

THE VNR DICTIONARY OF SHIPS & The SEA

John V. Noel
Captain, USN (ret.)

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Preface

This is the first, new, general maritime dictionary in over 30 years and thus, it reflects the world of the ocean and its ships as we are interested in them today. Man's new appreciation of the sea and its environmental, as well as its economic importance to his welfare, are recognized. The age of sail has not been forgotten, particularly as it is reflected in modern sailing for recreation and adventure, but the major emphasis is on the world's shipping as it develops technically. Some ancient nautical terms, old even in the latest days of sail, dealing with building and rigging sailing ships have been omitted unless they have survived in modern usage.

All major activities and disciplines of the sea have been considered in the selection of the words to define; including oceanography, ocean engineering, familiar sea mammals, fish and plants, weather, ships and shipping, seamanship along with operating in ice, cargo handling, commercial maritime terms, marine insurance, ships and gear used in ocean fishing, yachting under power and sail, and the sport of surfing. Whaling, fortunately nearly finished due to the disappearance of most whales, is not treated in depth. In selecting words from this broad spectrum, an effort has been made to choose those of interest to the layman and generalist.

This book is truly a dictionary in that it defines words and terms but does not explain how. Familiar words with a great many general meanings are defined only in regard to their maritime use, such as the word overhaul. Compound terms are usually listed under the noun, unless the adjective is the distinctive word, as for example, in naval stores. Whenever possible, words are defined according to their legal sense, such as vessel or short blast. Guidance to the pronunciation is provided only when radical differences exist, such as for the words *tompson* and *tackle*. Only naval terms of general interest are included. Acronyms relevant to the ocean are given but the term itself is only defined when its meaning is not obvious. Words, peculiar to the sea that are used in definitions, are not identified; it can be assumed that they are defined elsewhere in the book.

British words, so often different in meaning from their American counterpart, are noted but no claim is made that all have been included. Many British terms, particularly in yachting and marine insurance, seem to have moved across the Atlantic and these are defined.

I acknowledge with gratitude the assistance of Commander George W. Loveridge USN (ret.) whose review of the manuscript was most constructive.

vi Preface

The language of the sea, like so many others, is always growing and changing, and there are often legitimate differences of opinion among literate mariners as to current meaning. Words often have a regional meaning – a scow in San Francisco may be called a barge or lighter in Baltimore. Comments and criticism will be most attentively and appreciatively received and will be incorporated to improve future revision.

Captain John V. Noel, USN (ret.)

A		L		W		NUMERAL PENNANTS	
B		M		X		1	
C		N		Y		2	
D		O		Z		3	
E		P		REPEATERS		4	
F		Q			First Repeater	5	
G		R			Second Repeater	6	
H		S			Third Repeater	7	
I		T		CODE AND ANSWERING PENNANT		8	
J		U				9	
K		V				0	

International Code Flags and Pennants.

A

A. International signal code alphabet burgee. When hoisted singly means: "I have a diver down; keep well clear at slow speed." Spoken: "alpha."

A#1. An insurance rating given by Lloyds of London for the highest quality equipment on a ship.

A-60 bulkhead. A fire and flame resistant bulkhead insulated to meet certain temperature requirements for 60 minutes.

AA. Always Afloat. *See* always safely afloat.

AAR. Against All Risks.

AB. Able Bodied. *See* able bodied seamen.

aback. A sail is aback when sheeted to windward causing a braking effect on the ship's motion or when the wind strikes it on what has been the lee side. A ship is thus taken aback and may be forced astern.

abaft. Back of, towards the stern; used by a seaman instead of aft of.

abaft the beam. Behind a horizontal line drawn at the center of, and perpendicular to, the fore and aft axis of the ship.

abalone. A large edible marine snail or gastropod with a single protective shell and a muscular foot used for locomotion and firm attachment to submerged rocks near the shore. Found along the rocky coasts of all continents and many islands. Called abs (plural) for short in California; ormer, omar or Venus Ears in the United Kingdom.

