

# Nautical Expressions

by Capt. Bob Cerullo

Continued on page 18

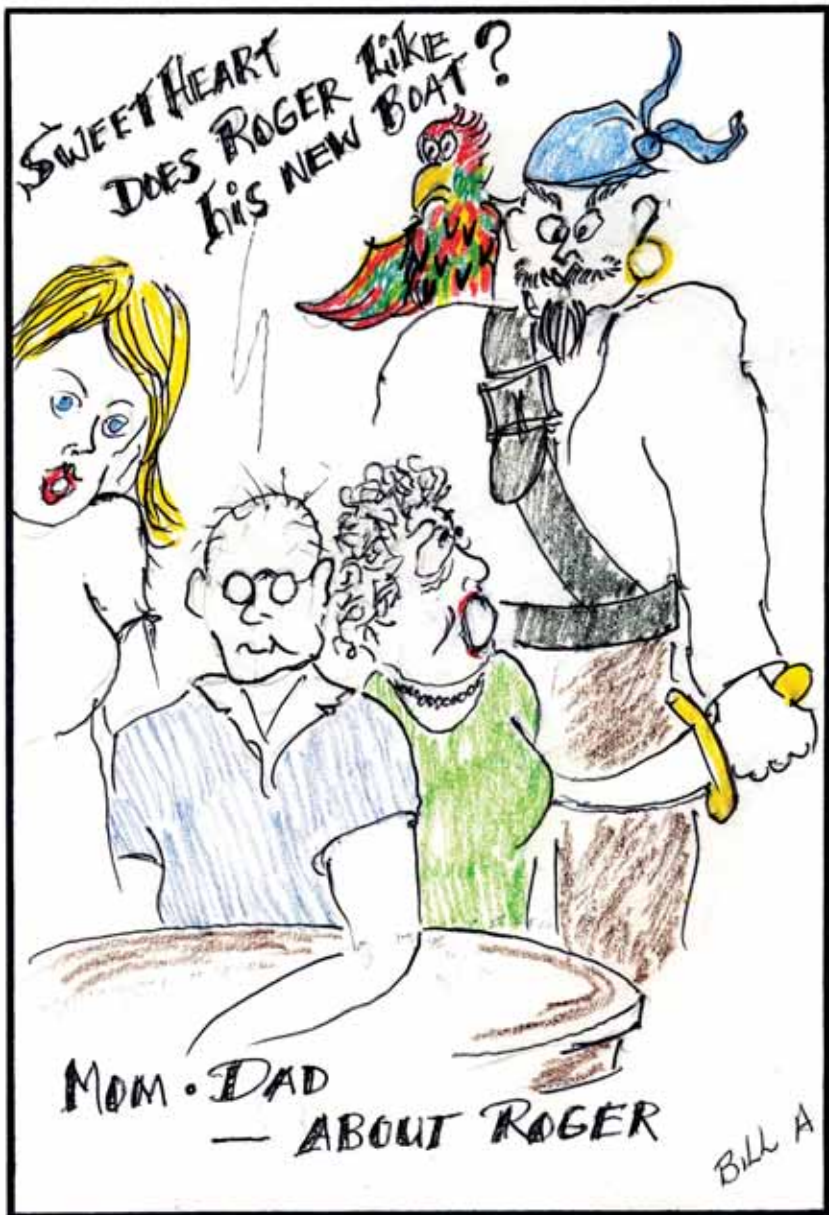
those who use it frequently, would know where the expression “Hunky-Dory” originated. It has come to mean the person saying it is feeling good, is in good health, understands an order or is reporting a good condition. In fact, it is a corruption of the name of street in Yokohama, Japan where visiting 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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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