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There is a long tradition of mariners and their tattoos, and links with the Navy can be traced back to the 1770s when Captain Cook discovered tattooed natives in the South Pacific. His sailors brought tattoos back from these foreign lands as mementoes and exotic souvenirs of their experiences.

Many sailors' tattoos have specific meanings, referring to events in sailors' lives, religious beliefs, common superstitions or reminders of home, and during his career a sailor could mark his history on his body.

Some tattoo meanings:

ROPE, tattooed around the wrist meant the sailor was a deckhand.

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

A **PIG** on the top of one foot, and a **ROOSTER** on the other, was said to protect the seaman from drowning, because both of these barnyard animals cannot swim so they would get the seaman quickly to shore.

A **SHARK** meant the sailor took on the rough characteristics of the animal.

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

An **ANCHOR** showed the sailor had crossed the Atlantic Ocean.

A **DRAGON** showed the sailor had served on a China station.

A **SHELLBACK TURTLE** denoted a seaman who had crossed the equator.

A **GOLDEN DRAGON** meant the seaman had crossed the International Date Line.

A **FULL-RIGGED SHIP** showed the sailor had sailed round Cape Horn.

PORT & STARBOARD ship lights were tattooed on the left and right side of the body.

SWALLOWS are known for long distance migrations and returning to the same areas every year. Thus, a swallow tattoo meant the completion of a 5,000 nautical mile voyage, and the hope of a safe return home. Often swallows were tattooed facing one another on the chest, one when 5,000 miles had been completed, and another when 10,000 miles had been completed.

NAUTICAL STARS symbolised the North Star, commonly used for celestial navigation and a guide to show the way home.

WOMEN were common motifs, either representations of mothers, wives or girlfriends back home or exotic women from ports the seaman had visited.

An interesting anecdote relates to the United States Government issuing a recruiting circular for their Navy in 1909 which stated, *'Indecent or obscene tattooing is cause for rejection, the applicant should be given an opportunity to alter the design, in which he may, if otherwise qualified, be accepted.'*

In the 1940s, and after Pearl Harbour, there was one of the biggest booms the tattoo trade in America had known for years, as eligible young men flocked to their favourite needlers with demands for lingerie, skirts, brassieres, fans, bubbles, flowers, butterflies or almost anything that would cover a bare spot. Indeed, when Charlie Wagner, a prominent New York tattooist, was brought before the New York Magistrate's Court in the 1940s, on a charge of violating the Sanitary Code, he was able to describe his work as 'essential war work' - helping with recruitment to the US Navy.

**QD6: Originally appeared In the "Quarterdeck" magazine
Ref: 2010 Issue 2 (Summer) pages 10 to 11**