

~ The Origin of the term Mess ~

In the days of sail, circa the 18th and 19th centuries, groups of Sailors who had obtained the rank of Able-Seaman were apportioned together to work several positions on the ship. Members of these groups were called a 'mess' and their brethren, 'messmates.'

A mess was called to work interchangeably within the group and always presented a unified front when accomplishing their duties. To be included in the mess, you must be a rated seaman! This excluded wasters, (land) lubbers, landsman, and all non-rated seaman from consideration inside the 'mess'.

A 'mess' was required to work the great guns. Each 'mess' was assigned their own numbered gun that would remain their primary responsibility so long as they remained in ship's company. For example, the number 14 gun's crew, was a 'mess'.

That same mess would be responsible for a particular portion of the sails and rigging (starboard foretopmast, etc.). This became vitally important when a ship took damage during an action. If a section of rigging needed immediate repair, the assigned mess would without hesitation take charge. Fire and damage control parties of the modern Navy continue to use this model.

They 'messed' together; meaning they slept, ate, and drank exclusively together. Messmates manned the sweeps (oars) together. The even went on liberty together and were responsible for one another's safe return.

In the most crucial sense, a mess was responsible to one another should their ship sail into action against an enemy vessel. In the event of injury, messmates were the first lifeline. For example, if a member of the mess became injured and required amputation of a limb in order to save his life, his mates would, without question, hold him down until the deed was done.

In the case of disciplinary action, the 'mess' would prepare their mate for the ordeal. Prior to, they'd 'dress and drink' him before being lashed at the capstan. Afterward, and in lieu of visiting the ship's surgeon, the 'mess' would mend their mate's wounds.

While multiple messes worked and functioned on the ship. Each mess was like an exclusive club unto themselves. They comprised their own working parties, liberty parties, and remained unquestioningly loyal to their mates both in and out of the fight.