

A Fish Tale with 331 (or so) Nautical Terms
Compiled by Jane Freeman, wordplayjane@yahoo.com [2009]

I'm a little under the weather, feeling blue, experiencing waves of nausea. Maybe I should see a doctor for a clean bill of health. Maybe I should quarantine myself. Sorry, I don't mean to gripe, or let the cat out of the bag, but I want to deflect any scuttlebutt. Let me tell you what happened. I'm not spinning a yarn here; this is recorded in my logbook.

The bigwig boss, who at first was so aloof and even snubbed me, suddenly turned cranky when I was on my watch. One day he barged in and, with an undercurrent of hostility, accused me of being a fly-by-night and a flake. Hey, I never flake out. When he told me "welcome aboard," I thought him first-rate. But now apparently he was showing his true colors. He lowered the boom and squalled: "We were short-handed. I hired you as my mainstay. But you're no great shakes, you're a mere figurehead. You're deadwood." His voice shrieked like a siren. "And, you son of a gun, you've overreached your bounds. I've done a tally and find you've rigged the books, fudged the figures, and dipped into the slush fund. You fouled up, crossed the line. Holy mackerel! I run a tight ship! There's no room for skylarking in this company. You're all washed up! Do you catch my drift? Shape up or ship out. I've a good mind to jettison you. In fact, you're fired. Now, you roustabout, shove off!" He looked ready to give me a flogging; I braced myself for a smack. We were at a standoff, but I managed to retort, "Hell's bells! Tell it to the marines!" before he steered me to the door.

Overwhelmed and taken aback in the wake of his bilge, and fearing he would keelhaul me, I sensed I was on the rocks, since he would give me no quarter. But why? There wasn't a glimmer of truth to his accusations. It was he who'd pressed me into service, to salvage his floundering, foundering, jury-rigged office, which was known to be in the drink. Maybe I'd misread the garbled hodgepodge of the dressing down he gave me.

Just as I was thinking that one halcyon day I'd overhaul, dismantle and plumb the depths of everything he'd said, like a loose cannon, in his overbearing way, he swept into the room and, looming above me, let fly, "You're a galoot, you dirty dog, an albatross around my neck! You have the devil to pay!" I edged away from him, protesting, wishy-washily: "Now, don't go overboard, Skipper; please don't get carried away." But no way could I stem the tide of his temper. I felt adrift. He was having a field day with me. I had no clue as to why we got into this flap, since I've been aboveboard, A-1 from stem to stern.

After all, we were in the same boat, working in close quarters. Now, having run the gauntlet, I determined to grin and bear it. Somehow I'd weather the storm.

The job, in the offing, had seemed a good deal. For a long time I'd been at loose ends, and always hard up. After weeks of casting about and trolling for work, by a fluke I found this gig. It would be my maiden voyage, as far as employment went, and a bonanza at that—a real argosy. The only other trades I'd ever considered were as a pilot and working on a caboose, but they didn't jibe. I procrastinated for a while, afraid of being landlocked in an office job, which might turn out to be like boot camp. I spent some time making lanyards. But as they say, time and tide wait for no man. Fearing to miss the boat, I convinced myself to fish or cut bait. I couldn't hold on too long to my knockabout life. I could wait no longer for my ship to come in. I decided to brace up, shake a leg and tackle the job, because off and on, ever since I was a little nipper, I've been scraping the barrel. This job was opportune; it would be a lifeline, and would keep me afloat. In desperation I took this one: any port in a storm. When I told my skeptical pal back home about it, he shrugged, "Whatever floats your boat."

Having been a drifter and an idler, I looked somewhat derelict, so I tidied up, became mainstream, got a crewcut and trimmed my beard to look less sloppy. I dressed to the nines in a pea coat, a blazer, bell-bottom dungarees, navy-blue Dockers, a watchcap, and deck-gray Topsiders. I stowed everything in a bulky duffel under my bunk, including a hammock and a packet of lifesavers. Now that I fit the bill, I launched this career. Every morning, eager to embark on my new adventure, I would rise and shine and get cracking. I felt footloose and fancy free with the ballast of a steady income. I was gung-ho for this windfall, with all its perks. I imagined making money hand over fist. Maybe I'd make governor one day. I imagined cruising toward a whale of a retirement. I was hooked.

