

# History and Quotes

## Discipline & Flogging in the Navy

According to surviving records, between 1812 and 1815 approximately 11 men were flogged for offenses ranging from desertion to smuggling liquor on board *Constitution*. During the same period, courts martial (military courts) awarded seven men between 50 and 100 lashes each for more grievous offenses like theft and “mutinous conduct.”

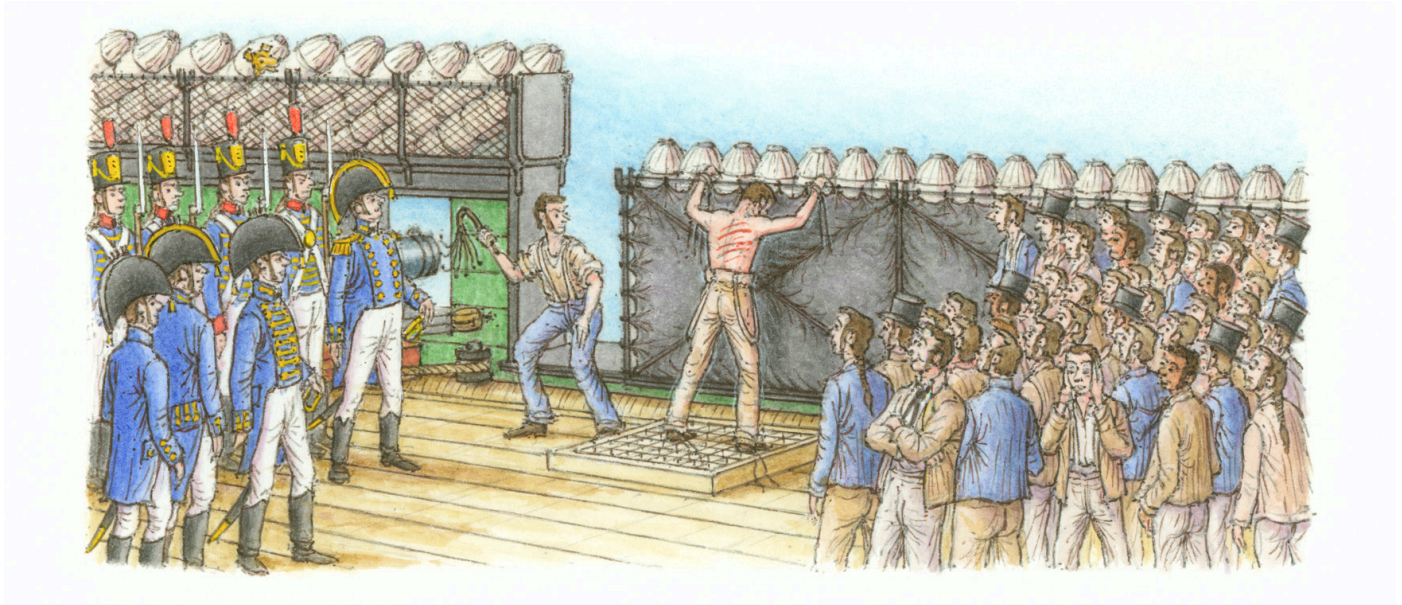
Maintaining discipline among a diverse and often headstrong crew was as much an art as a science. Not all officers possessed the skills to convince or coerce their men. Capt. John Rogers recommended “to the officers of every class to avoid Swearing or using reproachful or degrading appellations to the men, it being contrary to every idea of true discipline & character of an officer, besides, it must be discouraging to good men, & cannot convey any information to those who are ignorant.” Naval officers carried themselves with a certain dignity, and would not countenance any affront to their egos. They also knew they had to be obeyed instantly and without reservation. There was no room for discussion in the heat of battle or during a dark night on a lee shore. Naval officers therefore used a variety of harsh methods to enforce compliance from their sailors. Some were sanctioned by law, others by the “ancient custom” of the sea service.

Perhaps the most informal and common punishment meted out to sailors was “starting.” If an officer thought a sailor moved too slowly, or otherwise performed unsatisfactorily, he might order a boatswain’s mate to “start” the man with a “colt.” “The colt is a piece of rope about three feet long and half an inch thick,” wrote one sailor. “The boatswain and his mates always carry one in their hats for immediate use.” The boatswain also frequently carried a rattan, a stiff cane used to thump men about the shoulders. Such spur-of-the-moment punishments may have been extremely common indeed, but since they were never recorded in the log book, they are impossible to track beyond the occasional anecdotal account.

Flogging, however, was a more serious and formal punishment, and was more frequently recorded in the ship’s log. Flogging offenses ran the gamut from drunkenness and swearing, to sleeping on watch and neglect of duty. While the Naval Regulations forbade more than twelve lashes for a single offense, as of yet there was no uniform code of justice for officers to follow, and the number of lashes awarded for any particular infraction depended on the whim of the captain.

At the cry of “all hands to witness punishment, ahoy!” the guilty man was brought forward and striped of his jacket and shirt. The man stood on a grating and was triced up by the wrists to the bulwark. It was a vulnerable position that added to the humiliation of the punishment. At the captain’s command, a boatswain’s mate administered the punishment using a whip called a “cat,” defined as “a piece of nine thread ratline.” The punishment was intended to humiliate not maim a recalcitrant sailor. There were no barbs or lead weights added to naval cats, but they certainly smarted. According to one witness to a flogging, “they say the sensation is just as if melted lead were poured on the back.” Wielded by

a brawny arm, the lash first raised welts and then finally broke the skin. If continued long enough, the flesh could become exceedingly mangled and bloody. "I shall always remember my feelings on the occasion," remembered one sailor. "I felt as if I had rather jump overboard and drown than be flogged. But I took the blows without opening my mouth. Indeed, I clenched my teeth close together, determined that no mortal should know by a sound from me how much I felt."



Serious offenders often found themselves hauled before a court martial. Composed of the most senior officers on a station and directed by a judge advocate, a court martial convened to try transgressions that could not be punished with a mere flogging. Murderers, thieves, repeat deserters, and habitual drunkards all appear in the court records. The courts were also used to praise or admonish officers who lost their vessels or who had acted with "ungentlemanly conduct." The court had the power to award hundreds of lashes, or even death, for certain crimes committed by enlisted men. For officers, the severest punishment was usually a public reprimand or dismissal from the service.

These punishments may seem harsh and more severe than the crimes warranted, but they were fully countenanced by law and custom. Casual interpersonal violence was a fact of everyday life in America. Mobs frequently fought in city streets, brawls in taverns occurred all the time, and even schoolteachers applied the rod to wayward children. A stroke with a colt or a lash with a cat was not entirely beyond the bounds of public perception and social norms. Still, the too frequent or the unjustified use of these punishments grated on sailors. Being beaten like a man, with an opportunity to fight back, was not a problem, but to be tied up and beaten like a slave seemed degrading and inhuman. With heartfelt emotion, Seaman James Durand argued, "Such outrages on human nature ought not to be permitted by a government which boasts of liberty. No monarch in the world is more absolute than the Captain of a Man-of-war. The situation of a sailor, exposed as he is to the vicissitudes of life, to the inclemencies of the seasons, to the fury of storms and tempests, is sufficiently arduous without its being rendered more so by the cruelties of his fellow beings."