

Nautical sayings compilation

Most sayings created using website www.harbourguides.com and www.see-the-sea.org
Published in the *Halo*, magazine of the Miracle Class Association

Cannon balls and the brass monkey

It was necessary to keep a good supply of cannon balls near the cannon on old war ships. But how to prevent them from rolling about the deck was the problem. The storage method devised was to stack them as a square based pyramid, with one ball on top, resting on four, resting on nine, which rested on sixteen. Thus, a supply of 30 cannon balls could be stacked in a small area right next to the cannon. There was only one problem—how to prevent the bottom layer from sliding/rolling. The solution was a metal plate with 16 round indentations, called, for reasons unknown, a Monkey. But if this plate was made of iron, the iron balls would quickly rust to it. The solution to the rusting problem was to make them of brass—hence Brass Monkeys.

However, brass contracts much more and much faster than iron when chilled. Consequently, when the temperature dropped too far, the brass indentations would shrink so much that the iron cannon balls would come right off the monkey. Thus, it was quite literally cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey. And all this time folks thought this was just a vulgar expression!

Halo, Winter 2009

Fits the bill

This phrase used to describe something that is just what is required and is derived from the Bill of Lading. This was an inventory of goods received and a promise to deliver in the same condition signed by the captain of a merchant ship. When the ship reached its destination the cargo would be confirmed according to the bill.

Halo, Autumn and Winter 2010

Fly by night

Most people think that the term 'fly by night' means someone who will turn up to do something only to have disappeared by nightfall, usually after being paid for a job half finished. May be so but a fly-by-night was also a large sail used only in specific wind conditions. The fly-by-night was employed instead of the usual collection of smaller sails, making it easier to manage. It could also only be used when sailing downwind and, more or less, the only time it would be used was during the night when most of the crew were asleep below.

Halo, Summer 2011

Money for old rope

A saying with its basis in nautical history that is a quite literal translation. The phrase used to describe financial gain for doing very little, actually derives from a fact that, in olden times, if a sailor landed in port short of cash he would sell lengths of old rope that would otherwise have been discarded.

Halo, Summer 2011

Over a barrel

Many moons ago the most common form of punishment aboard a ship was flogging. The Sailor receiving the punishment would quite often be tied over the barrel of a deck cannon obviously in an uncompromising position. Hence the phrase “you’ve got me over a barrel”
Halo, Summer 2010

Piping hot

When something is served piping hot it basically means it has come more or less straight from the hob or oven. So why ‘piping’? It is basically a reference to an old fashioned ship’s form of dinner bell or gong. Rather than ring a bell or banging a gong the boatswain would pipe a signal to announce that meals were being served.
Halo, Summer 2011

Shake a leg

The traditional wake up call used by armed forces was first used on board ships in port. The idea was to distinguish which hammocks were occupied by crew members and which were being used by lady guests or both. Basically everyone was told to show or ‘shake’ a leg. Those that were hairy were obviously sailors the smoother variety belonged to females, who were promptly rounded up and sent back ashore. Makes you wonder how many sailors might have taken to shaving their legs to get some extra shore leave.
Halo, Spring 2010

Up the creek—Haslar Creek

We all know that to be up the creek means that there is trouble in store, but did you know that the creek in question is believed to be Haslar Creek in Gosport. This is where the Royal Naval Hospital was built and first brought into use in 1753. The site was difficult to access, being enclosed by the creek and the sea, and it is thought that this was in order to prevent any press ganged sailors from doing a runner. So, to be rowed up Haslar Creek was truly to be in trouble – in 1745 more than 9 acres was set aside as a cemetery. By the time the hospital was closed in 2009, there was believed to be in the region of 8,000 military personnel buried there.

It must be said, however, that survival rates at Haslar were exceptional for the time, thanks to the enlightened attitude towards infections of James Lind, who was also one of the first to document the effects of lime and lemon juice on scurvy. Regrettably, the value of his findings was not recognised until 40 years later, a year after his death, when citrus fruit became a compulsory part of the Royal Navy diet.

Haslar Hospital also set up the first blood bank, in the 1940’s, to treat soldiers wounded in the Second World War.

Halo, Spring 2011

All above board

The phrase used to describe something as being plain to see, with nothing to hide, or as truthful, stems from a bit of nautical trickery practiced by warships and pirates alike. With such large crews on board it was common for ships within view of another vessel’s telescope to keep most of the men out of sight. At a distance they could possibly appear to be a peaceful merchant ship with only a small crew that offered no threat. All but a handful of the crew would be

kept behind the bulwarks, or below the top deck. However a captain with nothing to hide would have all his crew in plain view "above board".

Halo, Autumn 2011

A clean slate

During each watch aboard a ship a record of relevant details would be made by the watch keeper –courses, distances, speeds, tacks and any problems. These would be written on slate tablets with chalk. If, at the end of his watch, there were no problems to report the tablets would be wiped clean ready for the next watch.

