

NAVAL TERMS

Ahoy. A nautical hail, once the dreaded war cry of the Vikings.

Airdale. A naval aviator. It can also refer to any member of the naval aviation community, officer or enlisted. "**Browns**hoe" also refers to an officer or chief petty officer in the aviation branch as they are authorized to wear brown shoes whereas mere mortals in other branches of naval service are forever tainted as common "**Black**shoes."

Anchor Clanker. Slang term for a Boatswain Mate or member of ship's Deck Department. Deck Ape is also used as a term of endearment.

Aweigh. The moment a ship's anchor leaves the sea bottom, the anchor is said to be aweigh. "Weigh" from the Old English infers movement. Anchors "away" is incorrect usage. But when a ship weighs anchor it is said to be under way even though it may or may not be making way (powered).

Aye Aye. Aye is old English for "yes." A bluejacket says, "Aye aye, sir," meaning, "I understand and I will obey."

Barge. An admiral's boat.

Beam. The width of a ship.

Belay [1]Stop an action. "Belay the whistling! You're no boatswain." [2] Make fast. "Belay the line here." The use of a belaying pin in days of sail most likely is responsible for coining

the term. [3] Disregard an order. "Right full rudder. Belay my last."

Bilge. The lower part of the ship were waste water and seepage collect. "Yuk, the mess cook is making this coffee out of bilge water." **Bilged.** Fail and examination. "Jones bilged her dc quals (damage control qualifications)." Also, refers to denting the side of a ship.

Binnacle List. Listing of the names of crew members excused from duty by the Medical Officer. The binnacle supported the ship's compass. Lists posted thereon were prominent.

Bluejacket. The first uniform that was ever officially sanctioned for sailors in the Royal Navy was a short blue jacket open in the front. A generic name for a Navy enlisted person.

Boats. From the Anglo-Saxon "bat" that stood for a small ship or vessel. Also slang for a Boatswain.

Boatswain. From the Saxon word "swein" which meant a boy or servant. The boat refers to the ship and not to her small boats.

Boatswain Pipe. One of the oldest and most distinctive pieces of nautical equipment, the pipe or flute, was used in Greece and Rome to keep the stroke of galley slaves. The pipe was used in the Crusades to call English cross bowmen on deck for attack. In time, the pipe came to be used as a badge of office by commanders. The whistle was used for salutes to distinguished persons as well as to pass orders.

A 1645 publication detailing honors for an admiral, orders; *"The ship's barge to be sent to fetch the visitor having the cockson with his silver whistle in the stern... Upon the near approach of the barge the noise of the trumpets are to sound and so to hold on until the barge comes within less than musket shot, at that time the trumpets are to cease and all such as carry whistles are to whistle a welcome three several times."*

Originally, a distinctive call on a boatswain's whistle sent the crew below decks or down below. Now to "pipe down" means to be quiet.

Meals aboard ship are announced by the boatswain pipe. Crew members who respond immediately to the call are said to have their meals "piping hot."

The four primary parts of the boatswain pipe are the buoy, gun, keel and shackle.

Boxing the Compass. Calling the names of the 32 points of the compass in order.

Bulkhead. Transverse or longitudinal partition separating portions of a ship. Landlubbers call it 'a wall.'

Bumboat. A boat selling supplies or provisions to ships. Derived from "boomboat," signifying boats permitted to lie at the ship's booms.

Cannon Cocker. A Gunner's Mate or one associated with the Weapon's Department.

Chaplain. Tradition gives the origin of the title as from the French. The legend offers that St. Martin divided his coat with a poor beggar on a cold wintry day outside of Amiens. It is

related that the coat was miraculously preserved and thereby became a sacred banner for the Kings of France. This cloak or cape, French "chape," was preserved in a place of prayer that took the name of "chapelle," or chapel, and the one charged with its keeping was called the "chapelain."

Chit. From the Hindstani word "chitti" and referring to a letter, note, voucher or receipt. "Where is your chit for the supplies sailor?"

Charlie Noble. The galley (ship's kitchen) smoke stack on early ships.

Colors. The national ensign. Also the daily ceremony of raising the national ensign at 0800 and lowering of the ensign at sunset. "First call to colors" is five minutes prior to colors. Naval ships underway fly the national ensign continuously therefore do not hold colors ceremonies at sea.

