



Texas Navy Association

Historical Article



Glossary of Nautical Terms

(As used in the late 18th and early 19th centuries)

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- Aback**
a sail is aback when the wind strikes it on the opposite side from the normal situation: can be done on purpose in maneuvering or can happen accidentally
- Aft**
the rearmost portion of a ship; at or towards the stern or after part of a ship; the opposite of bow.; From old English (aftan) behind
- Aloft**
at or toward the upper rigging of a ship; overhead, or above.
- Athwart**
across.
- Bank**
a rising ground in the sea, differing from a shoal, because not rocky but composed of sand, mud or gravel.
- Barque**
a sailing vessel of three or more masts and whose after mast is fore-and-aft rigged.
- Becalmed**
to render motionless through lack of wind.
- Belay**
When the order “Belay” was given, whoever is about to fire a canon must immediately lift the match from the area of the pan and the venter replace his (gloved) hand on the powder.
- Binnacle**
A case near the helm that supports the ship’s compass. The round balls on either side are solid iron.
- Blanket**
a sail is blanketed when the wind is prevented from striking it either by another ship passing close aboard to weather or by the sails on another mast.
- Booty**
Goods obtained illegally. Spoils obtained as a result of war or battle.
- Bow**
the front most portion of a ship; the foremost end or part of a ship; the opposite of stern.
- Bowsprit**
a large mast or piece of timber (spar) which extends out from the bows of a ship.
- Brig- Brigantine**
Two-masted sailing vessel, square-rigged on both masts. Brigs have been used as cargo ships and also, in the past, as small warships carrying about 10 guns. They vary in length between 75 and 130 ft (23-40 m), with tonnages up to 350. A brigantine is a somewhat smaller two-masted vessel, square-rigged on the foremast but with a fore-and-aft mainsail. In earlier times it carried a square topsail on the mainmast. A hermaphrodite brig is identical with the brigantine except that it carries no topsail on its mainmast; most U.S. brigs since 1860 have actually been of this type.

Broadside

a general term for the vantage on another ship of absolute perpendicular to the direction it is going. To get along broadside a ship was to take it at a very vulnerable angle. This is of course, the largest dimension of a ship and is easiest to attack with larger arms. A "Broadside" has come to indicate a hit with a cannon or similar attack right in the main part of the ship.

Burthen

the older term used to express a ship's tonnage or carrying capacity. It was based on the number of tons of wine that a ship could carry in her holds, the total number giving her burthen.

Careen

to careen a ship is to take it into shallower waters or out of the water altogether and to remove barnacles and pests from the bottom. Pests include mollusks (worms), shells, and plant growth. A ship needed to be careened often to restore it to proper speed.

Chase, to

to pursue a vessel in wartime with the aim of capturing, acquiring information from her, or destroying.

Colours

the name by which the national flag flown by a ship at sea is known, used to determine nationality.

Cutlass

A short, heavy, single edged sword, once used predominantly by sailors.

Cutter

small, one-masted sailing vessel, with a rig similar to that of a sloop except that it usually has a sliding bowsprit and a topmast. From 1800 to 1830 cutters were in service between England and France. They were also employed to pursue smugglers, their speed and easy handling fitting them admirably for the task. These revenue cutters were so well known that the name was applied to the revenue vessel even after steam had replaced sails, and vessels of the coast guard are still called cutters. The name is also used for a heavy rowboat carried on large ships.

Dead reckoning

Navigation without astronomical observation, as by applying to a previously determined position the course and distance traveled sense.

Fair wind

a wind favourable to the direction a ship is sailing.

Fathom

a unit of length equal to 6ft (1.83m), used to divide the lead (or sounding) lines in measuring the depth of water; and to calculate in the length of cables, rigging, etc.

Flash in the Pan

a misfire of the canon or gun

Fo'c's'le

This is a term used for the Forecastle or front most part of the ship. Usually under the front deck and above the lower deck.

Fore

at, in, near, or toward the front part of a ship.

Hail to

a greeting or call out to another ship.

Helm

the steering gear of a ship, especially the tiller or wheel; A position of leadership or control

Jib

a triangular sail set forward of the mast of a sailing ship, on the boom which runs out from the bowsprit.

Jury-mast

a temporary makeshift mast erected to replace a mast that has been disabled or carried away.