abandonment. A marine insurance term used to designate damage to a ship equivalent to total loss.

abeam. Said of something that is to the side of a ship, midway between dead ahead and dead astern.

able. In seamen's language means capable, seaworthy, and well equipped in describing a ship.

able bodied seaman (AB). An experienced deck hand, superior to an ordinary seaman; one who can "reef, hand and steer."

aboard. In or on any ship or station. A sailor properly serves in a ship.

about. To go or come about is to tack in a sailboat, i.e. to steer the bow into and then across the wind in order to have the wind blow against the other side of the sail.

abreast. By the side of. A ship may lie abreast or alongside of another.

ABS. American Bureau of Shipping. *See* classification. Also Acrylic Butadiene Styrene, a plastic used to mold small boats.

absence flag or indicator. A flag that indicates the absence of the ship's owner, master, or commanding officer. Also called an absentee. In a yacht, it is a small, rectangular blue flag during the day and a blue light at night.

absentee. *See* absence indicator.

aburton. A cargo stowage word describing cargo stowed athwartships instead of fore-and-aft.

abyss. A modern word for ocean deep. The abyssal zone extends from the four degree isotherm (1000-3000 meters) to the ocean bottom. *See* benthic division, hadal, bathal.

abyssal hill. A small topographic feature of the deep ocean floor; 2000 to 3000 feet high and a few miles wide.

abyssal plain. A nearly flat, large area of very deep ocean floor with a slope of less than five degrees per mile. Term now used instead of deep to denote the ocean bottom.

abyssobenthic. A term describing sea life on the ocean floor or abyssal plain. *See* bathybenthic, bathypelagic.

abyssopelagic. A term describing fish and other animals living in ocean depths over 6000 feet deep. *See* bathypelagic, bathybenthic.

acanthaster. A coral-eating starfish that destroys coral reefs. Also called crown-of-thorns.

acceleration of the tide. *See* tide.

accommodation ladder. Portable steps from the gangway (access to the ship) to the water with platforms at the top and bottom. Sometimes called a gangway ladder but term should never refer to a gangway. *See* gangway, ladder.

accommodations. Old word for the living quarters aboard ship.

acey deucey. A nautical version of backgammon, popular in the Navy.

acorn. Small ornamental conical or globular piece of wood that once retained the windvane on top of the masthead of a square-rigger.

acropora. A variety of green, mauve, and blue hard coral attaining heights up to eight feet in shapes of branches or umbrellas.

"Act of God." An expression used in marine insurance and chartering to indicate a misfortune or loss which could not have been prevented by reasonable precaution. Same as *force majeure*.

address commission. A chartering term. A percentage of the freight sometimes paid to charterers upon the signing of the bills of lading. If none is due, the vessel is free of address.

adjustable pitch propeller. Adjustable blades that increase, decrease, or reverse the angle at which they push the water; permits the use of a constant speed motor or engine. *See variable pitch propeller.*

admeasurement, certificate of. Certificate issued by the U.S. Customs listing exempted spaces in computing the registered tonnage of the ship.

admeasurer. Person who measures the inside of a ship for registry purposes.

admiral. The highest ranking naval officer of flag rank. Also among North Sea fishermen, the senior captain who directs operations when several vessels are fishing together. In sailing ship days, a long wooden fid used to open the eyes of hemp rigging.

admiralty. The system of jurisprudence relating to both civil and criminal maritime law. Admiralty courts have jurisdiction over all matters relating to the sea. In the U.S., the Constitution grants it to all navigable waters; in other countries, it usually extends only to the sea below the low water mark in tidal waters.

adrift. Free upon the waters; neither moored nor anchored in any way nor under any propulsive power. In naval usage, means not properly stowed.

advance. Distance a ship continues to travel on the original course while undergoing a turning maneuver; measured from the point at which the rudder was put over to the point where the ship has arrived on her new course. *See transfer.*

advance staysail. A light, four-sided staysail set above the main staysail in schooner-rigged yachts.

advantage. A tackle is rigged or rove to advantage when the moving block holds the hauling part. If the hauling part leads to the fixed block, there is less mechanical advantage and thus the tackle is rigged to disadvantage.

advection fog. Fog formed at sea by warm humid air over cold water.

adventure. A commercial venture. In marine insurance, a period or risk, whether or not insured. *See frustration of the adventure.*

adze. A hand wood-working tool with the cutting edge set at right angle to the handle; used by shipwrights for trimming planks and timbers.

