

It's Cold Enough to Freeze the Balls off a Brass Monkey!

Posted by Sarah L. Tichonuk on September 14, 2014

Perhaps you've heard that phrase and thought, "brrrrrr, that sounds cold."

Or perhaps, if you're like me, you wondered ***what in heck is a brass monkey?*** And why would its anatomy be going anywhere?!

Etymologists disagree about this phrase's origin.

(My mind immediately envisions the office of the Oxford English Dictionary erupting into podium-pounding, chair-throwing chaos. Bloody noses and egos are nursed over ciders at the corner pub.)

The theory I like best is the least accepted (typical) and has its origins in life at sea. It goes like this:

In the Great Age of Sail, military vessels were equipped with numerous cannon, and the ammunition to arm them. Cannons could fire a variety of projectiles: grape shot, bar shot, chain shot, and of course, cannon balls. Since space was at a premium aboard ship, cannon were stored in a pyramid stack on indented brass trays called "monkeys." Since brass contracts more than iron (more nerdy-ness on the coefficient of cubical expansion below), during especially cold periods, the "balls" would be knocked off the brass "monkey."

Isn't that awesome?! Turns out not everyone agrees with this origin as a nautical saying. In fact, [Michael Quinion](#) says, "It's rubbish" citing things like logic (balls stored that way would be disrupted in the first rough seas), common sense (why leave your iron shot outside to rust in the rain?) and physics (despite my math wizardry below, the difference does seem negligible). Party-poopers. Apparently the term has been used to refer to extremes of many kinds:

- Weather: as in Abbey's 1857 *Before the Mast*, "It would freeze the tail off a brass monkey."

- Being talkative: as in Kate Douglas Wiggin's 1913 *The Story of Waitstill Baxter*, "The little feller, now, is smart's a whip, an' could talk the tail off a brass monkey."
- And being bold: Talbot Mundy's 1919 *The Ivory Trail*, "He has the gall of a brass monkey."

The more commonly accepted rationale is that "brass monkey" refers to little brass figurines of monkeys, which were common tourist souvenirs from China and Japan in the 19th and 20th centuries. Sometimes they came in sets of three, depicting the Three Wise Monkeys like those carved in the 17th century Tōshō-gū shrine in Nikkō, Japan. You know, "See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil?" Even Uncle Sam [got ahold of it](#) during the WWII Manhattan Project. The image was one of something strong, solid, and immune to extremes.

Like nautical word-play?

Then you've GOT to grab one of my favorite books, *When A Loose Cannon Flogs a Dead Horse, There's the Devil to Pay* by Olivia Isil. Why certainly we sell it in our online store.

As an aside, presuming there were brass monkeys, could it really be cold enough to freeze cast iron cannonballs off them?

I'm not a particularly math-y person, but using the [coefficient of linear expansion](#), I figure a 1-meter-long brass object traveling between the equator (32°C) and the Arctic (-40°C) would contract **0.6mm more** than a same-shaped cast iron object. Seems like it wouldn't go rolling across the deck.

But wait, Sarah! You haven't taken into account a greater volume for the two shapes! How closely-fitted were these objects to begin with, and at what temperature were they made? Got a more precise calculation? Another nautical saying you love? **Post it in the comments!!**