Jury-rudder

a makeshift arrangement to give a ship the ability to steer when she has lost her rudder.

Keel

the principal structure member of a ship; the lowest and principal timber of a wooden ship -running lengthwise from the bow to the stern to which the frames are attached.

Keel Haul

a term made famous by pirates. This is the act of throwing a man overboard, tied to a rope that goes beneath the ship, and then dragging him from one side to the other and hauling him out. Besides the torment of being dragged under water, this would drag the victim across the barnacle studded ship's hull and cause great pain and injury. This was a serious punishment and not administered lightly.

Knot

the nautical unit of measure of speed, one knot being a speed of one nautical mile (6,080 feet) per hour. As a measure of speed the term is always knots, and never knots per hour.; The joining together of sections of material (rope) in an interlaced fashion.

Landfall

the sighting, reaching, or discovery of land.

Land-locked

surrounded or almost surrounded by land.

Lead

an instrument for discovering the depth of water, attached to a lead-line, which is marked at certain distances to measure the fathoms.; The first or foremost position.

Lee

the side of a ship, or other object away from the wind; the side sheltered from the wind. It is the opposite side to windward.

Lee shore

a coastline on to which the wind blows directly - consequently it can be dangerous as the wind tends to force the sailing ship down on it.

Leeward

away from the wind; with the wind; towards the point to which the wind blows.

Letter of Marque

a commission or agreement usually issued by Admiralty or high authority, authorizing the commander of a privately owned ship to cruise in search of enemy merchant vessels. The letter of marque described the ship, her owners and officers, the amount of surety which had been deposited and stressed the necessity of having all prize vessels or goods seized condemned and valued at a Court for the payment of 'prize money'.

Lie-to

to be or remain in a specified position or location.: To prevent a vessel from making progress through the water - achieved by reducing sail in a gale.

Mainsail

the principal sail of a sailing vessel.

Mariner

One whose responsibility it is to help in navigating a vessel.

Mizzen (or mizen)

a fore-and-aft sail set on a mizzenmast;

the name for the third, aftermost, mast of a square-rigged sailing ship or of a three-masted schooner.

Mizzenmast

the third mast aft on sailing ships carrying three or more masts

Mopping

once fired, the barrel of a canon must be mopped with a wet mop to assure nothing is left burning in the barrel. The mop MUST be dipped in a bucket of water prior to mopping, to insure there is nothing burning in the mop.

Muster

to assemble the crew of a ship on deck for inspection or call a list of names to establish who is present and accounted for.

Muster-book

the book kept on board a vessel in which was entered the names of all men serving in the ship, with the dates of their entry and final discharge from the crew. It was the basis on which victuals were issued and payment made for services performed on board.

Passage

a journey by sea

Poop Deck

the deck at the furthest back of a ship. Usually above the captain's quarters, the poop deck was usually the highest deck of the ship.

Port

the left-hand side of a vessel as seen from the stern also called (larboard); also a harbour or haven.; a city or town on a waterway; an opening as in port hole; a type of wine Powder-Monkey the man assigned to guard the powder-box and more particularly, it's contents. He's responsible for giving out powder for the canons. The powder-monkey prevents anyone from having any burning object around the powder box.

Privateer

a privately owned vessel armed with guns which operated in time of war against the trading vessels of an enemy nation. Each privateer was given a 'letter of marque' which was regarded as a commission to seize any enemy shipping as a 'prize'. The name 'privateer' has come to refer to both the ship and the men who sailed in her.

Prize

name used to describe an enemy vessel captured at sea by a ship of war or a privateer; also used to describe a contraband cargo taken from a merchant ship. A 'prize court' would then determine the validity of capture of the ships and goods and authorize their disposal. 'Prize' always acted as considerable incentive to recruitment with many men tempted to join the navy in anticipation of quick riches.

Prize Court

captured ships were to be brought before prize courts where it was decided whether

the vessel was legal prize; if so, the whole value was divided among the owners and the crew of the ship.

Prize Money

the net proceeds of the sale of enemy shipping and property captured at sea - these proceeds were distributed to the captors on a sliding scale from highest rank to lowest seaman.

Quarter

(1)the direction from which the wind was blowing, particularly if it looked like remaining there for some time;
(2)the two after parts of the ship - strictly speaking a ship's port or starboard quarter was a bearing 45° from the stern.

