

Boatswain's Calls (Bosun's Pipes)

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History of the Call

The history of the Call can be traced as far back as 1248 when Greece and Rome used galley slaves. On the manually powered ships the Call was used to help keep stroke.

In the United Kingdom, the Call had its beginnings in the days of the English Crusades, 1248 A.D., as a method of alerting troops to arms. Documented in 1485 A.D., the Call was used as an honored badge of rank, then being worn by the Lord High Admiral of England. Undoubtedly, it was worn because it was used as a method of passing orders and therefore signified authority. When the Lord High Admiral, Sir Edward Howard, was killed in action off Brest in 1513 while commanding French Galleys, a "Whistle of Honor" was presented to him posthumously by the Queen of France. From about that time onward the Call was no longer used as a badge of rank, reverting to its original use as a method of passing orders only. By 1671 the name 'Call' was well established and has lasted to the present day.

As with many U.S. naval terms and customs, the Call was utilized by the U.S. naval personnel of the 18th century. In the U.S. Navy the Call was referred to as the Boatswain's Call in the 1917 through the 1943 editions of the Bluejacket's Manual. In the 1944 edition of the Bluejacket's Manual, the Call was referred to as a Bosun's Pipe. To this day the Bosun's Pipe is still occasionally employed to "pipe" dignitaries as they embark or disembark U.S. naval vessels.** While primarily a shipboard used instrument, the Call is often used at naval shore stations.

**More commonly the shipboard IMC system and the ship's quarterdeck bell are employed to denote the arrival or departure of the commanding officer and other high ranking officers.

Tuning Calls

Pipes are stamped out when manufactured; therefore, both the hole and the pee are often misshapen. Most pipes are too open at the pee and should be flattened and soldered at the sides of the pee to fill the space between the pee and the bowl; otherwise, hissing sounds of escaping air will interfere with the clearness of the call.



Note: This tuned Gemsco produced Call has extra solder and filed wind edge. (Image 1)

According to Mike Sandell, USNR(Ret), a USN Boatswain's Mate for 22 years, "to tune a Bosun Pipe we would put bee's wax inside the bowl and use a lighter to melt it and kind of smash in the side to tune it up so the perfect sound would come out of it."

From an early edition of the Bluejacket's Manual, "some pipes are improved by scraping the wind edge or edge of the bowl farthest from the pee. It is sometimes necessary to enlarge this hole by scraping as well as by sharpening the edge until the reed strikes the hole fair. A test of this is often made by pushing the large end of a broom straw through the reed to find how the straw hits the wind edge of the hole. That edge of the hole should split the straw. The call, once tuned, should sound if held with its mouth to a gentle breeze; and, when blown with open hand, should sound from the most repressed pressure to the full strength of the lungs without any flaw in the sound known as wind leak or hoarseness; and the sound with closed hand should be as clear and shrill as is possible."

Call Examples

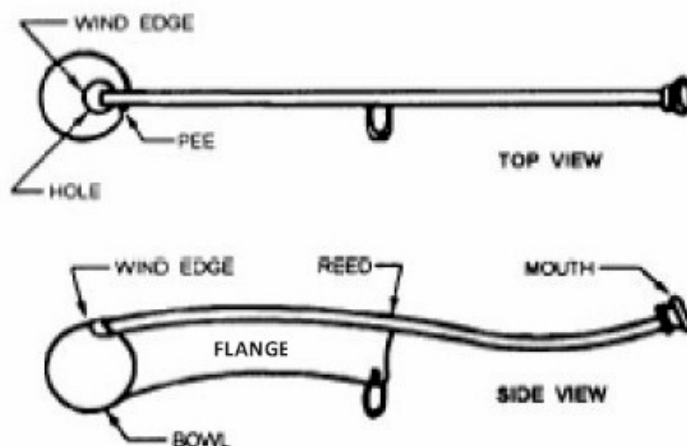


Figure 1-1.—Boatswain's pipe and its parts.

(Image 2)



WWII USN Sterling Silver (Image 3)



Marked Sterling (Image 4)



Applied Dragon (Dan Smith collection) (Image 5)



Inscribed Dragon (Doug Hodakievic collection) (Image 6)



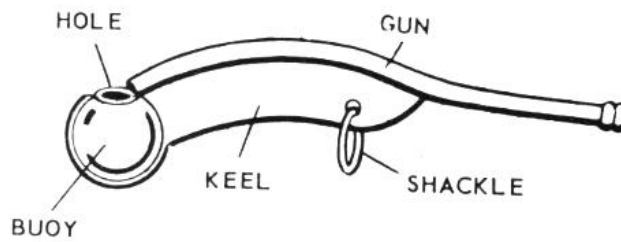
USN Boatswain's Mates with Bosun Pipes (Image 7)



Second Class Boatswain's Mate Piping (Image 8)



United Kingdom, 1890-1915 (note "crows foot" Sterling mark) (Image 9)



United Kingdom style Call (Image 10)



Argentinean Call current (Image 11)



Brazilian Call current (Image 12)



German (Image 13)

Recommended:

<http://whistlemuseum.com/2012/03/29/boatswains-call-history-timeline-examples-and-more.aspx>

The Bluejacket's Manual, 2nd Edition through 16th Edition is best, U.S. Naval Institute