4 aeolian dust

aeolian dust. Fine sand blown off deserts combined with cosmic dust, organic debris, salt, and man-made pollution to form sea haze.

afloat. Supported by water; not aground.

afore. Archaic word for forward of.

A frame. A triangular metal tubular frame used to support a latteen sail in a catamaran. Also called bipod spars.

aft. Towards the ship's stern as in "go aft." A seaman says "abaft," not "aft of."

after. An adjective meaning towards the stern as in the after engine room or the after mast.

afterbody. The after part of a ship's hull, abaft the middle or midships.

after bow (quarter) spring. A mooring line at the bow (quarter) that leads aft from the ship to the pier. *See mooring line.*

aftercastle. Old word for poop, the aftermost structure on deck; no longer used.

afterguard. The officers who traditionally lived aft. Now a yachting term for the owner and his guests. The officers of a yacht club.

afterguy. A line controlling the fore-and-aft trim of the spinnaker pole.

afterhoods. In wooden ship construction, all the after ends of the planking fitted into the sternpost.

afterpeak. *See peak.*

after perpendicular. The frame station farthest aft, usually at the intersection of the waterline and the after end of the sternpost.

afterrake. Part of the stern that overhangs the keel.

afterspring. *See spring.*

agar. A jelly (colloid) made from an algae known as agarophyte and used principally for bacteria culture, the food industry, and the production of beer, wine, and cosmetics. *See algin.*

age of the moon. The time since the last new moon.

age of the tide. The interval between the time of new or full moon and the maximum effect of these phases upon the range of tide or the speed of tidal currents.

Ageton's. A navigational method that starts with the Dead Reckoning position; devised by Adm. Arthur Ageton who is also known for his sight reduction table, a government publication, H.O. 211.

agonic line. A line that joins points on the earth's surface which do not have magnetic variation.

aground. A ship resting on the ocean floor. When put aground or allowed to take ground deliberately, a ship is said to take ground. If done accidentally, she is run aground. *See* grounding, stranding.

Aguaje. The extensive discoloration of water off the coast of Peru caused by the sudden death of plankton due to sudden changes in the temperature of the sea.

Agulhas current. A strong branch of the South Indian Ocean Equatorial current that flows south through the Mozambique Channel along the east coast of Africa and deflected eastward by the Agulhas Bank.

ahead. Forward of the bow. Also a ship may go ahead slowly but when she backs, she goes astern.

Ahoy. A traditional nautical hail, still used in the Navy but usually replaced elsewhere, these days, by "Hello" or "Hi there."

ahull. A vessel that spreads no canvas nor uses engines in very heavy weather is lying ahull as it drifts; sometimes a sound tactic. Also called hulling. *See* heave to.

Air Almanac. Similar to the Nautical Almanac but designed for celestial navigating in aircraft instead of surface ships and thus arranged somewhat differently; published by the Naval Observatory. *See* Nautical Almanac.

air ejector. In a steam power plant, a device that removes air from a condenser thereby increasing its efficiency.

airfoil. In the maritime sense, the curve of a sail over its whole area.

air lift. A suction pump used to draw up sand and debris from a wreck to recover artifacts and other treasures. Also a spraytight fitting or opening on deck used for the escape of ventilating air in a ship.

airlock. A double door that preserves the air pressure in a ship's fireroom or any other pressurized space and that lets people come and go.

airport. A round opening in a ship's side fitted with a hinged glass cover (portlight) and a metal cover (deadlight or Navy term, battleport). A ventilating deadlight as well as a windscoop may be inserted. British term: scuttle or sidescuttle.

air register. An air regulating device in the casing of a boiler.

airscoop. Same as windscoop.

