

Crossing The Line



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Crossing the line 1830's style

In the nineteenth century navy the ceremony of 'crossing the line' was often performed as ships crossed the equator. Petty Officer John Bechervaise gives the following account of the preparations for the ceremony on board HMS Blossom in 1825:

'There were aboard the ship a great number of officers and seamen, who had never yet gone south of the tropics, and consequently were to be initiated into the mysteries of crossing the Equinoctial line and entering the dominions of Neptune. Great preparations had been making since our leaving Woolwich, for an event which promised to some part of the crew great amusement, to the other great fear. Many a poor girl at Woolwich, and at Spithead had been deprived of some part of her wardrobe to adorn Amphitrite; from one a night cap and gown had been stolen, from another some part of dress, and although I had no hand in it, I was as bad as the rest, for I was consenting thereto. An immense grey horse hair wig, sufficiently to reach well down the back of Neptune, had been purchased in England by subscription, accompanied by a venerable grey beard to sweep his aged breast, a tin crown and trident completed the regalia.

'On a review of all those who had previously crossed the line, I was selected as Neptune. In vain I endeavoured to defend myself from being deified, it was useless, I must be Neptune, all remonstrance was in vain; I took it, resolved to use the trident with mildness. Now reader fancy to yourself the writer of these lines with his legs and arms well blacked, his cheeks, vermillion, short and very large trowsers, a double frilled shirt, from whose ample folds the salt water

dripped plentifully, two swabs for epaulets, a long grey horse hair wig, a venerable beard of the same colour, a tin crown, a trident, and to complete the whole, a hoarse churchyard cough. Fancy all this I say, and Neptune, or your humble servant in this shape stands before you.'

The ceremony itself on board HMS Blossom was quite villainous and unhygienic, whereas that held on the Thames City, which had women and children amongst the passengers, was more family friendly. In the Emigrant Soldiers' Gazette and Cape Horn Chronicle published on board the Thames City on Saturday 27th November 1858 at Latitude 10.54 South, Longitude 32.45 West, the arrival of Neptune and his entourage is reported:

'On a declaration from the deity that, whilst coming along the deck, they had all been nearly choked by the smoke from the galley, which continues to stick in their throats, the "main brace," which appears to have been broken in an unaccountable manner, was "spliced," and this repair having been effected, the party proceeded at once to business.

To the sufferers and lookers on, a description of the scenes would be superfluous, but to those who may have been prevented from seeing them we may as well say that the "doctoring", the "shaving" and the "ducking" were all conducted in a most correct and scientific manner, and that if they would like to form an idea of the extraordinary grimaces of the victims they had better come up tomorrow morning and see little Dodd' - *a baby aboard the ship* - 'in his shower bath. All who have witnessed the latter operation must have noticed that the little gentleman is, to begin with, in a horrible funk the whole time, that he would give the world to open his mouth and have a good bellow, but that, not approving of the taste of salt water, he is obliged to keep his mouth shut and content himself with making horrible faces, wriggling and writhing until he looks as if he were all legs and arms. Such were the faces of Neptune's victims who had similar objections to the taste of tar and grease, or even a nice little pill about the size of a pickled onion, the one great difference between them and little Dodd being that the younger gentleman always looks clean and nice after his ducking, while those who emerged from Neptune's bath looked equally dirty and disagreeable, especially around the chin.

'In conclusion, we are happy to state that nearly all who were called upon, from the Commanding Officer downwards, came to their fate like men, and we will be bound to say that they, although precious glad it is all over, are equally glad they have gone through the ordeal, and will take much pleasure on some future occasion in serving others the same trick as did those who on Monday last conducted so ably the operations that invariably take place on the occasion of "Crossing the Line."

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