

Crossing the Line:
Tradition, Ceremony, Initiation

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What could possibly compel a crew of nearly 4,000 sailors on a United States Navy aircraft carrier to crawl around on their hands and knees while being subjected to numerous disgusting indignities? Is this administrative punishment at its worst? A bizarre chemical weapons drill? The cause of this seemingly ludicrous behavior is an ancient naval tradition known as “Crossing the Line.” Performed when a ship crosses the equator, this ceremony has a rich and varied history.

Crossing the Line is nearly as old as seafaring itself; even in antiquity sailors engaged in rituals when crossing certain parallels. Our modern practice is believed to have evolved from Viking rituals, executed upon crossing the 30th parallel, a tradition that they passed on to the Anglo-Saxons and Normans in Britain.¹ Many other cultures had some sort of rite, religious or otherwise, upon passing an important landmark at sea. The Phoenicians, for example, gave sacrifices to their sea god upon passing the “Pillars of Hercules” (today’s Straits of Gibraltar).² Later, similar rites evolved in other countries for passing the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn.³ Today, a myriad of different certificates (and often ceremonies to accompany them) commemorate other passages. Among these are the Order of Magellan (for circumnavigating the Earth), the Order of the Ditch (for transiting the Panama Canal),

¹ Campbell, A.B. *Customs and Traditions of the Royal Navy*. Aldershot: Gale & Polden Limited, 1956. 38.

² *Ibid*, 38.

³ *Ibid*, 40.

and the Realm of the Czars (for Cruising in the Black Sea).⁴ Certainly many of these rites (especially the last) seem to have been fabricated by enterprising certificate publishers; nevertheless, some ceremonies (such as the Orders of the Blue and Red Nose for traversing the Arctic and Antarctic Circles, respectively) appear to be almost as hallowed as Crossing the Line.⁵

Early Crossing the Lines had a fairly serious purpose, however: they were designed to test the novices in the crew to see whether they could endure their first cruise at sea.⁶ Ceremonies in the seventeenth century were particularly rough.⁷ Today, Crossing the Line no longer has such serious undertones, although some of the novice/veteran dichotomy persists in the titles given to those who have and have not been initiated by the rite: those who have crossed the equator are termed “shellbacks” (often called “trusty shellbacks”) and those who have not are called “pollywogs” (also rendered “polliwog”). These “slimy” pollywogs (or “wogs” for short) must endure the entire ceremony at the hands of the shellbacks before being accepted into their number; those who complete the ceremony while also crossing the international dateline are termed “golden shellbacks” because the international dateline is known as the “realm of the golden dragon.”⁸ The term “wog” has even crossed into the Scientology religion, where it refers to an unconverted, uninitiated person. This crossover is most likely

⁴ Tiffany Publishing Company Certificates. <http://www.tiffanypublishing.com/certificates.html>

⁵ Seemanns-Slang in Englisch <http://www.besco.de/index/inslanb0.htm>

⁶ Terms, Traditions and Customs of the Naval Service. <http://www.bluejacket.com/tradition.htm>

⁷ Campbell 40.

⁸ Meyers, David J. Essex Holds “Golden” Ceremony. <http://www.surfpac.navy.mil/pressrelease/April97/204.htm>

because the founder of Scientology, Ron Hubbard, was once a junior officer in the Navy.⁹

What does a crossing the line ceremony entail? Traditionally, the night before, King Neptune (the most senior shellback) sends a messenger informing the Captain that he intends to board the ship the following day, and summoning a list of slimy wogs to appear before him.¹⁰ Today, many ships hold talent shows the night before, with the understanding that the winners will be given an easier time the following day.¹¹ Other ships hold push-up and sit-up competitions, likewise promising a gentler Crossing.¹² This summons does not exclude anyone because of rank; even Admirals must go through the ceremony if they are not yet shellbacks.¹³ Indeed, because many naval aviators have not spent much time on cruises, even some Battle Group Commanders are still wogs when a carrier crosses the equator, as RADM Ralph “Benny” Suggs was on the USS John C. Stennis.¹⁴

The actual ceremony revolves around the pretense of “preparing” the wogs for their audience before King Neptune. This “preparation” involves any number of disgusting, dirty, deprecating, and/or difficult actions. This may include crawling through garbage, eating colored food, allowing the “Royal Doctor” to squirt foul-tasting

⁹ <http://village.vossnet.co.uk/h/hpttrsn/wog.faq.htm>

¹⁰ Campbell 40.

¹¹ Pezzato, Joseph J. Shellback tradition is alive and well on USS Juneau.

<http://www.c7f.navy.mil/news/7fre1097.html>

¹² USS John C. Stennis (CVN 74) Crosses the Line. <http://www.navy.mil/homepages/jcs/neptune.htm>

¹³ Windas, Cedric W. Traditions of the Navy. Annapolis: Leeward Publications, Inc, 1978. 64.

¹⁴ USS John C. Stennis

liquids into one's mouth,¹⁵ and kissing the "Royal Baby" (the fattest chief on board) on the belly. Other embarrassing routines with the Royal Navigator, Dentist, Cops,¹⁶ Chaplain, Judges, and Attorneys¹⁷ continue throughout the day. The penultimate ritual is a "shaving" by the Royal Barber with a huge wooden "razor," after which one is dunked in a tub of water (often dyed a hideous color) to "cleanse" oneself for the final meeting with King Neptune.¹⁸ At this meeting, King Neptune appears with his entire retinue, Queen Amphitrite, and Davy Jones and officially proclaims the wogs to be trusty shellbacks. The day ends with each of the new shellbacks receiving elaborate certificates testifying to their safe passage, along with a wallet-sized card to prove the fact on future cruises. They who lose their cards may soon find themselves climbing back into a wog pool on their next deployment.