Coxswain. Or "cockswain" from the combination of "cock," a small boat, and "swain," a servant. It originally meant one who had charge of a boat and a crew in the absence of an officer.

Crossing the Line. The boisterous ceremonies of "crossing the line" are ancient and their derivation is lost. It is well known that ceremonies took place long ago when the ship crossed the thirtieth parallel, and also when going through the Straits of Gibraltar. Early ceremonies were rough and to a great extent supposed to try the crew to determine whether or not the novices on their first cruise could endure the hardships of life at sea. The custom then, as at present, is primarily a crew's party.

The Vikings were reported at an early date to carry out these ceremonies on crossing certain parallels. It is highly probable that the present day ceremony was passed on to the Anglo-Saxons, and Normans from the Vikings. As at earlier times, ceremonies of propitiation are carried on to appease Neptune, the mythological god of the seas.

One who has crossed the line (equator) is called a **Shellback**. The **Sons of Neptune** (shellbacks) prepare the ship for King Neptune and the Royal Party's arrival and conduct the solemn ceremonies.

Bluejackets treasure the certificate which testifies that "*in Latitude 00-00 and Longitude xx-xx,*" and usually addressed to all Mermaids, Sea Serpents, Whales, Sharks, Porpoises, Dolphins, Skates, Eels, Suckers, Lobsters, Crabs, Pollywogs and other living things of the sea, "*__(name)__ has been found worthy to be numbered as one of our trusty shellbacks, has been gathered to our fold and duly initiated into the solemn mysteries of the ancient order of the deep.*"

Members of Neptunus Rex's party usually include **Davy Jones**, Neptune's first assistant, **Her Highness Amphitrite**, the **Royal Scribe**, the **Royal Doctor**, the **Royal Dentist**, the **Royal Baby**, the **Royal Navigator**, the **Royal Chaplain**, the **Royal Judge**, Attorneys, Barbers and other "dignitaries" that suit the party. The uninitiated are lowly **pollywogs**.

A **Golden Shellback** is one who crosses the equator at the 180th meridian (international date line).

Cumshaw. Something procured outside official channels and without official payment. Word derived from beggars of Amoy, China, who said "kam sia" meaning "grateful -thanks." The Navy term usually relates to unauthorized work done for a ship or station usually obtained by bartering. "The shipyard welder

added the brackets in exchange for five pounds of coffee." A "cumshaw artist" is one who is adept at getting projects done or items for free or by bartering.

Davy Jones' Locker. The bottom of the sea. Davy Jones being Neptune Rex's first assistant.

Ditty Box or Ditty Bag. A small box or bag carried by sailors in which is kept letters, small souvenirs, and sewing supplies. Probably from the Saxon word "dite," meaning tidy.

Divine Services at Sea. William Murrell, in his book, *Cruise of the Frigate Columbia*, describes a typical Divine Worship Service on board the USS Columbia during a round the world cruise in 1838-1841.

"On Sunday mornings, immediately after quarters, should the weather permit, all hands are called to muster. The summons is instantly obeyed, by every one proceeding to the quarter-deck (the sick alone are exempted) where the minister stands in readiness arrayed in his clerical robes, and the capstan covered with the national flag, to answer the purpose of a pulpit. The commodore takes his station on the weather side of the chaplain; the lieutenants, and all other commissioned and warrant officers on the weather side of the deck; the forward officers at the fire-rail, and petty officers at the fore-part of the main-mast. The bluejackets take up their position abaft the mizzen mast, clad in white frocks with blue collars, white trousers, and straw hats, looking the picture of cleanliness; whilst the marines are stationed and drawn up in rank, on the lee side of the deck, headed by their commanding officer, all in blue uniform."

Drawing a Dead Horse. A "dead horse" is advance payment of wages. In the British Merchant Service, approximately a months pay was advanced when a sailor shipped. A ceremony was held when the crew "stopped working for nothing," usually after about five weeks at sea. The men made a horse out of canvas stuffed with waste material or out of a cask. Permission was requested to light it and hoist it out to the end of a boom or yard. Cheers went up as it marked the time the crew started to accumulate wages "on the books."

Dog. A metal fitting or handle used to secure a water tight door (WTD), hatch and scuttle. Dogging or undogging a single WTD may require manipulation of eight to ten separate handles, although under normal non combat conditions a single dog may secure the WTD with other dogs left open. A **dogging wrench** is a short pipe used as an extension on the fitting to gain leverage.