At the office, I handled all the flotsam and jetsam, even though I wasn't hired as a flunky. In fact, I was listed on the masthead. My office was aloft in a posh, flagship skyscraper. I swabbed the decks, kept things spic and span and shipshape. I even proofread the galleys. When my boss took me to lunch, I insisted we go Dutch. We usually shared a submarine sandwich of turtle, marinated with rosemary.

Gradually I learned the ropes, began to know the lay of the land, kept abreast of things, learned the loopholes of the trade and the jargon for all the gadgets and gizmos involved, and truly believed I was making headway. It was all hunky-dory, and I was as happy as a babe in a pram.

So I couldn't fathom why he'd change course so suddenly and take the wind out of my sails. Here we were, at loggerheads. He came at me like a maelstrom. I felt not only thwarted, but walloped. He was rubbing salt in my wounds. How could I salvage my job? What a stick in the mud, I thought angrily. Then it was my turn to sound off. I told him to stand off, pipe down and keep his shirt on. But when he went after me, bearing down in hot pursuit, I almost keeled over and hit the deck. I careened away from his hulking presence—did I mention he's rather broad in the beam, with skin like scurvy and a nose like a rostrum? I just cut and ran. By and large, I've been bamboozled, hijacked and shanghaied. The job has become a no man's land. For a while it had been touch and go, before I got my sea legs, and success seemed like a long shot, but I thought I'd passed muster with flying colors. I thought I'd become a beacon to him. So why would he want to deep-six me?

Just when I was over a barrel, there was an unexpected sea change that put a new slant on things. He seemed to re-channel his opinion, as if he'd turned a blind eye to my alleged shortcomings. I had no idea where he hailed from when he asked me to return. "Now you're talkin'?" I said, becalmed, but I bit the bullet and zig-zagged back to his office again. There we chewed the fat and seemed to get squared away. At last, with a lopsided grin, he said, "Well, carry on." I was taken aback with this plain-sailing attitude. I had thought it was the bitter end, but maybe he'd prove to be an old salt after all. "Aye, aye, sir," I said with flimsy humor, adding, "but I wish you'd cut me some slack." To which he replied, "Don't hand me a line."

To possibly explain his reversal, there'd been a ground swell in the company. He had no recourse but to take another tack, and toggle back toward a show of civility. But I wondered if the coast was clear. Was this the calm before a storm? I was all at sea, and half wanted to bail out to avoid being taken down a peg or two again. Although I knew I was still in his black book, and that my progress was certainly choppy, I vowed to stay, come hell or high water, but kept a weather eye open in case he flared up, tried to pull a fast one, or gave me the old heave-ho.

For some time, he left me high and dry. In fact, we were like two ships that pass in the night. I interpreted this renewed indifference as his way of giving me leeway. But, had we cleared the deck? Were his jibes over? Were we on an even keel? I still felt like his whipping boy. I was careful not to rock the boat and continued to give him a wide berth. I minded my ps and qs, just in case he still harbored resentment. To fend off the possibility of being stranded and marooned, if scuppered, I battened down the hatches. I practically

lashed myself to my deck chair, up in the crow's nest. I sure didn't want to be put through the hoops again. I would have done anything to stave off his wrath, as well as unemployment. So I toed the line. Swamped with work, I stayed anchored hard and fast to my desk. My antenna was up. I was far from coasting, always ready to scuttle off, even as I tried to go with the flow.



