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### **Everyday Phrases and their Nautical Origins**

#### **Ahoy!**

This traditional greeting for hailing other vessels was originally a Viking battle cry.

#### **Aye, Aye**

Aye is old English for "yes." The seaman's reply "Aye aye, sir," means, "I understand and I will obey."

#### **Bamboozle**

From the 17th century, it described the Spanish custom of hoisting false flags to deceive (bamboozle) enemies.

#### **Between the Devil and the Deep**

The **devil** was the longest seam of the ship, thought to be the first plank on the outer hull of a wooden vessel from stem to stern. When at sea and the devil had to be caulked, the sailor hung from a rope to do so. He was suspended between the devil and the sea — a very precarious position, especially when the ship was underway.

#### **Bitter End**

The end of the anchor line secured to a sturdy post on the deck called a bitt. The line was paid out in order to set the anchor. However, if the water was deeper than anticipated the rope would pay out to the bitter end . . . oops.

#### **Black Book**

From the 1300's - a collection of maritime laws and conduct that became known as the Black Book of the Admiralty. The punishments for offenses was harsh, to say the least. Drowning, starvation, and marooning were punishments for serious offenses such as repeatedly sleeping on watch. As used today, if you're listed in someone's black book, you have offended them in some way. Luckily for you, physical punishments no longer apply.

#### **Blind Eye**

In 1801, during the Battle of Copenhagen, Admiral Nelson deliberately held his telescope to his blind eye, in order not to see the flag signal from the commander to stop the bombardment. He won. Turning a blind eye means to ignore intentionally.

#### **Booby Hatch**

A booby hatch is a small, covered compartment under the deck, toward the bow. Sailors were punished (perhaps by the Black Book) by confinement in

the booby hatch. The term has come to mean (politically incorrectly) a mental institution, or to characterize some places I have worked.

### **Chewing the Fat**

Literally, eating the seaman's daily ration of tough, salt-cured pork or beef. Long before refrigeration, cured meats were tough but durable and it took a lot of chewing to make them edible. Has come to mean a friendly conversation (or talking too much, depending who's talking).

### **Clean Slate**

Prior to GPS and onboard computers, courses and distances were recorded on a slate. At the end of each watch these were transcribed into the ship's log and the slate wiped clean for the next watch. Has come to mean starting anew.

### **Cranky**

Possibly from the Dutch *krengd*, a crank was an unstable sailing vessel. Due to a faulty design, the imbalance of her cargo, or a lack of ballast, a crank would heel too far to the wind. Has come to mean irritable.

### **Cup of Joe**

Navy lore: Josephus Daniels (18 May 1862-15 January 1948) was appointed Secretary of the Navy by President Woodrow Wilson in 1913. Among his reforms of the Navy were inaugurating the practice of making 100 Sailors from the Fleet eligible for entrance into the Naval Academy, the introduction of women into the service, and the abolishment of the officers' wine mess. From that time on, the strongest drink aboard Navy ships could only be coffee and over the years, a cup of coffee became known as "a cup of Joe".

### **Dead Horse**

A ceremony held by British crews when they had been at sea four weeks and had worked off their initial advance, usually one month's wages (and usually long gone). The term '**flogging a dead horse**' alludes to the difficulty of getting any extra work from a crew during this period, since, to them, it felt as though they were working for nothing.

### **Down the hatch**

A toast that seems to have its origins in sea freight, where cargoes are lowered into the hatch. First used by seamen, it is thought to date from the 1930s and has been attributed to author P.G. Wodehouse.

### **Even Keel, Keeled Over**

A vessel that floats upright without list is said to be on an even keel and this term has come to mean calm and steady. A keel is like the backbone of the vessel, the lowest and principal centerline structural member running fore and aft. **Keeled over** (upside down) was a sailor's term for death.

### **Filibuster**

Buccaneers were known in England as filibusters. From the Dutch for *vrybuiter* (freebooter) translated into French as *flibustier*. It is now used as a political term meaning to delay or obstruct the passage of legislation (as opposed to

sailing vessels) by non-stop speech making.

### **Fits the Bill**

A Bill of Lading was signed by the ship's master acknowledging receipt of specified goods and the promise to deliver them to their destination in the same condition. Upon delivery, the goods were checked against the bill to see if all was in order. If so, they **fit the bill**.

### **Fluky**

A light wind at sea that does not blow steadily from any one quarter. Variable.

### **Fly-by-Night**

An easily set extra sail used temporarily when running before the wind (wind coming from behind). Has come to mean 'here today, gone tomorrow', or a less-than-stellar reputation.

### **Gripe**

A sailing vessel gripes when, by poor design or imbalance of sail, it tends to end up with its bow into the wind when sailing close-hauled. The sails flap around, forward progress is halted and she is very hard to steer. On land, the term means to complain, complain, complain.

### **Grog, Groggy**

Rum diluted with water. Brandy was part of a sailor's daily rations in the Royal Navy until the conquest of Jamaica in 1687 when rum replaced it. In 1740, Admiral Vernon decided his fleet got a little too much rum and issued an order to have the daily ration of one pint of rum diluted with water. Since Vernon's nickname was 'Old Grogram' because of the material out of which his (apparently rather ostentatious) 'boat cloak' was made. The watered down rum immediately became known as grog. Groggy is what happens to you when you indulge in it (even watered down).

### **Ground Swell**

A sudden swell, which is the rise of water, along the shore. It often happens when the weather is fine and the sea behind it appears calm. Said to occur when undulating water from a far away storm reaches the shoreline where friction causes the swell. In common use, the term **groundswell** means a growing change in public opinion.

### **Hand Over Fist**

Hand over hand was a British term for the act of moving quickly up a rope or hoisting a sail, which was a matter of pride and competition among sailors. It is thought that American sailors changed this term to 'hand over fist', and the term now means to advance or accumulate rapidly. In the 19th century, many captains used this practice to assert their authority. Hazing has

### **Hotchpotch, Hodgepodge**

Hotchpotch was a maritime term describing the method of equally dividing cargo and property damaged when two ships have collided and both are deemed to be responsible. Current usage of **hodgepodge** means 'a jumble'.

### **Idler, Idle**

Idler was the name for those members of a ship's crew that did not stand

night watch because of their work. Carpenters, sailmakers, cooks, etc. worked during the day and were excused from watch duty at night. They were called idlers, but not because they had nothing to do, simply because they were off duty at night.

**Junk**

Old rope no longer able to take a load, it was cut into shorter lengths and used to make mops and mats. Land-side, junk is all that stuff in your garage you know you'll need right after you throw it away.

**Jury Rig**

A temporary repair to keep a disabled ship sailing until it could make port, such as a jury sail erected when the mast was lost or a jury rudder as an emergency means of steering when the ship's rudder was damaged.

**Knowing the Ropes**

This is pretty obvious if you've ever seen a tall ship. It was such an important skill on sailing vessels that an honorable discharge from service was marked, at one time, with the term 'knows the ropes'. Land-side it still means a person with experience and skill.