Dreadnaught. An early battleship characterized by a single caliber big gun with a main battery of guns of 11 inches or more, no intermediate battery, a secondary battery from 3 to 6 inches caliber and a speed of at least 18 knots.

Eight O'clock Reports. On shipboard shortly before 8 P.M. (2000) the Executive Officer, (second in command, XO) receives reports from the heads of departments. He in turn makes "eight o'clock reports" to the Commanding Officer. "Now lay before the mast all eight o'clock reports." Never 2000 reports!

Ensign. [1] The junior commissioned officer. Also known as a "**Butter Bar**" for the gold rank insignia collar device. May be

addressed as "Enswine" if lacking in wardroom etiquette. In addition, "**George**" is the junior ensign, the lowest ranking person in a wardroom, while "**The Bull Ensign**" is the senior ensign. [2] **Ensign**. The national flag flew from the flagstaff in port and the gaff at sea.

Ex. Short for exercise. FLEETEX. Often used in combination with words to describe fouled up evolutions; MOBEX, GROPEX, BOREX.

Exec. Shortened title for Executive Officer, second in command on a naval unit. Also, XO.

Fathom. Saint Paul relates in the New Testament that soundings were taken after a gale, and the ship was found to be in twenty fathoms of water. The Greek word *orgina*, which means to stretch or reach out with the arms. A sailor stretches out both arms and measures from finger tip to finger tip - an approximate fathom. More precisely, a fathom is six feet.

Field Day. A day set aside to clean ship. Also, to clean or straighten. "Seaman Jones! This compartment is a rat's nest. Field day it and report when it is **squared away.**"

Firing Three Volleys at Military Funerals. Best explained as a superstitious custom that was supposed to drive away evil spirits as they escaped from the hearts of the dead. Before the advent of firearms, the number three had mystical significance. In ancient Roman funeral rites earth was cast three times into the grave; those present called the dead three times by name, and on leaving the grave site mourners called farewell three times.

Fleet. From the Anglo-Saxon "floet," or "floetan." An organization of ships, aircraft, Marines, and shore based activities all under one commander. Even numbered fleets are in the Atlantic area and odd numbered fleets operate in the Pacific area. Also, a term for all naval operating forces.

Flotilla. From the old Spanish "flota." An administrative or tactical organization consisting of two or more squadrons together with a flag ship.

Foul Anchor. An anchor that is foul of the cable or chain is a symbol found in various Navy crests. The device is on the cap of American naval officers, the distinguishing device of a Chief Petty Officer, the collar device of midshipman, and on the cap badges of the British naval officers. Many sailors regard the device a sign of poor seamanship. Although, artistic to a civilian, it has been called a sailor's disgrace by some. The badge has been traced back to 1601 and Lord Howard of Effingham, the Lord High Admiral, who used it first as a seal of his office, but the device was used previous even to that time.

Gig. A captain or commander's personal boat. A recorded fault. "Jones received a gig at personnel inspection for his dirty white hat." Also, **gig line.** An imaginary straight line running down the front center of the torso for uniform alignment. Non alignment of the shirt edge, belt buckle and trouser fly results is a "gig."

Galley. The ship's kitchen or food preparation area. See **Mess** and **Mess deck.**

Gangway. From the Anglo-Saxon "gang." Meaning to go, or make a passage in or cut through. An opening in a ship to give entrance for boarding or leaving the ship. It may be either an opening in a bulkhead or railing.

Also, "Gangway," a command to step aside or make way. Who remembers not the messcooks cry, "*Gangway, hot stuff.*" Or in a jovial mood, "*Gangway, lady with a baby.*"

Geedunk. Items from vending machines or ship's store such as candy, soda and ice cream. Any dessert, sweets, or good deal. Also **Pogey Bait.**

Gunboat. Light patrol vessel unarmored for use in shallow coastal waters.

Hand Salute. The hand salute in the American Navy came by way of the British Navy. It is generally agreed that the salute is the first part of the movements of uncovering. That there was nothing in the hand is a possible explanation of the British salute with the palm turned out. From the earliest days of organized military units, the junior has uncovered in addressing or meeting the senior. Lord St. Vincent, in 1796, promulgated an order to the effect that all officers were to take off their hats when receiving orders from superiors.

