

A PRIMER FOR NAUTICAL TERMS & MARITIME TRIVIA

As a licensed professional master of vessels from motor yachts to cruise ships, I've lived with the esoteric lexicon of the mariner for over thirty years. To the uninitiated, the language of the sea might as well be Pig Latin for most casual observers. But the lay person need not feel completely left out. The origins of some common nautical terms are steeped in maritime history and little known to most modern mariners.

Some terms are of historical interest, some are amusing, and some will manage to offend. But a look "behind the sextant" is probably worth the education and will dazzle your dinner partners at the next yacht club banquet.



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The following selections from the sailor's lexicon are offered for your edification:

Starboard: the right side of a vessel. This traces its lineage all the way back to Viking ships and galleys propelled by sails and slave rowers. Ships of this era did not use conventional rudders affixed to the transom keel but employed a "sweep oar" or, literally, a "steering board" (star board) deployed from the right quarter (aft section). Starboard was derived from this since virtually all ships were constructed "right handed".

Port: the left side of a vessel. Since a ship outfitted with a "steering board" on its right side could not be brought alongside a pier without risking damage to this vital maneuvering equipment all docking was arranged to the "port" side, or city side. The starboard side was kept to seaward.

Head: a vessel's toilet. Early sailing craft had notoriously poor performance to windward due to sail designs featuring square-rigged rigging that encouraged the mariner of that day to use downwind

or off-the-wind routes. Thus, when a crewman needed to relieve himself, he sought out the "head" of the ship where the downwind aspect of this vantage point favored his bodily functions.

Spanker: small sails at the extreme aft section of a vessel. Popularized by Caribbean pirates as additions to complement the square rigged main sail plan. One buccaneer is said to have praised the performance of the fore & aft mizzens "for spanking her ass smartly". The obvious confusion for some over the use of this term is best summed up in this limerick:

*There once was a lady from Bangor,
Who slept while the ship was at anchor.
She rose in dismay as she heard the mate say,
"Let's raise the top sheet and spank'er!"*

Heave Ho: what inevitably happens after eating too much "ho" in rough seas.

Before the mast: the crew's quarters or fo'c'sle.

The ride in the forward section of the ship was subjected to an unholy pitching motion when sailing on the wind making the berthing section for ordinary seaman a wretched space. The most stable ride at sea was enjoyed aft of the main mast and was generally reserved for senior officers and the master.

Posh: the highest standard of luxury. The popular steamship route from England to the Mediterranean attracted all of Britain's upper crust for the extended cruises. Given the fashion of the time, it was much frowned upon to be cursed with a suntan since this implied that one might have to actually work for a living and go outdoors. In these latitudes the sun was cast on the southern side (right) of the ship en route to the Med and on the reverse on the return voyage. To ensure that one's cabin and deck lounge were on the shady side for both legs of the voyage, all gentlemen and ladies insisted on "port out, starboard home" accommodations. These "posh" cabins reflected the ultimate social status.

Hornpipe: a sailor's jig or dance. Enforced idleness on long passages aboard the whaling ships of the 1800s were the mother of invention. Creative seaman fashioned fine works of art from whale ivory known as "scrimshaw" and used the left over horns of livestock to carve musical instruments similar to penny whistles. The spirited tunes from these crude "horn pipes" sparked a wild dance performed with abandon that was a frequent relief from the tedium of the sea

voyage. When ships met at sea, a sailor's "gam" frequently ensued with entire crews engaged in the furious all-male dancing rituals. "Ah, to be born again when truly appreciated," Liberace once reflected.

Holy stone: to clean the ship's decks by scrubbing with an abrasive stone. One of the more hated duties of the seaman during the golden age of sail. The expansive hardwood decks were cleaned of dirt, blood and other accumulations by the backbreaking labor of buffing by a flat stone with a "hole" drilled in the center for a mop handle. It is more likely that the "holy" in holy stone came from the sailor's true feelings for the "goddamn" practice.

Clean Bill of Health: This refers to a document issued to a ship that shows the port it sailed from has suffered no epidemic or infection.

As the Crow Flies: When lost or unsure of its position in coastal waters, a ship's crew would release a caged crow. The crow would fly toward the nearest land, giving the crew some sense of direction. The tallest lookout platform on a ship became know as the "crow's nest."

Son of a Gun: When in port, and with the crew restricted to the ship, women were allowed to live aboard. Sometimes children were born on the ship and a convenient place was between the guns on the gun deck. If a child's father was unknown, as was often the case, the boy or girl was entered in the ship's log simply as "son of a gun."

The Whole Nine Yards: Yards are the spars attached to the mast that support square sails. On a fully rigged, three-masted ship, there are three major square sails on each mast. If the nine major sails are employed, the whole nine yards are working.

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

Overbearing: To sail downwind directly at another ship to "steal" or divert the wind from its sails.

Pooped: The poop is the stern section of a ship. To be pooped is to be swamped by a high following sea.

"If you harden up, I believe you can lay that nun to starboard:" Harbor pilot's advice to a schooner captain entering Boston harbor in 1830. (translation: sail closer to the wind and you can safely leave the red buoy to the right.) His directions were the cause of some consternation to the local Catholic priest brought aboard to bless the ship's safe return.

Dress for Success: A Swashbucklers Cautionary Tale

The captain of a British Man-of-War in the early 1700s, upon having his ship attacked by a boarding party of pirates, was heard to shout, "Bring me my red shirt!" as the skirmish began.


When one of his officers inquired as to the reason for his order, the captain explained, "In case I am wounded, I do not want my bloody wounds to deter the men's resolve."

Inspired by this selfless act of courage, his men fought on to victory that day. And so on throughout their tour of duty during every battle the captain would grandly order, "Bring me my red shirt!" and they would win the day vanquishing all enemies.

Later in the sea campaign facing overwhelming odds as ten boarding parties of cut throat pirates stormed his ship from port and starboard, the men awaited the captain's characteristic orders of inspiration, whereupon he shouted, "Bring me my brown trousers!"

The outcome of the battle, and his laundry, remains unknown.

After digesting this short tutorial you are now qualified to expound smugly on the esoteric lexicon of the mariner in all appropriate social circles while wearing red trousers, a blue blazer and a Greek fisherman's cap. For best results, avoid sharing your wisdom with actual marine professionals who might feel the need to give you a first hand remedial lesson in "keelhauling."

Finally, it's worth noting that in 1989 my old crew aboard the 525-ft. cruise ship *Ocean Spirit* had a brass plaque placed outside my office that offered this warning: "The Floggings Will Continue Until Morale Improves." 

Bret Gilliam is a licensed ship master and has commanded vessels up to 525-ft. in the cruise, yacht, commercial, scientific, and military shipping business over the last 30 years in the Pacific, Atlantic and Indian Oceans as well as the Caribbean and Red Sea.