6 Alaska current

Alaska current. The north flowing branch of the Aleutian current carrying relatively warm water. It flows into the Gulf of Alaska where it circulates counter-clockwise.

albacore. Part of the tuna and mackerel family, distinguished by its very long pectoral fins, white meat and fighting spirit when hooked. *Thunnus alalunga* is found worldwide, grows to 90 pounds and is important commercially.

albatross. A large bird of the petrel family with a wing span of up to 20 feet. The wandering albatross follows ships far at sea for months.

alcyonian. A form of soft coral in pink, green and blue. It swells up at night to large dimensions and then shrinks with the arrival of day.

Aldis lamp. A portable light used for signaling by ships and aircraft.

alee. On or toward the sheltered side of a ship or boat, away from the wind. Except for the expression hard alee, concerning the tiller of a sailboat when tacking, the word is seldom heard today. Common usage is to leeward.

Aleutian current. The northern extension of the Japan current or Kuroshio. Flowing east between 40 and 50 degrees north latitude, it divides into the Alaska current that flows north into the Gulf of Alaska and a southward branch that becomes the California current.

alewife. A small baitfish of the herring family.

algae. Marine plants ranging from very small (single cell phytoplankton) to large kelp and other seaweed.

algin. The generic name of a water-soluble gum extracted from brown seaweed such as kelp. It is used to stabilize and thicken food, drugs, etc.

alidade. Aboard ship, a bearing circle equipped with a telescopic sight for taking bearings and azimuths. It is usually fitted over a pelorus or dumb compass with unobstructed vision. See pelorus, bearing circle.

All Hands. All those aboard ship except those on watch. Also a call made on a boatswain's pipe.

all hatch ship. A modern cargo ship having a maximum number of holds divided into compartments, each of which has its own hatch serviced by a crane instead of a boom.

allowance list. List of machinery spare parts and tools needed for ship operations. Other allowance lists include electronic spares or weapons spares.

all standing. Literally describes a ship with all her sails up or set. A sailing ship may run aground or jibe all standing, usually with unfortunate results. Officers and men on duty but not actually on their feet, such as the anchor watch, may turn in all standing which means fully dressed.

all time. Surfer's slang for great, fantastic, wonderful.

all told. A chartering term describing deadweight capacity that includes bunkers, water, provisions, dunnage, stores and spare parts.

almanac. See Air Almanac, Nautical Almanac.

Almanac for Computers. An almanac that provides equations and numerical constants from which celestial navigation calculations can be done by computers; published by the Naval Observatory—first edition 1979.

aloft. Up above, topside, opposite of below or alow.

alow. Old word meaning below; the opposite of aloft. Rarely used.

altars. Steps on the side of a graving dock extending virtually all the way around; used to support shores.

altitude. In celestial navigation, the vertical angle between the horizon and a celestial body, measured with a sextant. This observed altitude, when corrected for the sextant's index error, is apparant altitude and when also corrected for dip and semi-diameter (sun and moon) becomes rectified or corrected altitude.

alto cumulus, altostratus. See clouds.

Aluminaut. An aluminum hull research submarine, 50 feet long, designed to reach a depth of 15,000 feet.

Alusna. Official abbreviation for U.S. Naval Attache. An officer stationed in most U.S. embassies to advise the ambassador on naval and shipping matters and to collect intelligence.

always safely afloat. A clause in a charter party that prevents the loaded ship from being sent to a port where she may have to take the ground at low water.

ama. The sea women of Japan who dive, for example, for oysters or seaweed. Also an outrigger or additional hull of a multihull boat.

ambergris. A fatty substance sometimes found in the intestines of a male sperm whale or floating on the sea; used in making perfume and was, at one time, extremely valuable.

