

Old Ironsides (The USS Constitution)

One of the primary tourist destinations our family planned to visit during our summer in Boston, was the USS Constitution, or Old Ironsides, as she was affectionately called by the Colonists. This name was assigned to the square-rigged sailing ship because she seemed to shed cannonballs like no other. The ship survived the battles of the revolutionary war and remains a naval commissioned ship yet today.

Old Ironsides ventures away from shore and into the Boston Harbor once or twice each year on special occasions, normally on the 4th of July. The Constitution is the oldest sailing, square-rigger in the U.S., however, she doesn't sail -- she is towed out and back. The Star of India in San Diego holds the distinction of being the oldest square-rigger that truly sails. The Star is constructed of iron rather than wood, that has allowed her to survive the ravages of time better and get under sail for brief periods when she gets out of San Diego Bay and beyond Point Loma.

I've had the distinction of sailing as a guest on the Star of India during one celebration. I had hoped to be a member of the crew and land a perch on one of the yard arms aloft during sea trials that day, but alas, I didn't qualify during the training. I learned the ropes, as they say; how to tie knots; read a few flag signals; and learn the names of the sails on the main mast; the fore mast; the after mast; and even the jibs, but I couldn't climb the rigging up to the crow's nest, not even through the "lubber's hole." I just didn't have the strength and endurance to climb up the rigging at a thirty-degree angle back from vertical. It takes a lot of strength to scurry around in the ratlines.

But, the officials of the Star of India graciously placed my name in a raffle for two tickets to sail on the next celebratory cruise as a consolation prize, after I washed out as a crewman. My wife and I were selected in the raffle to sail as VIPs instead of yeomen. It was a rare treat to sail with the officers on the poop deck and be served fresh seafood on ice, rather than sweat and slave with the scurvy rats I trained with for two months, "before the mast!"

When my family and I arrived in Boston in the summer of 1985, we found our way to the shipyard where the USS Constitution was tied up. I wanted to compare experiences with a different ship and crew. There was no crew onboard that day and Old Ironsides never left the dock. But, we were given a wonderful tour of the ship, not by a Park Ranger, as I had expected, but by a member of the U.S. Navy. Since the ship is still commissioned, she carries active duty Navy personnel.

During our tour I was impressed to learn the derivation of two highly important, and frequently used words--"head" and "scuttlebutt." The word, "head", as most people know, is the naval term for bathroom. But, I was always curious about the source of the name. It remarkably turns out that the word, "head," derives from sailing days when a wooden plank was fastened to the edge of the railing near the front of a ship, with large holes in it for toilet seats. The plank was positioned at the "head" of the ship to permit the wind to blow odors from bathroom usage away from the ship. The wind on a sailing ship in motion, is always from the back to the front, therefore, the toilet on a ship became known as, "the head."

Likewise, the term, "scuttlebutt," has its etymology in a term used on sailing ships. Fresh water is always a critical item when at sea because salt water is not drinkable. A ship always carried enough water for the crew to last many weeks before methods for separating fresh water from seawater were perfected. When making landfall, locating a reliable source of fresh water took top priority. Sailing crews drank large quantities of watered-down rum, called "grog," but they still needed large quantities of fresh water for eating, drinking, and washing "skivvies" when sailing long distances. The water was stored onboard in large wooden barrels, and served by ladle from a copper "scuttle," in the waist, near the middle of the ship. Because many of the crew converged at the scuttle throughout the day for water and conversation; news, stories, and rumors were passed around with the water, near the scuttle, and became known as, "scuttlebutt."

The term, "scuttlebutt," used historically in ships, and, later, in offices and around the water cooler, for rumors and unconfirmed information, has now evolved into the new word, "fake news."