



Hardtack and Marlinspikes – Life and Work Aboard Ship

Post-Visit Activity

Sailors' Tattoos

Teachers handout

Tattoos are very important to sailor culture. Sailors played an important role in popularising tattoos in the Western World by bringing them back from voyages to the South Pacific, beginning a long tradition of mariners & tattoos.

Many sailors' tattoos have particular meanings, relating to specific events in sailors' lives, common superstitions or religious beliefs, or reminders of home. Over the course of a marine career, a sailor could literally mark his history on his body.

In this activity the class is given drawings of two sailors sporting various tattoos (these are sized to 8.5x11, and can be made into overheads or photocopied). Given the following list of common tattoo meanings, have each member of the class construct the personal histories of the two sailors. This can be done in the form of a story, a first-person biography, a monologue or dialogue.

Tattoo Meanings:

HOLD on the knuckles of one hand and FAST on the other. This is said to help the seaman to better hold the rigging.

A PIG on one foot or knee and a ROOSTER on the other is said to prevent drowning, because both animals avoid water.

An ANCHOR shows the seaman has crossed the Atlantic Ocean. The US Navy variation includes an American EAGLE with the anchor. Other nationalistic tattoos are common in the navies of the world, often including that nation's flag or animal symbols.

A FULL-RIGGED SHIP shows the seaman has sailed around Cape Horn.

A DRAGON shows the seaman has traveled to China.

A SHELLBACK TURTLE denotes a seaman who has crossed the equator.

A SHARK is a common sailor tattoo, meaning the seaman takes on the tough characteristics of the animal.

WOMEN were common motifs, either representations of mothers, wives or girlfriends back home or exotic women (e.g. HULA GIRLS) from ports the seaman had visited.

SWALLOWS are important maritime tattoo symbols. The birds are known both for migrating long distances and returning to the same areas every year. Thus, a swallow tattoo means both the completion of a 5000 nautical mile voyage, and the hope of a safe return home. Swallows were commonly tattooed facing one another on the chest, one when 5000 miles has been completed, and another when 10 000 miles had been completed.

NAUTICAL STARS symbolize the North Star, a star commonly used for celestial navigation. This symbol is found on maps and charts, and indicates a guide to show the way home.

A HEART with DAGGER can symbolize betrayal *or* courage in the face of misfortune.

Pirates would sometimes sport tattoos featuring typical pirate flag symbols, such as SKULLS, SKELETONS, HOURGLASSES (symbolizes time running out for the pirate ship's victims) and SWORDS.