

Secrets of a real son of a gun!

THE naval origins of some of the richest language in the British vocabulary is in danger of being lost forever — so retired Lt Commander Peter Whitlock, a world-renowned naval historian, has decided to put the records straight. For example ...

'Son of a gun' is not in fact very nice. It's the 18th century 'naval' for any male child born on the gun deck of a British warship.

Before 1840 women were allowed on board to sleep with the sailors whenever the ship was in port. The 'All hands on deck' call, therefore, could sometimes be chaotic.

But the navy had a delicate way of handling this — with the 'Show a Leg' call. A well-turned ankle appearing from a sailor's hammock meant that the sleeper could sleep on.

Three sheets to the wind, by contrast, is nothing to do with beds: the expression means that even if a man in drink has three sheets (ropes that control the sails) he still wouldn't be able to trim his sails and steer a steady course.

Then there's By and Large ... meaning to sail not quite close to the wind. Hence a comfortable point, a compromise.

And Gone for a Burton: Burton was a special tackle for giving a strong haul in a restricted space, associated with the setting of the 'shrouds' of a mast or the opening up of gun-port lids. Burt-on, to pierce or gore. So the phrase means a man who was killed by action or accident.

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