

A Brief History of Some Words and Phrases (Part II)

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Etymology is the study of the origin of words and phrases. Many of the phrases or words that are in use today originated from naval, military, or sporting terms which were used and have been in existence for hundreds of years.

I have provided below just a few examples of some of the words and phrases which are in common use today and a short history of their origin.

"Assassin": We use this word today to describe someone who has been hired to kill another. The term actually stems back to a fanatical Muslim splinter group which existed from the 1090s to around 1265. The group targeted Muslim rulers in the Middle East as well as Crusaders. Members would use hashish before or after raids. They were known as the "Hashishin". This term would later morph to the Assassin.

"At Loggerheads": We use this phrase today to describe people who are not only at odds with others but unable or unwilling to compromise. The term actually comes from a tool which was used in medieval navies. Ships would carry long sticks which had a solid iron ball on one end which could be used to heat and melt tar ("a loggerhead"). Hot tar could be flung at an enemy or used to patch up the ship. If there was no tar, the pole could be used as weapon.

"To Deep Six" or "Deep Sixing Someone": In common usage, this phrase is used to describe the destruction of a person or thing. The deep six portion of this phrase was used to describe a grave of some sort. Etymologists point to two possible sources of this phrase. The first is a reference to the digging of a grave which

is customarily done six feet into the ground. The second is a reference to six fathoms (or thirty-six feet) where it was unlikely that a victim would be able to swim back to the surface and would drown in the ocean.

“Giving a Wide Berth”: We use this term today to describe avoiding someone or something from a distance. In the days of old sailing ships, a boat would be anchored far away from other boats in order to prevent collisions caused by wind or tides.

“Spic and Span”: In modern usage, this term means something new and clean. The term was originally used to describe a new sailing ship. The “Spics” referred to the shining nails in the wood ship and the “Span” referred to the new wood in the planks.

“Knowing the Ropes”: This term means the same today as it did during the days of the old sailing ships in the 17th and 18th Centuries. Ships used ropes for their sails and knot-tying became almost an art form in the navies of the world. An individual who knew “the ropes” knew his job as a sailor.

“In one Fell Swoop”: This term came from falconry which was practiced as a sport among medieval nobles. Its origin comes from two different Middle English words. The word “fell” meant either “to fall” or “terrible” and the word “swoop” meant to snatch. It is a reference to how a falcon or hawk attacks its prey from the air.

“Riff-Raff”: In modern usage, this term is used to describe someone who is undesirable. In the medieval ages, “to rif and to raf” was to plunder dead bodies on the battle field and remove any items of value from them.

“A Pyrrhic victory”: This phrase is used today to describe a victory that came at too high of a cost. Its origin come from ancient Rome and refers to King Pyrrhus of Epirus who was able to win battles against the Romans legions but at such a loss of men and equipment that he eventually had to retreat.

“Reading the Riot Act”: We use this term today to describe chewing out someone for doing something stupid or foolish. The origin of this phrase comes from the Riot Act which was instituted in England by George I in 1716. This act made it illegal for 12 or more people to gather together and disturb the peace. According to the law, police or military personnel were required to literally read the act to individuals who were violating it before they could be arrested or disbanded.

“Armed to the Teeth”: Some etymologists point to this phrase as being associated with pirates in the Caribbean. Muskets were only one shot weapons. As a result, a pirate would carry multiple weapons in order to keep in the fight once one of them was no longer serviceable. They would literally carry weapons all over their bodies. Other Etymologists point to the 14th century phrase “to the teeth” which meant to be completely or totally involved.

“In the Doldrums”: The term is used today to describe someone who is depressed. The original term comes from the days of wind propelled sailing ships and describes a condition where there is no longer any wind to move the ship. As a result of the weather, sailors could spend weeks doing little at all but being bored and depressed.

“Throwing in the Towel”: We use this term today when an individual has given up after a long struggle or fight. The phrase comes from the 19th century and refers to boxing matches. If a boxer was losing, his team would be allowed to throw something into the ring to signify the request to end the fight. The team would frequently have towels or sponges which were used to clean off their fighter and would toss them into the ring.

