

The “Dog” Days of Summer

It’s hot as this Bugler is written; I mean really **HOT! HOT** and muggy! This weather isn’t fit for man or beast – which is ironic ‘cause these are called the dog days of summer. That’s the period of hot sultry weather that falls between early July and early September in the northern hemisphere. Blame the dog days, or at least the name, on the stars.

Once upon a time ...

In ancient times, different cultures around the world drew images in the sky as if they were connecting the dots from star to star. The Japanese saw images different than what Native Americans saw. And their images were not what Europeans saw. Those star pictures that were mapped by dots we call constellations and the ones we know now came to us from our European ancestors. They include bears Ursa Major and Ursa Minor, the Gemini twins, Taurus the bull, Orion, the great hunter, and dogs Canis Major and Canis Minor. The brightest of the stars in Canis Major (bigger dog) is Sirius. Actually it’s the brightest star of all in the night sky as seen from earth. It’s so bright ancient Romans thought that the earth received heat from it. During the summer season, Sirius, known now as the Dog Star, rises and sets with the sun. During late July, Sirius is in conjunction with the sun, and the ancients believed that its heat added to the heat of the sun, creating a stretch of hot and sultry weather. This period – from 20 days before the conjunction to 20 days after – was called “dog days” after the Dog Star.

In recent years, “dog days” has also been used in reference to the U.S. stock market. Since summer is a very slow time for the stock market, poor performing stocks with little future potential are frequently known as “dogs.”

Military “dogs”

Dogwatch at sea

In summer (as well as fall, winter, and spring), a dogwatch at sea is the period between 4 PM and 8 PM: 4 – 6 PM, the first dogwatch; 6 – 8 PM, the second dogwatch. The dogwatches are only two hours each, so the same sailors are not always on duty at the same time each afternoon. Why “dog” watch? It might be the corruption of dodge watch. It might be the fitful sleep of sailors, called dog sleep, because it is such a stressful watch. Apparently, the origin of the term is not known other than that it was in use in the 1700s.

Dog Soldier

In the late 1860s, the Dog Soldiers were crucial in Cheyenne resistance to American expansion westward as an elite military organization within the tribe and were noted as both highly aggressive and effective combatants. They refused to sign treaties that limited their hunting grounds and restricted them to a reservation south of the Arkansas River. Many of these soldiers were killed by General Custer and his Seventh Cavalry; the remainder were killed by a force composed of Pawnee mercenaries and American cavalry.

Dog of war

This is the nickname for a mercenary or soldier-for-hire and was first used to describe unchecked European soldiers of fortune who roamed the Congo in the 1960s and 1970s.

My dogs are barking!

Ouch! A common complaint of the Infantry, no doubt! “My dogs are barking” translates to “my feet are hurting”!

Dog him out

You dog someone out and that means you’ve criticized him.

Dog leg

This is an intentional but temporary divergence from a particular planned direction, usually in a road or a route. It refers to the partial bend at the knee of a dog’s leg.

Dogfight

This is a fairly common term used to describe close-range aerial combat between two or more opposing aircraft. The term originated during World War I. A preferred fighter tactic was to position one’s aircraft behind the enemy aircraft. From that position, a pilot could fire his guns on the enemy without having to lead the target, and the enemy aircraft could not effectively fire back. When two fighter aircraft circle each other trying to achieve this position, it resembles two dogs chasing each other’s tails. The preferred terminology for modern aerial combat is “air-to-air combat” and “air combat maneuvering.” Still, in the old war movies, we get caught up in the actions of a dogfight.

We’re “dog”ged to the end. (Sorry about that. It must be the heat and humidity!)