Sketches of Naval Life, written on board the USS Constitution, in 1826, gives an account of a Sunday inspection on board that describes the salute of the day. "*The Captain and First Lieutenant, Mr. Vallette, are now on the deck; they pass around and examine every part of it, each man lifting his hat as they pass, or in default of one, catching hold of a lock of hair.*"

And in 1849, an officer records: "*Some very good officers to*

show a marked distinction between the petty officers and other part of the crew, have given instructions that on those occasions on which the seamen generally pull off their hats as a mark of respect, such as divisions, muster by the open list, etc., that the petty officers shall then only touch their caps."

In 1890, the hand salute only was decreed by Queen Victoria because of her displeasure at seeing officers and men stand uncovered when they appeared for royal commendation.

In the United States Navy, officers in the open uncover only for divine services. Men uncover when at "mast" for reports and requests, and in officers' country unless under arms or wearing a watch belt.

Honors. See **Rendering Honors.**

Holystone. A large flat stone used to polish the wooden deck of a ship.

Irish Pennant. Any loose or untidy end of a line. Lines dangling from a ship's rigging. Threads hanging from a uniform. "You have an irish pennant hanging from you pocket, shipmate."

Java. Bluejacket term for Coffee. For twenty years before "grog" was legislated out of the Navy, the rum ration was cut back and coffee and tea were supplied as a substitute. Congress passed a bill on 23 May 1872 that provided "*an additional ration of coffee and sugar to be served at his (the bluejacket's) first turning out.*" Not a surprise to most, the United States Navy uses more coffee than any other military organization in the world.

Jack-of-the-Dust. Jack o' the Dust. Person in charge of breaking out provisions for the food service operation. Originates with the British Navy. "Jack," a Royal Navy sailor, who worked in the bakery and was covered with flower dust. Also, "Dusty."

Knee-knocker. The coaming of a watertight door or bulkhead opening. Coaming edges are raised about one foot off the deck and strike the shins if one fails to step over them.

Landlubber. Seaman's term for one who does not go to sea. Perhaps from "land lover." Also known as landsman and more derogatory, a sandcrab.

Lucky Bag. A compartment or locker where masters-at-arms stow articles of clothing, bedding, and other items left adrift. Originally, articles were placed in a bag called the "lucky bag" which was in the custody of the master-at-arms. In a narrative of a cruise in the USS Columbia in 1838, the writer relates that the bag was brought to the mainmast once a month, and the owners of the articles *"if their names are on them, get them again, with a few lashes for their carelessness in leaving them about the deck."* The term "lucky" in this case is a bluejacket's twisted humor. One wag suggested another definition is "a sailor's wife."

Mail Buoy Watch. A practical joke pulled on inexperienced crewmembers and midshipmen which revolves around convincing the victim that mail is delivered to a ship at sea via a buoy. The more gullible victims are dressed in outlandish garb (lifejacket, helmet) and with a boat hook and sound

powered telephone directed to stand watch for the buoy and retrieve the mail.

Mate. A companion. Mate appears as early as the 13th century, as a corruption of the Dutch word "mattenoot." Loosely translated it means companion, or the person with whom you shared your hammock (one being on duty while the other slept in it. Hot bunking is not new!). In some trades, like that of stevedores, the French word "matelot" is used in the same sense as the English word mate. That being the person with whom you lift sacks which are too heavy to be lifted by one man alone.

Mess. From the Latin term "mensa" meaning tables. "Mesa" is Spanish for table and "mes" in old Gothic means a dish. The English word originally meant four, and at large meal gatherings diners were seated in fours. Shakespeare wrote of Henry's four sons as his "*mess of sons.*" The word "mess" that suggests confusion comes from the German "mischen," meaning to mix. Messmates, are those who eat together. Smythe's, Sailors' Word Book, yields the ditty, "*Messmate before shipmate, shipmate before stranger, stranger before a dog.*"

Mess deck. Eating area for the ship's crew.

Mustang. An enlisted person who continues through the ranks to officer status other than warrant officer. "You can't fool Mr. Roberts with that story. He's a mustang."

Nonrate. Navy or Coast Guard enlisted personnel in the first three pay grades who are not petty officers. Pay grades E1, E2 and E3 are nonrates. A nonrate may be a "**striker,**"

performing authorized on-the-job training to qualify for a specific petty officer specialty. Or, a nonrate may be "designated" in that they have met the training qualifications but not promoted to petty officer. "Electronic Technician Seaman Joan Pauline Jones has completed ET School and should be soon promoted to Electronic Technician Third Class."