Schooner

sailing vessel, rigged fore-and-aft, with from two to seven masts. Schooners can lie closer to the wind than square-rigged sailing ships, need a smaller crew, and are very fast. They were first constructed in colonial America and because of their speed became one of the favorite craft of the United States and Canada in the latter half of the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century. Schooners were widely used in the North Atlantic fisheries and the North American coastal trade until World War I, when they were replaced by power-driven craft.

Searching

once a canon has been fired, the barrel must be 'searched' using the corkscrew-like tool.

This is done to dislodge any hot embers from the walls of the barrel and although there should none, to remove any remaining material.

Ship

from the Old English script, the generic name for large sea-going vessels (as opposed to boats), designed for deep-water navigation.

Ship Parts

Sails	Flying Jib
Fore Staysail	Fore Topsail
Foresail	Jib
Main Topsail	Mainsail Rigging
Bowsprit	Fore Topmast
Fore Boom	Foremast
Gaff	Main Boom
Main Topmast	Mainmast
Shrouds	Yard Hull
Bulkhead	Bulwarks
Forecastle (Crew's Quarters)	
Forecastle Deck	Hatch
Hold	Keel
Mast Step	Main Deck
Quarter Deck	Rudder
Stern	

Shoal

a bank or reef, an area of shallow water dangerous to navigation.

Sloop

a fore-and-aft-rigged, single-masted sailing vessel with a single head sail jib. A sloop differs from a cutter in that it has a jibstay-

a support leading from the bow to the masthead on which the jib is set. A sloop of war was a small warship, variously rigged as a barque, brig, brigantine, or ship, that carried fewer than 18 guns in the British navy and fewer than 24 in the American navy. These vessels played an active role in the American Revolution and the French Revolutionary Wars. The sloop disappeared as a warship in the mid-19th century, but during World War II the British revived the term to designate a small escort vessel armed with 4-in. (10.2-cm) guns and depth charges.

Sound

- (1) to try the depth of the water;
- (2) a deep bay.

Sounding

ascertaining the depth of the sea by means of a lead and line, sunk from a ship to the bottom.

Soundings

those parts of the ocean not far from the shore where the depth is about 80 to 100 fathoms.

Spar

a general term for any wooden pole used in the support of rigging of a ship - includes all masts, yards, booms, gaffs etc.

Squall

a brief, sudden wind and/or rain of considerable strength.

Starboard

the right-hand side of a vessel as seen from the stern.

Stern

the rear part of a ship or boat.

Tack

the nautical manoeuvre of bringing a sailing vessel on to another bearing by bringing the wind round the bow; during this manoeuvre the vessel is said to be 'coming about'; the position of a vessel in relationship to its sails

Trade Winds

steady regular winds that blow in a belt approximately 30 N. and 30 S of the equator. In the North Atlantic the trades blow consistently all year round, from the north-east; in the South Atlantic they blow from the south-east, converging just north of the equator. The meeting of the trade winds just north of the equator created the infamous 'doldrums', where sailing ships could be becalmed for days or weeks waiting for a wind to carry them back into the trades. They were known as trade winds because of their regularity, thereby assisting sailing vessels in reaching their markets to carry out trade.

Under way

the description of a ship as soon as she begins to move under canvas power after her anchor has been raised from the bottom; also written as 'under weigh.'

Voyage

a journey by sea. It usually includes the outward and homeward trips, which are called passages.

Watch

- (1) one of the twelve divisions of the nautical day marked by two hour intervals;
- (2) one of two divisions of the seamen forming the ship's company.

Wear

the nautical maneuver of bringing a sailing vessel on to another tack by bringing the wind around the stern.

Weather

in a seamen phrase, describes anything that lies to windward. Consequently, a coastline that lies to windward of a ship is a weather shore; the side of a ship that faces the wind when it is under way is said to be the weather side a ship, etc.

Weigh

to haul up.

Weigh anchor

the raising of the anchor so that the ship is no longer secured to the sea or river bottom.

Windward

the weather side, or that direction from which the wind blows. It is the opposite side to leeward.

Yard

(1) a long tapering wooden spar crossing the masts of a sailing ship horizontally or diagonally, to support and spread a sail.

(2) a shortened form of the word 'dockyard, in which vessels are built or repaired.