced**, a term which has been readily adopted in everyday language.

Junk is a naval term for old, discarded or condemned cordage. From its toughness and likeness to old rope, the salt meat supplied to Royal Navy ships was called **Salt Junk**. The word is now used generally to describe "cast-off or unwanted articles".



An easy job yielding a profitable reward for little effort was known to sailors **as money for old rope**. The term has appeared in modem colloquial English; a variation is **money for jam**.

To name the 32 points of the compass in their correct order was known as **Boxing the Compass**. Today it is used in political circles to mean "going right around in one's views ending up in the same place".

Banyan Days were days when no meat was issued with the rations; so named after Hindu merchants who abstained from eating flesh. In the Australian outback, the term came to refer to 'the period when meat rations were exhausted'.

Fanny Adams was a child of eight who, in 1867, was brutally murdered and dismembered. Sailors in the Royal Navy, with gruesome humour, adopted the term to describe the tinned mutton which made its appearance about that time. While the contents of the tins were deemed worthless and of little value, the tins themselves were found useful as mess traps and the term **fanny** came to be applied to mess kettles generally. (The Army slang term was **dixie**.) It followed that the saying **Sweet Fanny Adams** came to be applied to "anything worthless" and eventually to mean "nothing at all".

Pipe down was the call on the boatswain's pipe made last thing at night for the hands to turn in, for silence on the mess deck and for lights to be extinguished. Sailors used the term as an order to stop a man talking or making a nuisance of himself and in this context it has entered everyday speech. The similar. term **pipe up**, whilst not specifically a naval term, has come to be used to mean "to speak up", usually without invitation.

To **stave off** or **fend off** is to bear a vessel off by a spar or boat hook in order to prevent violent contact when coming alongside. Currently it is used to indicate "offering resistance or parrying".

Scurvy, a disease caused by a deficiency of Vitamin C, was prevalent at sea between the 16th and 19th centuries. Colloquially, a **scurvy trick** is "a low, mean or contemptible act".

Whack was an old seaman's term for his daily ration of victuals. In today's colloquial English it has come to be used to mean "portion" or "share".

This list of phrases and expressions is not exhaustive; but extensive enough to give a broad outline of the nature and scope of the adoption of the seafarer's language into everyday speech. Apart from the vast number of modem technological terms, English has a vocabulary of over 500,000 words[3] - in contrast, German has about 185,00 and French has about 100,000 words. English is therefore a very flexible language with distinctive words and phrases to cover a wide range of subtle expressions. The lexicon of the seafarer has played a significant role in this feature of the language.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:
The author acknowledges the valuable assistance and advice received from Dr Elizabeth Liggins.

REFERENCES:

1 *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, London, 1967
2 *The Oxford Companion to Ships and the Sea*, Granada Publishing Ltd, London, 1979
3 *Life in Nelson's Navy*, Dudley Pope, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, USA, 1981
4 *The Angry Admiral*, CM. Hartman, Windmill Press, Surrey, UK, 1953
5 *Origins*, Eric Partridge, Book Club Associates, London, 1978
6 *Brewer's Concise Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, Cassell Publishers, Oxford, 1993
7 *The Lore of Ships*, Crescent Books, New York, 1975

3 It is claimed that the latest edition of the OED has over one million words listed.

The Naval Historical Society of Australia Inc.
Building 25, The Boatshed, Garden Island, NSW 2011

email secretary@navyhistory.org.au
website www.navyhistory.org.au