

Naval Customs, traditions and punishments in the IN and the RN

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Customs and traditions are important factors in the growth and maintenance of naval esprit de corps. In many cases, they concern matters which cannot be adequately covered by official regulations nor, indeed, would it be appropriate for them to be dealt with in this way. Frequently the customs of the Navy originated in the need to have a code of conduct to ensure that not only officers worked together harmoniously, but also that their relationship with the men under their command was properly governed. The following examples of naval ceremonies and phraseology will give the reader a brief insight into this important part of naval life.

Crossing the line

To the average civilian, “**crossing the line**” means ‘overstepping the limit or boundary’; but to those familiar with naval or maritime culture, it conjures up images of a lively and rough ceremony, led by the Lord of the High Seas (Varuna or Neptune, as the case may be). A naval tradition since the 18th century, this ceremony continues to be practised by most navies in the new millenium, as it is an important feature of naval culture and heritage.

Appeasing the Lord of the High Seas. The Crossing the Line ceremony is performed when a ship crosses the equator and results in the initiation of every ‘novice’ (i.e. those who have not crossed the equator before) on board. The ritual takes place in the Royal Court with the express purpose of appeasing the Lord of the Seas and introducing the uninitiated to the ‘solemn mysteries of the ancient order of the deep’. Those who have previously crossed the equator undertake a variety of roles in the ceremony, dressing up as Lord Varuna himself and his consort and courtiers.

The set built for the ceremony is usually very detailed, with thrones for their majesties and chairs for court officials and arrangements for ‘dunking’ or shaving novices. When I commanded the ‘old’ INS Beas, the ceremony was conducted at least twice a year for the cadets on board during the foreign cruises. The appended photographs tell their own tale and almost every naval officer will have a photograph or two tucked away in his album to show the extent to which the ship’s company prepared for the festivities. The ceremony can be interpreted as a simple initiation rite or entertainment to relieve the boredom of the ship’s crew, however it also offers sailors an opportunity to ‘let off some steam’ and take revenge on a superior who was unduly harsh. Malice is however not the motive behind the ceremony, but it could result in upsetting established social hierarchies on board the ship – so those at the top of the hierarchy must also be willing participants in the festivities. The festivities are normally well-received by all of the ship’s company and key participants are profusely thanked for ‘their untiring energy, good humour and liveliness – and sportsman spirit’.

Certificates conferred “FREEDOM OF THE SEAS”. Once they had been ‘dunked’, the novice would be issued a certificate signed by King Varuna/Neptune. The certificate confers on the holder the “freedom of the seas”, exempting him from paying further homage to Varuna. Given below is one example of such a certificate.

A Proclamation

Whereas by our Royal Consension, Our Trusty, Well Beloved has this day entered Our Domain. We do hereby declare to all whom it may concern that it is Our Royal Will and Pleasure to confer upon him the Freedom of the Seas without undue ceremony. Should he fall overboard, We do command that all Sharks, Dolphins, Whales, Mermaids and other dwellers in the Deep are to abstain from maltreating his person. And we further direct all Sailors, Soldiers, Airmen and others who have not crossed Our Royal Domain, to treat him with the respect due to One of Us. Given under Our Hand at Our Court on board I.N.S. on the Equator in Longitude° on this day of in the year

(Signed)

Crossing the Line today. The ceremony remains part of a sailor's experience at sea. It continues to fulfil the role of an initiation rite. While it may not be an 'official' part of the Indian Navy's heritage, its persistence and popularity makes it an important and intriguing part of 'unofficial' history.

Splice the mainbrace

Splice the mainbrace is an order given aboard naval vessels to issue the crew with a drink . Originally an order for one of the most difficult emergency repair jobs aboard a sailing ship, it became a euphemism for authorized celebratory drinking afterward, and then the name of an order to grant the crew an extra ration of rum or grog. The phrase is a mainstay of pirate vernacular in popular culture.

Braces are the lines which control the angle of the yards. On the first rate men-o-war, the mainbrace was the largest and heaviest of all the running gear; the mainbrace at times was 5 inches (13 cm) in diameter. Gunners commonly aimed for the braces during naval battles, with the mainbrace being the prime target. If the mainbrace was shot away, it was usually necessary to repair it during the engagement; the ship was unmanoeuvrable without it and would have to stay on the same tack. Even repairing it after the battle was a difficult job; the mainbrace ran through blocks, so it could not be repaired with a short splice or a knot. Splicing in a large run of hemp was strenuous work, and generally the ship's best Able Seamen were chosen to carry out the task under the supervision of the Bosun. On completion of the task it was customary for the men to be rewarded with an extra ration of rum. The Bosun would take a sip from the ration of each of the men he had selected for task. Eventually the order "Splice the mainbrace" came to mean that the crew would receive an extra ration of rum, and was issued on special occasions: after victory in battle, the change of a monarch, a royal birth, a royal wedding or an inspection of the fleet. In cases where the whole fleet was to receive it the signal would be run up with a hoist of flags or signalled by semaphore.

A ration of rum a day was standard issue in the Royal Navy until 1970, when concerns over crew members operating machinery under the influence led to the rum ration being abolished. Restrictions were placed on those who could "Splice the mainbrace": any man or officer over the age of 20 who desired to take it received an extra issue of one-eighth of a pint of rum. Lemonade was issued those who did not wish for the rum. The rum was mixed with water to make grog for all ratings below Petty Officer. Only ratings marked "T" in the ship's books could draw rum, grog or lemonade when the main brace was spliced and no payment in lieu was available. Those under 20 were marked "U.A." (for under age) in the ship's book; they were similarly barred from drawing the daily rum ration. The issue of rum to Wardroom and Gunroom officers was stopped in 1881 and ended for Warrant Officers in 1918; splicing the mainbrace was the only time that officers could be issued with rum.