8 American Bureau of Shipping

American Bureau of Shipping. The U.S. classification society that provides information and establishes design, construction and operating standards for U.S. ships; issues annually *The Record* and, monthly, *The Bulletin* which contain matters of interest to those involved with shipping.

American Ephemeris. An astronomical almanac containing the coordinates of sun, moon, planets, certain stars, and other data useful to astronomers and those doing celestial navigation; published by the U.S. Naval Observatory. *See* Nautical Almanac.

American Institute of Marine Underwriters. The trade association for companies, American and foreign, who handle marine insurance in the U.S.

America's Cup. A trophy first won in England by the U.S. schooner *America* in 1851 and held since by the New York Yacht Club despite periodic challenges by foreign 12-meters.

amidships or midships. In the center or middle of a vessel. "Rudder amidships" is an order to the helmsman to bring the rudder in line with the keel.

amphibious. At home both on land and at sea, such as a turtle or an amphibious tank.

amphibious operation or landing. An operation or landing carried out by combined naval, land and air forces against an enemy coastal objective.

amphipod. A small crustacean found in polar waters and that feeds on plankton.

amphitrite. A 65 foot, six ton, shallow draft, inflatable boat used as a tender for diving operations.

amphora. A clay pot or urn, often with a pointed bottom, used in the ancient world to carry oil, wheat, wine, etc; found in most old wrecks and often recovered intact by divers or by fishermen trawling the bottom.

amplitude. In celestial navigation, the angle at the zenith between the prime vertical and the vertical circle passing through the observed body.

AMVER. Automatic Merchant Vessel Report System.

anadromous. A salt water fish such as a salmon or shad that lives at sea but enters fresh water to spawn. *See* catadromous.

anal fin. *See* fin.

anchor. A device that is lowered to the bottom of the sea by means of a chain or rope and that holds a vessel in place. Originally a lump of stone. Old fashioned or stock anchors have been largely replaced by stockless (patent) anchors that

can conveniently be stowed in the hawsepipe, and anchors for special attachment such as screw anchors and those that can be forced into the ground by explosives, hammers, gravity, or by water jet. *See* mushroom anchor, stockless anchor, old-fashioned anchor, Danforth anchor, fisherman's anchor, plow anchor, Meon anchor, Baldt anchor, Bruce anchors, kedge, yachtsman's, Herreshoff.

anchorage. A place or area with good holding ground and protected from the sea where ships anchor; often marked by anchorage buoys.

anchor and chain certificate. A ship's document, issued by a classification society or government agency, stating that the anchors and chains have passed the required tests and inspections.

anchor and chain clause. A statement in some marine insurance policies that exempts the underwriters from the cost of recovering the anchor and chain if lost while the ship is afloat.

anchor ball. A visual indication that the vessel is at anchor. In inland U.S. waters, a black ball shown forward in the rigging. International Rules of the Road only require a ball displayed where it can be best seen.

anchor bar. A wooden hand spike once used to dislodge an old-fashioned anchor from the billboard.

anchor bed. Same as billboard.

anchor bells. Signals from the forecastle to the ship's bridge that are used to report the progress in heaving in the anchor. No longer used; now replaced by sound-powered telephones. The term is not to be confused with the ship's bells used to sound fog signals when the ship is anchored in the fog.

anchoring bolt. Bolt used to fasten down or secure a fitting, a piece of machinery or whatever.

anchor buoy. A small float, attached by a light line, that is used to mark the location of the anchor on the bottom; not to be confused with anchorage buoy.

anchor cable, chain. *See* chain.

anchor chock. A fitting on deck near the bow of a boat to hold the anchor in place when it is stowed on deck.

anchor crane. Crane installed on the centerline forward of the windlass for hoisting a stock or old-fashioned anchor on deck. It replaces the anchor davit or fish davit used previously.

anchor hoy. A lighter for carrying ground tackle around a harbor. Also called a chain boat.

