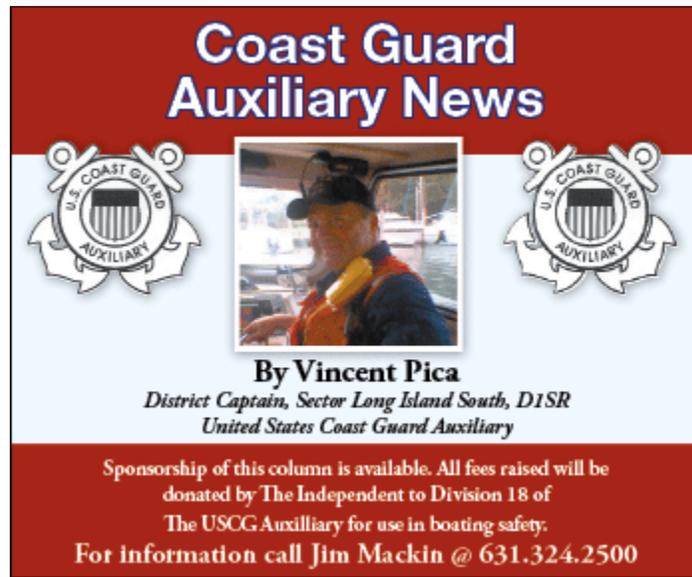


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INDEPENDENT

Coast Guard Aux NEWS ▶

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**Coast Guard
Auxiliary News**

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"Sabby the Lingo?" Maritime Language

Would you go to a doctor whose diagnosis of your problem was, "well, your doo-hickey isn't working right because the waddayacallit isn't feeding into your framis properly..?" I'd guess not. Each discipline has a language and that language conveys competency to the listener. We don't want to hide behind fancy words we don't understand but we also don't want to start off like the "doctor" above and completely alarm the listener about our competency. This column, and others that will follow it, is about making sure we come off competently and correctly...

From the Sea to the Land

Many more words than we think started at sea and were carried into everyday language due to its colorfulness or its "economy of expression" – maximum information in the minimum amount of words. Here are some.

"A-1" – No, it didn't start with the steak sauce. It started with Lloyds of London, the centuries old insurer, back in the 1700's... The letter was to tell merchants and mariners about the state of the hull and the number was to tell them about the state of the fittings. Hence, "A-1 by Lloyds" became the gold standard – for ships, steak sauce and anything else you wanted to convey at tops in its class!

"To the Bitter End" – No, there is nothing bitter about the taste (although the last draw on a warm bottle of beer always seemed a bit bitter to me!) On ships, lines, such as anchor lines, are attached to the bitt. When extended to the full end, it has reached as far as it can go. So, when someone on land "sticks it out to the bitter end", they have gone as far as they can go.

"Learn the Ropes" – Easy enough, eh? Particularly on sailing vessels, there are many "ropes" and the crew needs to know them by name, what they are used for and how to handle them – in the dark, in a storm, etc. There is only one problem. There are no ropes on boats – once a rope is taken on to a boat, it is a line...!

"Skyscraper" – Yes, this word came from the sea. The skyscraper sail was the highest sail that could be set on a ship. It was positioned at the very top of the mast on the old square riggers and was used in light air to get maximum propulsion. Like today's skyscrapers, you don't want to fall while tending to business up there!

"Hard to fathom" – Well, the fathom is a measure of the depth of the water, originally from the old Angl-Saxon word for "embracing" – the full reach of a man's arms. We know it as 6' although it moved around a bit through history (see SSP, "Measuring the World Since Ancient Times in Ancient Ways", 8/29/07) until the British Admiralty set it as 1/1,000th of a nautical mile (which actually makes it 6.08 ft.) So, when a sailor would pay out the sounding line over the side to find the bottom (hence, "sounding someone out"), he was trying to "get to the bottom of things." If he couldn't find the bottom, it was "hard to fathom"...

"Bearing Up" – When someone is under stress, a friend might ask, "How are you bearing up?" While you might think about Atlas carrying the weight of his world on his shoulders, it comes from the skipper's command to a helmsman to bring the boat closer into the wind – to bear her up closer to the wind – which gets increasingly more difficult to "bear" as you get closer and closer to the wind's direction...

"In the Doldrums" – While bearing up, you might find yourself in a funk, feeling low or "in the doldrums." The Doldrums – or the Intertropical Convergence Zones if you are technically inclined – are areas on both sides of the Equator where winds are very light (or hurricane-ish!) and where sailing vessels could languor for weeks without any means of propulsion. Pretty depressing!

"The Offing?" – You might hear from time to time someone ask, "So, what's in the offing?" The question is about what is just ahead – and naturally that has a nautical origin. The Offing is the distance from shore to the horizon – such as where you would begin to see ships returning home, as they came over the horizon, into the "offing..."

So, we'll do more of these, with an emphasis on nautical words themselves in nautical settings. But, now, when you are in a conversation and someone says, "Does he know the ropes", remind him that there are no ropes on boats – only lines!

BTW, if you are interested in being part of USCG Forces, email me at

JoinUSCGAux2008@aol.com or go direct to Lisa Etter, who is in charge of new members matters, at FSO-PS@emcg.us and we will help you "get in this thing..."