

# Boating Terms

## from **A** to **Z**

by Alex Zidock Jr. photos by the author



Not so much anymore but during the heyday of wooden boats, and when being a boater was a pursuit and passion more than a hobby, sailors spoke the lingo of abbreviated terms and a concoction of alphabet soup acronyms. You'll be surprised to find out how many of these terms and letter combinations are used today in other than boating situations and are actually nautical terms that date far back in boating history. Some are common, some are fun, and all are interesting. Then, there's the 'X' factor. I don't know a boating term that begins with 'X', do you?



### **A** ATON - Aids to navigation

These are all the buoys, lights, beacons and markers on land and in the water to help avoid dangers and to aid sailors in finding their position.

### **B** Bitter end

In old, wooden ship sailing days, line was secured around a bitt. That end of the line was called the bitter end. Today, the end of any line is called the bitter end. The phrase was adapted to also mean sticking to some project or course of action until "the bitter end."

### **C** Crows nest

Land-loving crows were carried aboard early ships. When in doubt on which direction the nearest land was located, a crow would be released. The ship was pointed in the direction the crow flew. Crow cages were kept at the highest point of the ship, which happened to be where the ship's lookout was, thus called the crow's nest.



### **D** Draft

This is the area on a boat between the water line and the lowest point of the keel, which is the minimum depth of water in which the boat will float.

### **E** ETA - Estimated Time of Arrival

When you consider your course and speed, you determine your Estimated Time of Arrival.

### **F** Fathoms

Depth of water is sometimes measured in fathoms. Two centuries or more ago, there were few tape measures or rulers. So, it was a common practice to determine the length of something as it pertained to the average size of a body part. The distance between a man's outstretched arms from fingertip to fingertip is about 6 feet. Carried over to the sea, depth was measured in 6-foot increments, which was called a fathom taken from the Anglo-Saxon fæthm meaning "arms" or "embracing arms."

### **G** GPS - Global Positioning System

It is a satellite tracking and locating system.

### **H** HIN - Hull Identification Number

Every boat has a HIN that is located on the outside of the boat hull about 2-inches to the starboard (right) side of the transom. On pontoon boats, look on the aft (rear) crossbeam, starboard, within one foot of where the hull attaches. The first three letters are the manufacturer's ID code, the next set of numbers are the production or serial number, then the month and year of production and finally the model year.

<b>ACB</b>	<b>F0930</b>	<b>A6</b>	<b>86</b>
<i>Manufacturer's ID Code</i>	<i>Production or Serial #</i>	<i>Month, Year of Production</i>	<i>Model Year</i>

## **I** I/O - Inboard/Outboard

This is a reference to a type of boat with the motor fitted Inboard and the drive or lower unit protruding from the transom or Outboard. As opposed to an outboard motor where all parts are mounted on the transom.

## **J** Jacob's Ladder

It is a rope ladder used to board a ship or used on the ship to climb high and skyward. So called, because the biblical Jacob dreamed that a ladder carried him to Heaven.

## **K** Keel

The keel is the main board or structure usually on the bottom of the hull and so fashioned to provide steering stability.

## **L** Log

Any records kept aboard a ship in a logbook. Before paper, the records of a voyage were inscribed on wooden shingles cut from logs and fastened together to make a book. No more shingles or logs, but the term logbook remains.

## **M** Mile

A mile on land is 5,280 feet. A nautical mile is 6,076.12 feet. A knot, the boater's measurement of speed, is one nautical mile per hour.

## **N** NUB

Pronounced the same, but today we call a "newbie" a person new to something. The term dates back to a sailor so "green" that he could not help with anything, and he was a "Non-Useable Body."

## **O** OK

OK became a popular sailing term in the middle 1840s, and some say it was attributed to the presidential candidate Martin Van Buren whose nickname was "Old Kinderhook." "Vote for OK," and it became a universal sign of approval.

## **P** PFD - Personal Flotation Device

This is a wearable life jacket or a throwable device that floats. With 80% of boating fatalities affecting those boaters not wearing a life jacket, wearing your life jacket is the safest way to boat.



