

Nautical Expressions

by Capt. Bob Cerullo

Do you ever become confused about the meanings of terms like stern, starboard, port, aft, amidships or the head? Don't feel badly, the sea has a language all its own that is often difficult to fathom. The term fathom, for example, has come to mean to understand or get to the bottom of something. The English Parliament described it as the span between an average man's outstretched arms or six feet.

If we were aboard a sailing vessel and I asked you to point out the *martingale* you would be correct pointing to a kind of cable set up on the jib boom or flying jib boom that is used to bear the strain of the head stays. On the other hand if you and I were out riding to hounds and I asked the same question, you would be correct in pointing to a leather strap that goes from the horses' bridle noseband to the girth between the forelegs of the horse. It is designed keep the horse from rearing or throwing back its head. Then again, if we were a couple of gamblers who resorted to a system of betting in which, after a losing wager, the amount of the bet is doubled or otherwise increased, you would be doing a martingale.

Back at the barn if the vet says the horse has *founded* it means he is really sick and may not survive. On a ship the term founder means the vessel has taken into her hull enough water to cause her to sink.

Who of us has not used the term "pooped" meaning we are tired and worn out. On a sailing ship the word poop refers to the aftermost part of a vessel. So when someone on the ship says I will meet you on the poop they are saying the meeting will take place

on the short aftermost deck raised above the quarter deck of a sailing ship. The word pooping William Falconer's *Universal Dictionary of the Marine* defines as: "POOPING, the shock of a high and heavy sea, upon the stern or quarter of a ship, when it scuds before the wind in a tempest. This circumstance is extremely dangerous to the vessel, which is thereby exposed to the risk of having her whole stern beat inwards, by which she would be immediately laid open to the entrance of the sea, and of course founder or be torn to pieces."

In the business world an experienced person who knows the job is frequently referred to as someone who "knows the ropes". In the salty world of square-rigged sailing vessels "knows the ropes" was a tag given to experienced sailors who literally knew the location, purpose and names of a multitude of ropes that raised and lowered mainsail, the fore-t'gallant yard, the main-royal-port-brace sails, secure yards, mast and other essential movements needed to control the sails. It was a kind of merit badge for sailors to have their papers marked "knows the ropes".

Land lovers use the term "fouled up" to describe a situation that has gone awfully wrong. On ships for many years "fouled" described a situation where, for example, the anchor is fouled which means the anchor is caught up in its own cable or it has caught on something on the ocean floor that has caught or fouled the line.

One of my favorites the familiar expressions is "Between the devil and the deep blue sea." A kind of



a nautical way of saying no matter which way you go, it is going to be difficult. Actually the "Devil" in that saying refers to the longest seam on a wooden ship. It, like all seams, needed to be caulked frequently. To accomplish this, a sailor had to hang in a boson's chair suspended between the devil and the "deep", a term used instead of sea. It was a dangerous job particularly when the ship was moving.

Speaking of the "Devil", the term "there will be the devil to pay" is one that has crept into landlubber language. Here again the "Devil" is that cursed long seam only this time it refers to the job of crawling through the bilge and caulking the seam by applying "pay" or pitch. You can imagine why seaman hated that job almost as much as they hated being dangled in a boson's chair to caulk the devil seam on the outside.