Halo, Winter 2011

Boot camp

This name for cadet training schools first came into use during the Spanish American War. Sailor's leggings were known as boots which quickly became the nickname for a Navy or Marine recruit. So logically these rookies were trained in 'boot' camps

Halo, Spring, 2012

Dead reckoning

The phrase to described estimating a course of events or position stems from the sixteenth century when mariners would plot a course based on the last known position, time, compass course and present speed. However this method did not allow for unknown variables such as wind speed and direction, currents and drift. Of course this meant continued use of the process produced cumulative errors.

Originally the method was called 'deduced' reckoning which became 'de'd', 'ded, and eventually 'dead'.

Halo, Summer, 2012

Round robin

The origin of the name given to a tournament where every competitor plays each other in turn comes from seventeenth century France. If a petition was raised and it was preferred that the first signee was not identifiable they would use a ruban rond (round ribbon) that the petitioners would sign and attach to the document. British sailors adopted a similar method when petitioning about grievances. The document would be signed in a way that resembled the spokes of a wheel radiating from the hub. That way any ringleaders would be anonymous

Halo, Autumn, 2012

Mayday

It has nothing to do with poles and ribbons, the rights of spring or bank holidays. The international voice radio signal for ships and persons in serious trouble at sea was actually made official in 1948. Mayday is an anglicized version of the French phrase 'm'aidez' which means 'help me'

Halo, Winter, 2012

"Starboard" and "Port"

The name for the right hand side of a ship or boat has its origins in Viking times. They referred to the side of a ship as a 'board' and the steering oar was called the 'star'. The star was placed on the right hand side of the ship, hence starboard. It was because of the practice of steering from the right that the left hand side became port side. Originally it was called 'larboard' but was deemed to similar in sound to starboard. Because of the steering oar ships were tied to port by the left hand side hence 'port-side'.

Summer 2013

To hail from

Hail was almost exclusively a nautical term until the mid 18th century. It was customary for passing ships to 'hail' each other. The information swapped usually included the name of the ports from which the ships were sailing. They were said to 'hail from' there. Eventually the term passed into everyday language to mean where a person was born or grew up.

Autumn 2013

Skyscraper

Long before architects and building engineers came up with a solution to the lack available real estate in urban centres, skyscrapers were already doing pretty much what it says on the tin. The name skyscraper was the traditional term used to refer to the topsail of a ship. Whether the architects or whoever coined the phrase to describe tower blocks knew this is open to debate

Winter 2013

On the fiddle

The fiddle was the name given to rim around the square wooden plate used by sailors. It was designed to help prevent slopping over in rough seas and has been used on round porcelain plates to varying degree ever since. But the sailor's fiddle didn't just prevent spillage it was also a means of portion control. It marked the limit of how much each crew member was entitled to. Anyone found with food that crossed the boundary was said to be "fiddling" or "on the fiddle" - translated as depriving fellow crew of food. With the strict rationing necessary in the days of oceanic discovery it was considered a crime punishable by flogging.

Summer 2014

Keep your shirt on

The fiddle was the name given to rim around the square wooden plate used by sailors. It was designed to help prevent slopping over in rough seas and has been used on round porcelain plates to varying degree ever since. But the sailor's fiddle didn't just prevent spillage it was also a means of portion control. It marked the limit of how much each crew member was entitled to. Anyone found with food that crossed the boundary was said to be "fiddling" or "on the fiddle" - translated as depriving fellow crew of food. With the strict rationing necessary in the days of oceanic discovery it was considered a crime punishable by flogging.

Autumn 2014

Cranky

Cranky for someone being irritable stems from a mispronunciation of the Dutch word 'krenkd' or 'crank'. A crank was an unstable ship or sailing vessel. Usually the problem was down to bad design, imbalanced cargo, or a lack of ballast. This would cause the vessel to heel too far to the wind.

Winter 2014

Fathom

This was originally a land measuring term derived from the Anglo-Saxon word 'fætm' meaning the embracing arms, or to embrace. In those days, most measurements were based on average sizes of parts of the body. A fathom is the average distance from fingertip to fingertip of the outstretched arms of a six-foot tall man hence six feet.

Spring 2015

Calm before the storm

Although not exclusively nautical, this has been attributed to seagoing folk as a result of their constant and intimate interaction with the weather. Although not known at the time, an

approaching storm will drop the barometric pressure, creating a low directly ahead of the storm front. If a storm comes from a direction that is opposite to the prevailing winds, the prevailing breezes will eventually be overcome by the storm front. Just before this happens, however, there will be an equalization of wind speed from two opposing directions resulting in an absence of any wind. The meaning is not lost on landlubbers, before someone explodes in anger they almost invariably become overly quiet and, in some instances, even tranquil.

Summer 2015