

## Pollywog To Shellback - A Tradition

In the U.S. Navy, when a ship crosses the equator a time-honored ceremony takes place. This is a Navy tradition and an event no sailor ever forgets. With few exceptions, those who have been inducted into the “mysteries of the deep” by Neptunus Rex and his Royal court, count the experience as a highlight of their naval career. Members of Neptunus Rex’s party usually include Davy Jones, Neptune’s first assistant, Her Highness Amphitrite, the Royal Scribe, the Royal Doctor, the Royal Dentist, the Royal Baby, the Royal Navigator, the Royal Chaplain, the Royal Judge, Attorneys, Barbers and other names that suit the party.

Officially recognized by service record entries indicating date, time, latitude and longitude, the crossing of the equator involves elaborate preparation by the “shellbacks” (those who have crossed the equator before) to ensure the “pollywogs” (those who are about to cross the equator for the first time) are properly indoctrinated. All pollywogs, even the Commanding Officer if he has not crossed before, must participate.

A Golden Shellback is one who has crossed the equator at the 180th meridian.

The following personal account is a reprint from DESANews, Vol 26/Num 5:

**Pollywog To Shellback**  
**by John Muldowney**  
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“Ninety percent of our crew were Pollywogs, (that is a person who has not crossed the equator). We knew that we were all in for a good hazing. All of our Chief and First Class Petty Officers were Shellback. Most of them had served on the battleships that went down at Pearl Harbor. Tradition was a big thing with them.

The day before we were to go over, the Shellbacks constructed the ‘Royal Bath.’ This was a pool about four feet deep and about seven by seven feet square. A handy billy was then rigged and seawater was pumped into the ‘Royal Bath’ and mixed with diesel oil. Word was passed that Davie Jones was to come aboard that evening and we were to entertain him on the fantail. Some had to dance for him, others told stories or recited poetry. I was lucky in being in a singing group. After the entertainment we were presented with a summons to King Neptune’s Court the next day.

Breakfast was piped at eight bells for all Shellbacks the next morning. Our Ensign had been lowered and the ‘Jolly Roger’ was hoisted. This meant that the hazing was underway. Steak and eggs was the meal for the Shellbacks. We had hard tack and coffee made with salt water.

Various charges were levied against the Pollywogs. Officers were dealt with more harshly than enlisted men. We had a lieutenant who had been in the First World War. He was a Mustang with 25 years of service, but had never crossed the line. Accused of painting the town when we were in New York, he was made to climb the rigging with a bucket of paint. Another officer was ordered to the forecabin with two coke bottles for binoculars to keep a look out of the mail buoy. I was accused of impersonating an Irishman, and had to eat an Irish apple, (which was a raw onion).

As you knelt before the Judge in King Neptune’s Court, you were ordered to kiss the Royal Baby. He was the ugliest guy on the ship. A bucket of mustard was hidden behind him and when you went to kiss him, he reached back to the bucket and hit you with a handful of mustard. The royal barber was next. He had electric clippers that kept shocking you as he cut your hair. After that came the ‘Royal Bath.’ You had to say Shellback three times as they were dunking you.

Running the gauntlet was the final stage of the exercise. A tarp was spread out on deck and greased with graphite, over it about a foot was strung a cargo net. You had to crawl along the tarp for about ten yards with Shellbacks paddling you and another at the end with a fire hose to drive you back just when you thought you were through. When it was all over you could take a deep breath and with great pride say: Now I am a Shellback.”