Other navies abolished the grog allowance far earlier (the U.S. Navy after the Civil War), but the order persisted, allowing the crew to take another drink in place of rum or grog. Permission to issue the order to 'splice the mainbrace' is heavily restricted - the Royal Navy allows only the Queen or the Admiralty Board to do so. Ships in most of the victorious fleets received the order at the end of the WW II; one ship received the order while still under attack!

Nowadays, the order is somewhat more freely given (the Queen issued it after reviewing the fleet off Portsmouth in 2002). I am not aware if the order was ever given in the Indian Navy, even though we have had several reviews of the Fleet(s) by the President.

Make and Mend

'**Make and mend**' is the term used in the Navy (notably Commonwealth navies) for an "afternoon off". It is derived from the time of sailing ships when sailors would, occasionally but regularly, be allowed time to "make and mend" their uniforms, which were not then supplied by the Royal Navy. Some sailors were, nevertheless, "on watch" to work (sail) the ship. The designated watch of sailors were still required to "turn to" if the ship's officers had to change the arrangement of the sails or rigging.

This half-day holiday also provided the opportunity to observe that ancient ritual called 'stripe wetting'; when one unfortunate soul watched helplessly while others quaffed gallons of beer at his expense. His only crime being that he had just shipped an additional stripe on promotion to a higher rank.

Did you know?

Admiral - The word Admiral is derived from the Arabic; it is a corruption of Amir-al-Bahr, meaning Commander of the Sea.

Aye Aye - The correct and seamanlike reply onboard a ship upon receipt of an order. The literal translation is 'At Your Service Always'. 'Aye Aye' is also the reply in the Navy from a boat which had an officer below the rank of Captain embarked.

Naval punishments

Taste of the Captain's Daughter. Many old salts would recall the old naval shanty, "*What shall we do with the drunken sailor?*", that we used to sing(?) during the post prandial songfests at mess nights after the good boys had gone home and the rest of us let our hair down in raucous harmony. One of the verses contains a line: '**give him a taste of the Captain's daughter,**' which some assumed meant the sailor was in for a good time with the old man's daughter. Nothing could be further from the truth as he was in fact going to be inflicted with severe punishment, an age old naval tradition, flogging with the lash or 'cat'.

The naval "cat", also known as the **captain's daughter** (since, in principle, it was only used under his authority), weighed about 13 ounces (370 g) and was composed of a baton (handle) and nine cords. The instrument traditionally has nine thongs as a result of the manner in which rope is plaited. Thinner rope is made from three strands of yarn plaited together, and thicker rope from three strands of thinner rope plaited together. To make a cat o' nine tails, a rope is simply unraveled into three small ropes, and each of those next unraveled, again in three. (The **thieves' cat**, to inflict punishment for theft, which was considered a particularly offensive crime on board ship, had each of its thongs knotted three times to cause additional pain).



The most severe form of punishment given in the Royal Navy was death, given only at a court martial. Rank determined the style of execution, with officers being brought before a firing squad. Death for seamen meant hanging from the yardarm. All formal punishments — ordered by the captain or court martial — were given ceremoniously on deck, the crew being summoned to 'witness punishment' and drama enhanced by drum roll and a whole routine, including pauses, untangling of the tails, a drink of water and so on which is believed were more intended for the observing crew than for the actual participants. John Byrn Jr., in his book, "Crime and Punishment" in the Royal Navy points out that, 'while the naval punishments developed in Elizabethan times may indeed seem harsh to twenty century sensibilities, they were fitting for the times'. Byrn also notes that 'much of the navy (sailors) population was thought to be drawn from the prisons, necessitating the

need to provide those who observed them with a grim lesson about the fatal consequences that would accompany serious violations of the Articles of War.'

Flogging round the fleet. The severest form of flogging was a flogging round the fleet. The number of lashes was divided by the number of ships in port and the offender was rowed between ships for each ship's company to witness the punishment. Penalties of hundreds of lashes were imposed for the gravest offences, including sedition and mutiny. The prisoner was rowed round the fleet in an open boat and received a number of his lashes at each ship in turn, for as long as the surgeon allowed— all accompanied by a piper and drummer playing the "Rogue's March". Sentences often took months or years to complete, depending on how much a man was expected to bear at a time. 'Flogging at the gangway' was a shorter process.

"Running the gauntlet" was another punishment reserved for particularly bad crimes. Prior to the ceremony, the entire crew were organized into two columns facing each other on deck. The prisoner was escorted through the lane formed by the crew to the tune of the "Rogue's March." Each man hit him with a short piece of rope with several knots (called a knittle).

While adult sailors received their lashes on the back, they were administered to boys on the bare posterior, usually while "**kissing the gunner's daughter**" (bending over a gun barrel), just as boys' lighter 'daily' chastisement was usually over their (often naked) rear-end. Bare-bottom discipline was a tradition of the English upper and middle classes, who frequented public schools, so midshipmen (trainee officers, usually from 'good families', getting a cheaper equivalent education by enlisting) were not spared, at best sometimes allowed to receive their lashes inside a cabin. For summary punishment of Royal Navy *boys*, a lighter model was made, the **reduced cat**, also known as *boy's cat*, that had only five tails of smooth whip cord. If formally condemned by court martial, however, even boys would suffer the 'adult' cat.

Notes

- The common phrase, "not enough room to swing a cat," is often claimed to refer to a cat o' nine tails.
- The phrase "letting the cat out of the bag" in the sense of revealing a secret may derive from the cat o' nine tails being kept in a red baize bag and being taken out when punishment is to be inflicted. For a sailor being punished for the first time, the secret of what the 'cat' is was thereby revealed.