Nav. Short for Navy, navigation or navigator. "How long you been in the Nav man?"

Navy Shower. Fresh water economy aboard ship may dictate using as little water as possible. Hence, the navy shower; wet down, turn off the water, soap up, turn the shower on to rinse off. If a ship's fresh water making device, the evaporators (evaps) have problems, a ship may experience "water hours" in which no showers are allowed except at select times. Generally, the smaller the ship the more experience the crew has with Navy showers.

Navigator. Officer responsible to the captain for planning the ship's course and the safe navigation of the ship. Also know as the "Naviguesser."

Officer of the Deck. OOD. The officer in charge of the ship and on deck as the Captain's representative. "Lieutenant Hazard has the deck," notes that Lt. Hazard is the OOD.

Old Man. Slang term for the Commanding Officer. The term for the Admiral is "the old gentleman."

Oil King. Petty Officer who maintains fuel oil records aboard ship.

Port. Larboard signified the left side on ships in the United States Navy until about 1846. It is recorded that in that year the word was passed on board an American man-of-war cruising off the coast of Africa: *"Do you hear there fore and aft? The word 'larboard' is to be forever dropped in the United States Navy, and the word 'port' is substituted. Any man using the word 'larboard' will be punished."*

The word "port" came from the British Navy from the orders of the Portuguese Tagus River pilots.

Peacoat. Short heavy topcoat worn by seafarers in cold weather. Originally made of a material called "pilot cloth." Name was probably pilot-cloth coat, pilot coat, P-coat, and finally peacoat. In the old Navy the topcoat was also called a "Reefer."

Plank Owner. A member of the original commissioning crew of a ship. In the days of wooden ships plank owners upon transfer or retirement were awarded a piece of wood from the ship. With metal ships a commemorative plaque or certificate is given to the commissioning crew members. In austere commands a plaque is received only if one buys it.

Rendering Honors. Originally, the one who saluted first rendered himself or his ship powerless for the time it took to render honors. In Henry VII's period the average time to fire a gun was twice in an hour. Under sail, passing ships lowered topsails. The point of the sword on the ground at the finish of the sword salute rendered the one who salutes powerless for

the time being. The British palm forward hand salute was intended to show that the hand was empty. The salute executed today by "present arms" originally meant to present for taking.

Rudder. Derived from the old Anglo-Saxon "rother," that which guides. The Viking "steer board" was on the starboard side of the ship. The sternpost rudder didn't come into use until the 12th century.

Saluting the Quarterdeck. Some hold that the salute to the quarterdeck is derived from the very early seagoing custom of the respect paid to the pagan altar on board ship, and later to the crucifix and shrine. Others hold that the custom comes from the early days of the British Navy when all officers who were present on the quarterdeck returned the salute of an individual by uncovering (removing the hat). The original salute consisted of uncovering. The salute, touching the hat, to the seat of authority, the quarterdeck, the place nearest the colors, is an old an tradition.

Scuttle-butt. Originally a cask of fresh water for drinking purposes used by the crew. Now any drinking fountain. Also, any ship board rumor or gossip. Taking a long slow drink, the sailor announced to anyone who would listen, "We're headed for Hong Kong. I heard it from the mess cook." Scuttle-butt passes through the ship rapidly, embellished and gaining creditability as it spreads.

Show a Leg. Awaking the crew at reveille, the call "show a leg" is heard. It originated in the days of sail when women often lived aboard ship. At reveille, a woman in her hammock would

display a leg and thereby was not required to turn out (get up) and turn to (go to work).

Skipper. Derived from the Scandinavian word "schiffe," meaning ships, or the Dutch word "schipper," meaning captain.

Starboard. From the Viking "steer board" or rudder that was placed on the right side of the ship.

Sword Salute. Generally thought to be derived from the oriental custom of the junior raising the sword and shading his eyes from the "magnificence" of the superior.

Sea Legs. Adapt to the motion of the ship. "The new man has his sea legs."

Snipe. Slang term for a member of the Engineering Department working below decks. Other affectionate terms for engineers are Bilge Rats and **Black Gang** (from the days of shoveling coal).