## **Q** Quarterdeck

The quarterdeck is a raised deck to the rear of the boat from where the captain commanded his vessel. It is used as the main ceremonial and reception area on a ship.

## **R** RIB - Rigid Inflatable Boat

A RIB is an inflatable boat that has a hard fixed bottom.

## **S** Scuttlebutt

In olden days, sailors used to gather around a cask full of drinking water called a scuttlebutt to jabber about the events of the day and spread rumors. We still refer to gossip and rumors as scuttlebutt.

## **T** Tacking

Tacking is a sailing maneuver in which the direction of the boat is changed while taking advantage of the direction of the wind.

## **U** USCG - United States Coast Guard



The United States Coast Guard is one of the five armed forces of the United States. It is the only military organization within the Department of Homeland Security. The Coast Guard has safeguarded our Nation's maritime interests and environment around the world since 1790.

## **V** VHF - Very High Frequency

VHF refers to radios that operate on Very High Frequency.

## **W** Weigh

Weigh is to raise the anchor or get underway.

## **X** 'X' Factor

I do not know any boating terms that begin with the letter X.

## **Y** Yacht

A yacht is a term used for a special, fast, lightweight boat in the Dutch Navy. King Charles II of England selected a yacht to transport him home from Holland to Britain at the time of his restoration in 1660. After that, yachts have been identified as vessels only the rich and wealthy can afford. As a man's home is his castle, any size boat can be his "yacht." Yachts can be power or sail.

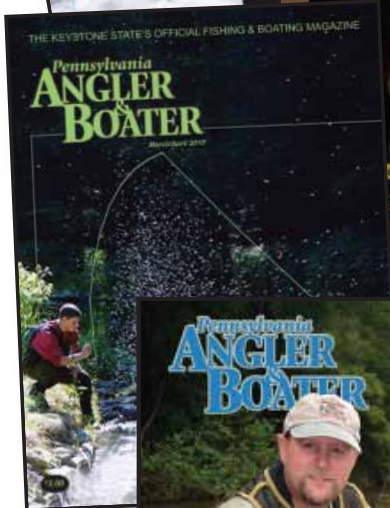
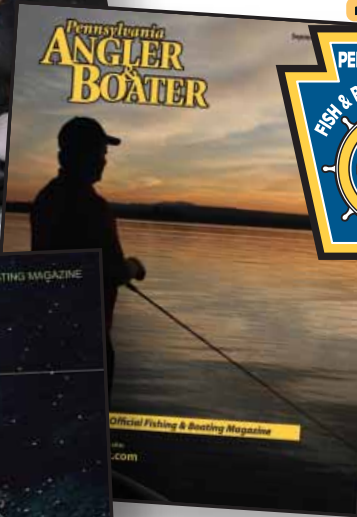
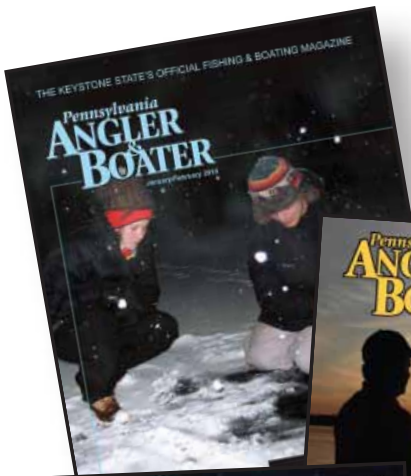
## **Z** Z-Dock

A harbormaster once told me that he learned to pronounce my last name correctly (spelled Zidock) when he remembered my boat was tied up on Z-Dock.

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For more fun and education about boating terms, go to the Navy Department Library at [www.history.navy.mil/library/online/origin.htm](http://www.history.navy.mil/library/online/origin.htm), or read *Chapman Piloting Seamanship & Small Boat Handling*.

For more information about boating in Pennsylvania, read the *Pennsylvania Boating Handbook* online at [www.fishandboat.com/bookboat.htm](http://www.fishandboat.com/bookboat.htm). ☐



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