10 anchor ice

anchor ice. Submerged sea ice attached to the bottom of the ocean. Also called bottom ice, depth ice, ground ice, and underwater ice.

anchoring expressions. 1. To back an anchor is to make fast a second anchor or a weight to its rode or anchor cable to increase the holding power. 2. To break out an anchor is to dislodge it from its partially submerged position before hauling it up. 3. To bring home an anchor is to pull the ship up to it when heaving in. 4. To cast an anchor is to drop it. 5. To fish an anchor is to bring an old-fashioned anchor aboard for securing. 6. To house an anchor is to bring it up snugly into the hawsepipe. 7. To gimlet an anchor is to rotate it at the hawse. 8. To sight an anchor is to heave it in far enough to see whether it is foul or clear. 9. To swallow the anchor is to retire from the sea and live ashore. 10. To shoe an anchor. *See* shoe. 11. To cat an anchor. *See* cat. *See* anchor's aweigh.

anchor knot. A fisherman's bend.

anchor lights. Lights required by the International or Inland Rules of the Road to be displayed by a ship at anchor or moored. Also called riding lights.

anchor lining. Sheathing on the bows of a vessel to prevent damage to the hull when hauling in the anchor.

anchor pocket. Recess at lower end of hawsepipe into which a stockless anchor is secured.

anchor ring. The ring fastened to the upper end of the shank of an anchor and to which the chain is shackled.

anchor rocket. Rocket with an anchor-shaped head for firing at a stranded vessel in order to make fast a rescue line.

anchor's aweigh. When hauling in the anchor before getting an anchored ship underway, the Boatswain on the forecastle reports to the bridge as appropriate: anchor at short stay, anchor up and down, anchor is aweigh, anchor in sight, clear (or foul) anchor, and finally, anchor secured for sea.

anchor shackle. A heavy shackle, a roughly U-shaped connecting link, by which the anchor is connected to its cable. Also any shackle whose center section is wider than its mouth. *See* shackle, bending shackle.

anchor shoe. A flat block of hardwood fastened to the hull to prevent damage by the bill of the anchor as it is brought aboard or when lowering. Also a broad triangular piece of wood fastened to the fluke of an anchor to improve its holding power when the bottom is soft.

anchor watch. A small group of men kept on duty when the ship is anchored at night or in heavy weather to handle emergencies. The anchor watch is usually permitted to sleep near the forecabin.

anchor windlass. *See* windlass.

anchovy. Very numerous, small (4 to 6 inches) fish of the family Engraulidae. They feed on plankton and are fed upon by larger fish, whales, seabirds, and humans.

anemone. A solitary, flower-like primitive sea animal, an invertebrate that lives attached to rocks or to a reef. It is cylindrical, muscular and crowned by a number of tentacles armed with stinging barbs with which it captures its food. An anemone fish, immune to these barbs, lives within the tentacles in a relationship of mutualism.

anemometer. An instrument that measures wind velocity and direction, usually indicated on a dial on the bridge or in the chartroom.

aneroid barometer. *See* barometer.

angary, right of. The claim by a belligerent power of the right to seize the ships of a neutral country for its own use if necessary.

angel. A light sail carried aloft in a square-rigger. *See* kites.

angelfish. A medium size, disc-shaped, flat tropical reef fish noted for its bright colors. The young are orange or yellow; the adults striped in black and white. Grows to two feet, is edible and lives in schools.

angle of attack. In a hydrofoil vessel, the angle between the foil (measured along the line joining its leading and trailing edges) and the direction of apparent movement of the oncoming water.

angle of incidence. In a hydrofoil vessel, the angle between the foil (measured along the line joining its leading and trailing edges) and the horizontal axis of the vessel.

angle of repose. The maximum angle of roll of a ship at which the bulk cargo will maintain its form. For grain, it is 25-35 degrees; for coal, 30-45 degrees. At greater angles the cargo, if unrestricted, will flow downhill like a liquid.

animal sling. Same as web sling.

annelid. An extensive family of wormlike animals, some of which build tubelike homes on the submerged portion of boats.

Annie Oakley. A yacht's spinnaker pierced with small holes for better control.