

The history of the Jolly Roger

Why are Royal Navy Submariners known as Pirates?

When submarines started to be used as warships, at the end of the 19th and start of the 20th centuries, Admiral Sir Arthur Wilson of the Royal Navy said that they were “underhanded, unfair, and damned un-English”, and that captured enemy submariners should be hanged as pirates.

Submarines then were very small, uncomfortable, and generally unpleasant, with relatively informal practices and attitudes compared to big surface ships. Many officers as a result looked down on submarine crews, viewing them as “piratical”.

What is the Jolly Roger flag?

The flag that became known as the Jolly Roger – a skull and crossbones design – was used in the 17th and 18th centuries by pirates.

The original skull and crossbones flag was not black and white, as used now, but was blood-red which signified that no mercy would be given once the pirates boarded a ship.

The skull and cross bones came from the symbol used in ships’ logs, which was used to represent a death onboard.

The name of the flag – the Jolly Roger – may have originated from the French phrase ‘joli rouge’ meaning ‘pretty red’, from its original blood-red colour, which in English became “Jolly Roger”. However other derivations of the name have been suggested.

Find out more about where the official Royal Navy flags were made at Chatham – The Sail and Colour Loft

Why did Royal Navy submarines fly the Jolly Roger?

In the First World War, following on from Admiral Wilson’s comments in 1901, Lieutenant Commander Max Horton (later Admiral Sir Max Horton, Commander in Chief Western Approaches in the Second World War) began flying the Jolly Roger after returning from successful submarine patrols in his submarine HMS E9.

Initially he flew a separate flag for each successful patrol, but later switched to a single large flag onto which symbols were sown on to indicate the submarines achievements.

The practice of flying the Jolly Roger was adopted by some other submarine commanders in the First World War, but not all. The practice was not approved by the Admiralty, but they were unable to stop it.

In the Second World War, the practice re-started, and was widely adopted, although not by all submarine commanders. Many submarine flotilla commanders issued a Jolly Roger to a submarine when it returned from its first successful patrol.

The practice is still used by Royal Navy submarines; a Jolly Roger was flown by HMS Conqueror on her return from the Falklands War in 1982. Other navies also adopted it, but only on a very occasional basis.

The Jolly Roger was marked with symbols to signify particular successes, with one symbol representing each individual successes/achievement. Some examples of commonly used symbols were/are (these were mostly used in the Second World War):

- Lifebuoy – rescued personnel from downed aircraft or sunken ships
- Diver's helmet – exceeded safe diving depth
- Dagger – a 'cloak and dagger' operation – typically the delivery or recovery of shore parties from enemy territory
- Lighthouse – used as navigational marker for an invasion force