Son of a Gun. In the early days, sailors were permitted to keep their "wives" on board ship. The term was used to refer to children born alongside the guns of the broadsides. The expression questioned the legitimacy of a person.

The old definition of a man-o'-war was: *"Begotten in the galley and born under a gun. Every hair a rope yarn, every tooth a marline spike; every finger a fish hook and in his blood right good Stockholm tar."*

A British officer commanding a brig off the Spanish coast in 1835 wrote in his diary. *"This day the surgeon informed me that a woman on board had been laboring in child for twelve*

hours, and if I could see my way to permit the firing of a broadside to leeward, nature would be assisted by the shock. I complied with the request and she was delivered of a fine male child." Gunners Mate's to the rescue!

Square Away. To make tidy, neat, clean and secure is to square away. "Jones, there is gear adrift in the storeroom. Square away for sea."

Individuals are directed to "square away" when their actions or uniform are other than military. A sharp sailor or Marine is referred to as, "A. J. Squared-Away."

Tending the Side. Piping as a ceremony with side boys is a custom evolving from the days when visitors were hoisted aboard by use of the boatswain's chair. The pipe was used for the commands "hoist away" and "avast heaving." Members of the crew of the host ship did the hoisting. It is from the aid they rendered in tending the side that the custom originated of having a certain number of men, ("**side boys**,") present. In time it became a courtesy for high ranking officers and diplomatic officials to honored by sideboys and piping ceremony.

Taps. The word "taps" is derived from the Dutch word *taptoe*, or time to close up all the taps and taverns in the garrisoned towns. In a volume entitled, *The Military Guide to Young Officers*, by Thomas Simes, reprinted in Philadelphia, in 1776 there are instruction for the officer of the guard. "*The tat-too is generally best at nine o'clock at night in the summer and eight in the winter. It is performed by the Drum Major, and all the drummers and fifers of that regiment which gave a captain of the main guard that day. The tat-too is the signal given for the*

soldiers to retire to their barracks or quarters, to put out their fire and candle and go to bed. The public houses are at the same time, to shut their doors, and sell no more liquor that night."

A British military dictionary published in 1876 states, "*The term Post is given to the bulging which precedes the tattoo. This is the first part, the last part that follows it is the last Post.*" The last post is sounded on the trumpet or bugle at British military funerals.

When the American Navy adopted the custom of sounding taps at funerals seems to be unknown. Accounts of military funerals on board the *Constitution* in 1846 record the "*Dead March from Saul*" as the only music at a burial at sea. Muffled drums are mentioned in addition to the "*Dead March*" at the burial of Commodore Claxton at Valparaiso in 1841.

A letter to the *New York Times* suggested that the world famous bugle call was composed by General Daniel Butterfield, commander of a brigade in the Army of the Potomac, and that it was first sounded by the writer's father, Oliver W. Norton, brigade bugler, in July 1862, at Harrison's Landing on the lower James River in Virginia. The General reportedly wrote the notes on the back of an old envelope and summoned Bugler Norton and directed him to sound the notes. After a few changes, the call was finally arranged to please General Butterfield and ordered substituted that night for regulation "taps" or extinguish lights, which up to that time have been used by the US Army.

Twidget. Slang name for an electronics technician.

Unauthorized Absentee. Used to describe a person absent from their command or place of duty without authority. Often

spoken as an abbreviation. "Seaman Jones is UA this morning." Unauthorized absentee replaces the older terms, straggler, absentee, and absent without leave (AWOL). Also in slang terms, Jump Ship, Over the Hill, French Leave and others.

"Very Good," "Very Well." The response given by a senior to the report of a junior. The helmsman reports, "Rudder is amidship sir." The Officer of the Deck responds, "Very well."

Weigh Anchor. Weigh here is from the Old English meaning to move or to carry. To "weigh anchor" is to hoist the anchor off the bottom.

Way. Ship's movement through the water. "The ship has way on." "Sir, we are making way." "The only time the chief smiles is when we're under way."

Yarn & Sea Story. Sailors "spin yarns" or tell "sea stories" which may contain marginal truth. They differ from landlubber fairy tales in that whereas a fairy tale begins, "Once upon a time," the sea story begins with an assertion of truthfulness, "This is no s..."

Zero Dark Thirty. Very early in the morning or late at night. "Why are we getting under way at zero dark thirty." Also known as "Oh Dark Thirty."