

Information sheet no 066

Loyal toast – Naval tradition

There are numerous stories reputed to have started the naval tradition of officers having the privilege of sitting during the loyal toast to the Sovereign. Many cannot be substantiated but remain current to this day.

1. Charles II: King Charles, on his return from exile in Holland, in May 1660 was aboard the *Naseby*, re-named *Royal Charles*. He is reputed to have bumped his head on a low beam in the cabin when responding to a toast. He is reputed to have exclaimed: “When I get ashore, I’ll see that my naval officers run no such risk, for I will allow them from henceforth to remain sitting when drinking my health.
2. Restoration: The Navy had a large influx of gentlemen volunteers who formed a considerable mess. As they were not seamen by upbringing, they would have had great difficulty keeping their feet.
3. George IV: As Prince Regent, while dining aboard a warship is reputed to have exclaimed as the officers rose to drink the King’s health, “Gentlemen, pray be seated. Your loyalty is above suspicion.” The Prince was at constant variance with the King and favoured the Whig Opposition, but it is a matter of speculation as to whom their loyalty was directed. The Navy generally consider that loyalty to the person of the Sovereign takes precedence over political ties.
4. William IV: While he was Duke of Clarence, he was dining on a man-of-war and is also reputed to have bumped his head on a deck beam when he stood up.

Probably more realistic are the following:

5. It was impossible to stand upright “between decks” except between the beams, so consequently only every third person would have been unable to stand erect.
6. The table was often fixed to the deck against a settee, so it would have been impossible for half the officers to stand with any degree of dignity.

All officers must stand if the National Anthem is being played during the toast. Officers of the Royal Yacht also stand as a distinction of the honour serving on the Yacht. In 1966, the Queen extended the privilege to Chief and Petty Officers of the Royal Navy.

Sources: Lowry, R G - The origins of some naval terms and customs. [n.d.]

Campbell, A B - Customs and traditions of the Royal Navy. 1956

Hampshire, A C - Just an old Navy custom. 1979 ISBN 0718304861

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The information contained in this sheet is correct as far as we are able to ascertain from our sources. It is not intended to be an exhaustive or complete history of the subject. Please contact the library for a list of further reading materials, if available