Three months have passed. You might wonder how I'm bearing up. Truth is, I feel I'm between the devil and the deep blue sea. I'm ready to jump ship. Why? The job turned out to be a washout. I feel dead in the water. I'm pooPED, in the doldrums, listless and at loose ends. It's time to forge ahead. I need to make a clean sweep, start over with a clean slate. I feel I've missed the mark. To buoy myself up, get my bearings, get underway again, first I'm going out for a cup of Joe, preferably Starbucks. Maybe I'll splice the main brace and get good and groggy. Yes, right down the hatch, three sheets to the wind. I'll also have a square meal. Then, when I'm chock-full of food and water-logged with booze, I'll go to a rummage sale looking for junk, and maybe binge on the whole nine yards.

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- According to Vance Broad, Chief Sailing Instructor of the Mumbles Sailing School of Swansea, Wales, “tidy” comes from “tides,” and “stranded” comes from “strand,” the Dutch word for “beach.” <users.aol.com/sailgower/lexicon.html>
 - According to wordsmith.org/awad, “jettison” and jetsum” are linked. Rostrum, meaning dais or pulpit, comes from a prow that projects like a beak.
 - Also see *Everything I Wanted to Know About: Nautical Terms, Sailing Dictionary, & Boating Glossary* by Captain Peter W. Damisch, bluewatersailing.com/expressions, for phrases such as “all in a day’s work,” “all sewn up,” “armed to the teeth,” “bonanza,” “born with a silver spoon in his mouth,” “brought up short,” “deadwood,” “dirty dog,” “faux pas,” “galoot,” “great guns,” “hard up,” “hell’s bells,” “Johnny come lately,” “knock off,” “laid up,” “landmark,” “maelstrom,” “make both ends meet,” “pigeonhole,” “real McCoy,” “teetotaler,” hundreds more.
 - <http://the3rdcolumn.blogspot.com/2006/05/gibbons-burkes-compilation-of-nautical>
 - According to www.redskyatnight.com, blazer comes from the jackets the sailors wore on the *HMS Blazer*. A clew (or clue) is part of a sail; it also refers to evidence leading to the discovery of a missing sail. Glimmer comes from “glim,” which is a sailor’s term for any kind of light. “Binge” refers to a sailor cleaning out a rum cask and getting drunk.
 - According to fotthewuk.co.uk, “swept into the room” refers to oars called “sweeps.” “Hold on too long” refers to shortening a sail too late.
 - According to the [Online Etymological Dictionary](http://www.etymonline.com), “opportune” is from the Latin for “favorable,” as in winds, from “*ob portum veniens*,” “coming toward a port.” “Mariate” is from the French *mariner*: to pickle in sea brine. “Rosemary” is from *rosmarine*, meaning “dew of the sea.” “Bulk,” orig., “a ship’s cargo” (1440). “Bar,” bank of sand across a harbor obstructing navigation (1586). “Deck,” from *verdeck*,

a nautical word meaning to cover as with a roof (1466). The original meaning of “caboose” was nautical (1747), from German *kabhuse*: a wooden cabin on a ship’s deck; train usage from 1861. “Roustabout” (1868) is a deckhand or wharf worker. “Siren” is a sea nymph who lures sailors to their destruction (1366). Its use as a warning device derives from steamboats (1879). The printing term “galleys” is from the oblong type-tray that resembled a low flat boat called a galley. “Garble” is the illegal act of mixing garbage with cargo. “Steer” comes from *steuro* (rudder) and is related to starboard. “Govern” meant “steer a ship” (1297). “Splice” (1524), a sailor’s word meaning to split. “Hammock” (1555) is Haitian for fishnets. “Pilot,” from the Greek for helmsman (1512). “Antenna” (1646) comes from “sail yard.”

- A good source of sailor-jargon is *Royce’s Sailing Illustrated, Vol. 1: Tall Ship Edition*.
- A great website, with hundreds of etymological entries, is see-the-sea.org.
- Aloof: from a- (1) + M.E. loof "weather gage," also "windward direction," probably from Du. loef "the weather side of a ship." Originally a nautical order to keep the ship's head to the wind, thus to stay clear of a lee-shore or some other quarter, hence the fig. sense of "at a distance, apart" (1583). First use in English: 1532

