

# BELAYING PINS

by Lew Zerfas

## Definition

1. A short, removable wooden or metal pin fitted in a hole in the rail of a boat and used for securing running gear. 2. A strong pin in the side of a vessel, or by the mast, round which ropes are wound when they are fastened or belayed. 3. They typically weigh 3-5 pounds and vary in length from 1-3'.

## Other Uses:

Normally, this pin is used to secure ropes. These large wooden clubs are found all over a ship and have often been used as a weapon. Usually made from a dense hardwood such as *lignum vitae* they do considerable damage when used as a club. They were often used by press gangs (men who subdued other men and brought them to ships for forced service).

Belaying Pin Quoits - to defeat the doldrums! When wind was the only power available, sailors had no choice but to sit out the calm equatorial zone known as the "doldrums." The crew naturally turned their minds to the invention of games to while away this enforced leisure and one of the more obvious options was to use belaying pins as a target at which to throw rope loops. Sailors often competed at this, the original "quoits", for money, tobacco and ale.



*The belaying pins above were made by the author on a wood lathe. The smaller pin has a shaft of 1-1/4" diameter and is 15" long (overall). The larger pin has a shaft of 1-1/2" diameter and is 18" long (overall).*

## Determining the Size of a Belay Pin.

Belaying pins come in various sizes depending on the diameter of the largest line (nautical for rope) that is to be tied to them. Use there are some general rules to follow. Most ships used one size of pin with the largest required size prevailing.

Sea-going naval and commercial vessels had pins from 1" to 1-1/2" in diameter with lengths of 12 to 18 inches. Smaller vessels might have pins of 1/2" diameter and lengths of 6".

A general rule of thumb was 1/2" plus 1/2" per 100-feet of ship length for the shaft diameters and 6" plus 6" per 100-feet of ship length for the overall length of the pin.

Pin shapes varied slightly but all had rounded ends, shoulders on the upper portions and a slight taper to the shaft. Upper portions were generally between 3/8 and 1/3 the length of the pin.

**Example:**

**BELAYING PIN PROPORTIONS:**

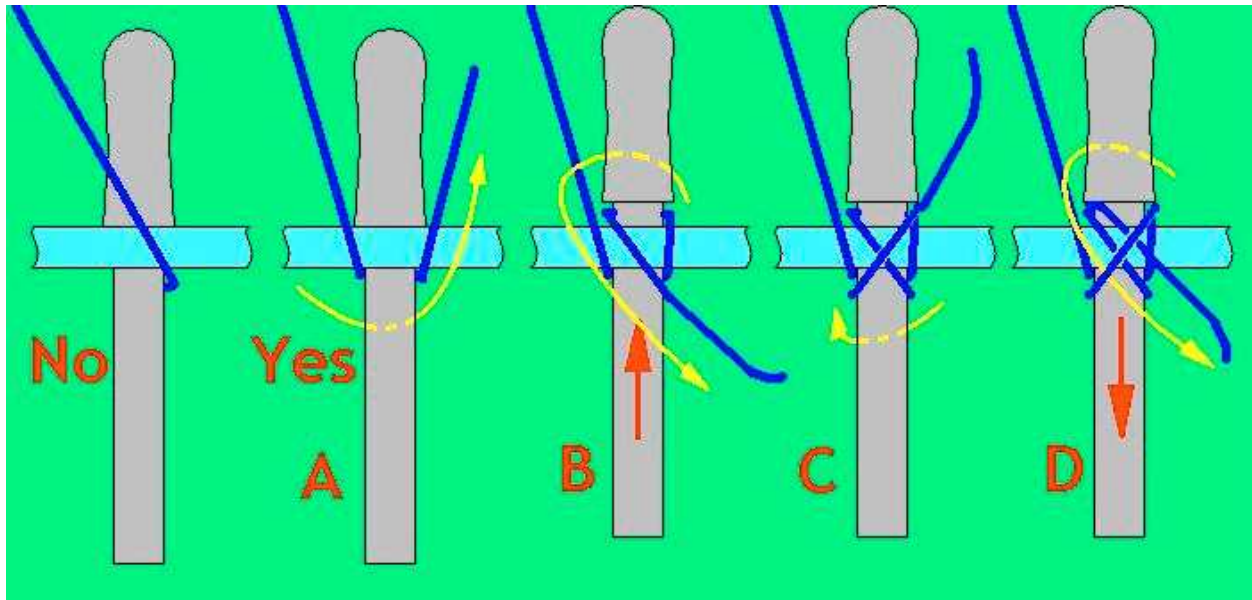
- 30' ketch- length 7.75" overall and a shaft diameter of 1/2"
- 160' schooner - 15" overall and a shaft diameter of 1-1/4" (small pin in photo above)
- 200' ship - 18" overall and a shaft diameter of 1-1/2" (larger pin in photo above)

**Tying to a line to a Belaying Pin (the cleat hitch or "figure eight's")**

To belay a line around a belaying pin, you pass the line fully around the bottom of the pin for one turn before beginning a series of 3 or 4 figure-eights (diagonally like an "S"), across the front and around the back of the pin.

A single half hitch, laid in the same direction as the figure-eights, finishes the belay.

Again, as with a cleat, there is no need or advantage to a birdsnest of half-hitches atop the pin. The excess line is then coiled and hung from the pin, neatly out of the way



Pass the line around the bottom end of the pin (**A**), around the top end of the pin after the handle is slightly raised and diagonally across the front (**B**), behind the bottom and diagonally across the front over the previous diagonal (**C**), around the top again, the pass the end under the last diagonal as a half-hitch (**D**).