“Tide you over”: We use this phrase today to mean something sufficient to get you through a rough time. This phrase comes from the old sailing days and refers to how a rising tide can push a ship over rocks or threatening obstacles.

“Bottoms Up”: We use this phrase to encourage someone to drain a glass of liquid, usually beer. The phrase actually has a long naval tradition and comes from the use of press gangs which would frequent seaside towns and cities during the 18th and 19th centuries. One member of the press gang would drop the King’s shilling into a potential “sailor” tankard or glass. Once he had finished his drink, the victim would discover that he had “accepted” payment for joining the navy. This practice led many Inns and Taverns to use glass bottoms for their drinks and encourage their patrons to check the bottom of their tankard prior to drinking it.

“Clearing the Decks”: We use this term today to describe the handling of small matters in order to prepare for larger ones. It actually comes from the days of old sailing ships where the deck would be cleared so that the ship could proceed into battle.

“Pouring Salt into the Wound”: We use this phrase today to mean making something worse either emotional or physically. This phrase actually comes from the naval tradition of putting salt on a sailor’s back after he had been flogged to speed up the healing process. Anyone who has actually had salt in an open wound knows how painful this process would actually be.

“Scratch my back and I will scratch yours”: We use this phrase to describe the mutuality of favors between two people. It actually comes from the use of flogging in the English Navy during the 17th and 18th centuries. In order to maintain discipline on a ship, Officers would have sailors flogged for violations. A sailor would sometimes informally agree to apply only light strokes (“scratching one’s back”) in the hopes that when their turn came to be disciplined, their fellow sailors would do the same for them.

“As the Crow Flies”: Today, we use this phrase as method of describing the shortest distance between two points. Ships in the 18th and 19th centuries would carry crows in cages. In fact, the topmost point on a ship was called the “crow’s nest.” It was widely believed that crows, once released, would immediately fly the shortest distance. The ship’s Captain merely had to sail in the direction of the crow’s flight. Exactly how crows would carry nautical maps in their heads telling them which way was land is anyone’s guess.

“Showing One’s True Colors”: This phrase is used today to describe a person who reveals some aspect of their personality or intentions which had been previously hidden. The origin of the phrase comes from naval combat when ships approaching each other would frequently not be able to identify friend or foe except by the flags or “colors” that were flown from the mast. One of the methods of combat was to fly the “colors” of the opposing side until you were in close enough range for cannons and then hoist your nation’s flag or color. This action was not considered honorable behavior during naval combat and would frequently earn the extreme displeasure (perhaps even terminal displeasure) of the opposing crew if it didn’t work. This phrase is closely related to the phrase “Flying False Colors” which was done by pirates to be able to get close enough to attack merchantman or to get into ports which would otherwise be barred to them.

“Swashbuckling”: We use this term to describe light-hearted sword play. Contrary to popular belief, the use of this term was not originally a compliment. It originated in the 16th Century and was actually two words: “Swash” which meant to behave violently with a sword and “buckle” which was a small shield. It was used to describe someone who did not know what they were doing with their weapons.

“Flash in the Pan”: The origin of this term comes from the early development of muskets. The pan was the place where the gunpowder would be placed and would hopefully be ignited by the sparks of the flint which came down after the trigger was pulled thus shooting the metal ball in the barrel. It was a bad day for a musketeer when there was a flash in the pan (a misfire) and the musket failed to go off.

And that is a quick message from the History Corner.

Sources: Bill Bryson, *The Mother Tongue: English and How it Got that Way* (Perennial, 1990); Albert Jack, *Black Sheep and Lame Ducks, the Origins of Even More Phrases We Use Everyday* (Perigee Books, 2005); Harry Oliver, *Flying by the Seat of your Pants, Surprising Origins of Everyday Expressions* (Perigee Books, 2008); David Feldman, *Who Put the Butter in Butterfly* (Barnes and Noble Books, 2005); Martha Barnette, *Dog Days and Dandelions: A Lively Guide to the Animal Meanings Behind Everyday Words* (St. Martin’s Press, 2003).