Where do these colorful characters come from? Neptune (or Neptunus Rex, as he refers to himself during the ceremony) is the Roman sea god, who originated as the god of fresh water but later became associated with the Greek sea god Poseidon.¹⁹ Poseidon was one of three sons of Kronos: Zeus, Hades, and Poseidon were said to have cast lots for the three kingdoms of heaven, underworld, and sea.²⁰ He generally appears with a trident (a three-pronged spear) and his consort, Queen Amphitrite.²¹

¹⁵ <http://home.inreach.com/stro/jsnavy.htm>

¹⁶ Windas 64.

¹⁷ Terms, Traditions and Customs.

¹⁸ Campbell 41.

¹⁹ Gerhardt, Mia I. *Old men of the sea*. Amsterdam: Polak & Van Gennep, 1967. 27.

²⁰ Rose, H.J. *A Handbook of Greek Mythology*. London: Methusen & Co. Ltd, 1928. 49.

²¹ *Ibid*, 63.

Triton, a merman son of Poseidon and Amphitrite, occasionally appears in crossing the line ceremonies as well.²²

Davy Jones has a number of stories concerning his origins. The Australians tell a tale of a fearsome pirate who sank to the bottom of the sea when crossing the equator and “now patrols the equator on his killer whale boarding any vessel that dares to pass the waters of the Kings [sic] Majestic Realm.”²³ Some ceremonies list Davy Jones as King Neptune’s Royal Scribe, who verifies that each wog has indeed crossed the line.²⁴ The most common tale is that he is the evil spirit of the sea, whose name is a corruption of “Duppy Johah,” duppy being the African West Indies name for “spirit” or “ghost” and Jonah being the Old Testament prophet who was thrown into the sea.²⁵ To go to “Davy Jones’ locker” is to be buried at sea.²⁶ A third explanation comes to us from the British, along with a vivid description of his appearance in the Crossing the Line ceremonies:

Some English sailors incline to the belief [sic] that his name is a corruption of Duffer Jones, a clumsy fellow who frequently found himself overboard. The only time Davy comes to life is in the ceremony of crossing the line. Then he is usually impersonated by the smallest sailor on board, given a hump, horns and a tail, and his features made as ugly as possible. He is swinish, dressed in rags and seaweed, and shambles along in the wake of the sea king, Neptune, playing evil tricks upon his fellow sailors.²⁷

²² Gerhardt 9-10.

²³ Dorian, Clare. Crossing The Line Ceremony for RIMPAC98.
http://www.navy.gov.au/9_sites/rimpac98/press_releases/rel110.htm

²⁴ USS John C. Stennis.

²⁵ Benét’s Readers Encyclopedia. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc, 1987. 242.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Smith, Daniel D. Navy Historical Facts and Trivia. http://www.sgaus.org/hist_fac.htm

Whatever his origin, Davy Jones is certainly, next to King Neptune, the most central figure in the crossing the line ceremony, perhaps due to his mysterious past.

All of this is in good fun, but what happens when this initiation goes out of hand? Recently, the issue of hazing has become of paramount importance to the entire military, in particular the Navy. In 1997, NBC's *Dateline* aired the story that some Marines had "blood pinned" (forced qualification pins into people's chests) some 30 jump-qualified recruits. Defense Secretary William S. Cohen responded by asking each of his subordinates to come up with an anti-hazing plan.²⁸ In response, the Secretary of the Navy, John H. Dalton, issued SECNAV instruction 1610.2 (enclosed), which re-emphasized the Navy's zero-tolerance policy for hazing and explained that "'crossing-the-line' ceremonies...are only meant to celebrate and recognize the achievements of individual Sailors or Marines or those of entire units."²⁹ The instruction also defined hazing and the various procedures for responding to allegations of hazing. "Blood wings" are specifically proscribed, as are "any activity which is cruel, abusive, humiliating, oppressive, demeaning, or harmful."³⁰

Since this instruction, captains have taken great care in ensuring that Crossing the Line ceremonies do not involve hazing. For example, on the USS Thach (FFG-43), CAPT T. D. Goodall issued THACH Notice 5060, which, among other things, made the

²⁸ Kozaryn, Linda D. "Pentagon Leaders Outraged by Hazing," American Forces Information Service. http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Feb1997/n02041997_9702041.html

²⁹ SECNAVINST 1610.2 From <http://neds.nebt.daps.mil>

³⁰ Ibid, 2.

ceremony strictly voluntary and allowed pollywogs to quit the ceremony at any time.³¹

He also stressed that the purpose of the ceremony is simple: to have fun!

Why all this trouble for a ceremony several thousand years old? The sea is eternal, they say, and so are the traditions that accompany it. As long as there are imaginary lines by which we travel, we will attach a special significance to crossing over them – a significance which also bonds the crew together in a way few things can. I noticed in my research that old veterans of World War II remember most fondly their Crossing the Line ceremonies; clearly, even before our more professional, risk-managed Navy they too bonded together, and fulfilled CAPT Goodall's decree: Have fun!

³¹ THACHNOTE 5060 Enclosure 3