I would wager that very few people, including

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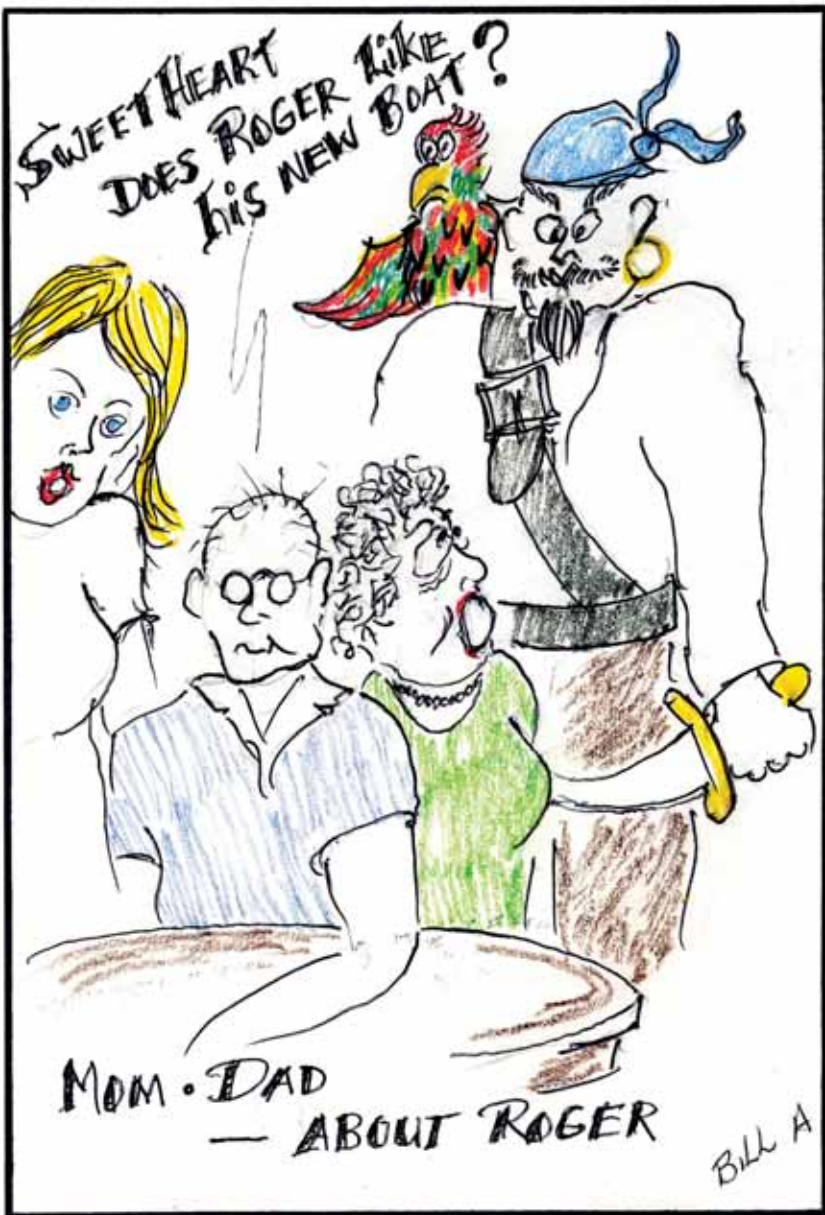
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those who use it frequently, would know where the expression "Hunky-Dory" originated. It has come to mean the person saying it is feeling good, is in good health, understands an order or is reporting a good condition. In fact, it is a corruption of the name of street in Yokohama, Japan where visiting sailors went to buy anything from a new dress for their girlfriends to the services of a lady of the evening.

The gunwale, pronounced gunnell, is a part of the boat that is the top most part of the hull where it meets the deck. In the good old days sailors would place guns on the gunwale. They may have originally pronounced it gun-wall then it corrupted to gunnell when it passed trippingly over their tongues after imbibing their issue of grog. The Royal British Navy issued rum to every sailor for hundreds of years and they called it rum until one eager beaver Admiral decided it would be a good idea to water down the rum to help maintain discipline. You can imagine it was not well received but "orders is orders, mate" and Royal Navy sailors named the watered down rum "grog" as a reminder of the blackguard who gave the order in the

first place.

The expression "shake a leg" also has its own nautical beginnings. It is often defined as coming from a command given when Captains or their mates were making sure crew members were actually in their hammocks. Of course in modern days it means to hurry up. One version comes again from the Royal Navy. In the 19th century wives, girl friends and other women were often allowed to sleep over when a ship was in port. Captains were reluctant to grant liberty for fear the sailors would not return. The women did not have to answer the call for all hands on deck, they were allowed to sleep. But, they were asked to "show a leg" over the side of the bunk to be sure the sleeper was attached to a shapely female leg rather than a hairy leg possessed a crew member who belonged on deck.

The next time you are feeling sorry for yourself when you become bewildered by the meaning of nautical terms, think of the poor 19th century midshipman aboard a Royal navy sailing vessel. Midshipmen had to "shake a leg" and to "know the ropes" even if they were "pooped" or there would be "the devil to pay."



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