

NITIDA

CANNON STATION

Brass Monkey

In the heyday of sailing ships, all war ships and many freighters carried cannon. Those cannon fired round iron cannon balls. It was necessary to keep a good supply near each cannon.

However, how to prevent them from rolling about the deck?

The best storage method devised was a square-based pyramid with one ball on top, resting on four resting on nine, which rested on sixteen balls.

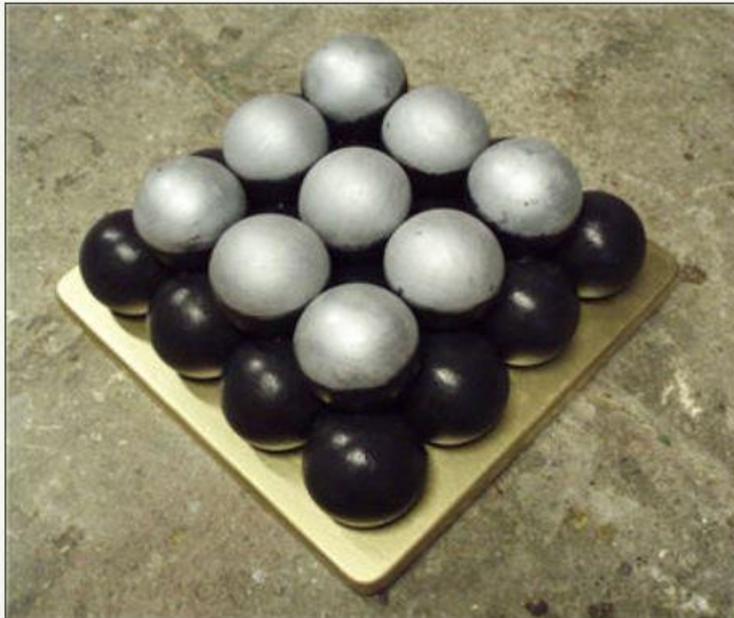
Thus, a supply of 30 cannon balls could be stacked in a small area right next to the cannon.

There was only one problem....how to prevent the bottom layer from sliding or rolling from under the others. The solution was a metal plate called a 'Monkey' with 16 round indentations. However, if this plate was made of iron, the iron balls would quickly rust on to it. The solution to the rusting problem was to make 'Brass Monkeys.'

Few landlubbers realize that brass contracts more and faster than iron when chilled. Consequently, when the temperature dropped too far, the brass indentations would shrink so much that the iron cannonballs would come right off the monkey;

Thus, it was quite literally, 'Cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey.'

(All this time, you thought that was an improper expression, didn't you.)



A real brass monkey with cannonballs

The Classic monkeys were 10x10 and made from Navy brass

And if you don't send this fabulous bit of historic knowledge to any or all of your unsuspecting friends, your hard drive will kill your mouse.

Roelof Brits

Please note:

However, nearly all historians and etymologists consider this story to be a myth.

They give five main reasons:

1. The Oxford English Dictionary does not record the term "monkey" or "brass monkey" being used in this way.
2. The purported method of storage of cannonballs ("round shot") is simply false. The shot was not stored on deck continuously on the off-chance that the ship might go into battle. Indeed, decks were kept as clear as possible.
3. Furthermore, such a method of storage would result in shot rolling around on deck and causing a hazard in high seas. The shot was stored on the gun or spar decks, in shot racks—longitudinal wooden planks with holes bored into them, known as shot garlands in the Royal Navy, into which round shot was inserted for ready use by the gun crew.
4. Shot was not left exposed to the elements where it could rust. Such rust could lead to the ball not flying true or jamming in the barrel and exploding the gun. Indeed, gunners would attempt to remove as many imperfections as possible from the surfaces of balls.
5. The physics does not stand up to scrutiny. The contraction of both balls and plate over the range of temperatures involved would not be particularly large. The effect claimed possibly could be reproduced under laboratory conditions with objects engineered to a high precision for this purpose, but it is unlikely it would ever have occurred in real life aboard a warship.

The reference is most likely a humorous reference to emphasize how cold it is.