

# Everyday speech from sailors of yesterday

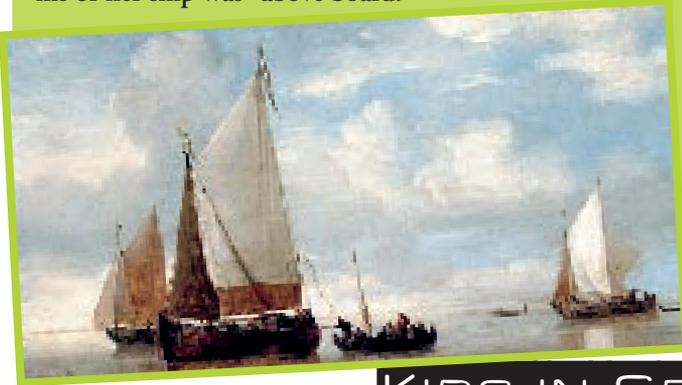
**Above Board** Today we say that someone is “above board” to mean he or she is honest. This phrase comes from the days when ship captains were always worried about running into pirates. Pirates would oftentimes hide most of their large crew below deck or below the wooden bulwarks (the extension of the ship’s side upwards past the deck to the railing) when they approached an unsuspecting ship. When the two ships would get close enough that the potential victim wouldn’t be able to get away, the crew would spring up, ready to fight the much smaller crew of a typical merchant ship. An honest captain would have his crew stand tall behind the bulwarks so they could be seen easily and show the other vessel that his or her ship was “above board.”

**Listless** “Listless” means that someone is dull or lethargic. This word originated in the days of sail. A ship in calm waters rides on an even keel or level with the horizon, without heeling or listing to one side or the other in a strong wind. Therefore, a vessel that has no wind or list is “listless” and slow moving.

**Spic and Span** When the age of exploration took off in the 16th century, the Dutch built many new ships for this purpose. Their word used to describe their brand-new boats was “spiksplinter nieuw,” which means new in every spike and splinter (spike meaning the large nails used to fasten the ship together and splinter referring to the wood used to build the ship). The British sailors called them “spike and spanew,” and American sailors warped that phrase to “spic-and-span” to mean clean and polished.

From Dr. Martin Davis, *Traditions and Tales of the Navy* (Missoula, Montana: Pictorial Histories Publishing Co., Inc., 2000)

*This Dutch ship is becalmed and listless. She would have been spiksplinter nieuw when she was new. Painting c. 1662 by Willem Van de Velde.*



## KIDS IN SEA HISTORY:

**H**e lived and died more than 200 years before Captain Hook was even dreamed up by J. M. Barrie, who wrote *Peter Pan* in the early 20th century. Nevertheless, 10-year-old John King was enthralled with pirates even in his time. Just like today’s kids who think it’d be fun to be a pirate, John King had no idea what he was getting himself into when the ship he was traveling on with his mother was seized by Captain Samuel Bellamy, the famous Black Sam, and his fellow pirates in 1716 on the ship *Whydah*. The boy demanded that he be allowed to join the pirate crew, much to the dismay of his mother who tried to warn him that that life was not all fun and games. Reportedly, John

## BOY PIRATE— JOHN KING



King even threatened to kill himself and then he threatened to kill his mother if she stopped him!

Instead of going to a much-deserved time-out in his cabin, the young boy went off with the pirates, never to see his family again. A few months later, the pirate ship and crew, with John King onboard, were struggling in a storm off Cape Cod, Massachusetts, when they

were dismasted and the ship sank. Only two men survived out of a crew of approximately 145 people. Today, we know about John King from the report left by the ship’s captain from which he was sailing with his mother. The shipwreck was discovered in 1984 and many artifacts have been removed from the seabed in the years since. John King’s fibula (lower leg bone), shoe, and silk stocking were among the plunder taken from the site. No one paid much attention to the remains of the very small pirate until this past June when archaeologists determined that the bone belonged to a boy and not a small man. With only one boy onboard, it could only be him.