Knot News

INTERNATIONAL GUILD OF KNOT TYERS - PACIFIC AMERICAS BRANCH

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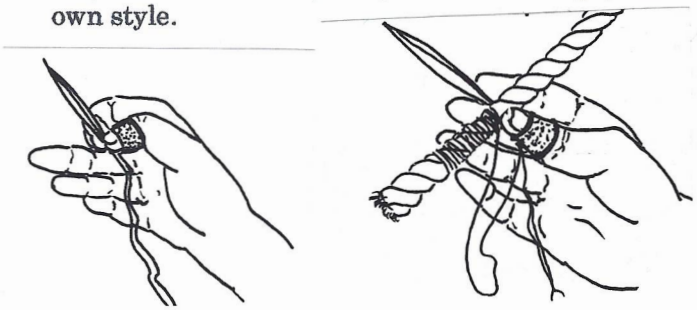
From the Ditty Bag:

Thumbles

by Roy Chapman

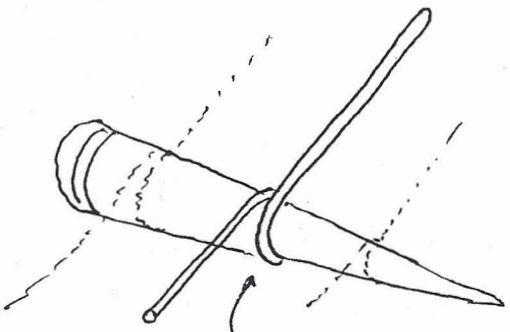
Often, when I get out my needles and twine; to make a snaked whipping or run a quick seam in cloth or leather (or patch my coat) or some knotting project, I leave my palm in my bag and grab a *thumble.* This really is a thimble, but is large enough for my thumb and made without an end, so that I can still grasp the needle with thumb and forefinger. You can see one item "K" in ABOK #101 as well as illustrated in ABOK #3547 and a word or two in ABOK #3523. My sketch shows how I grip the needle and how I push it through. Your hands may bend differently so you will develop your own style.



The important point is that you can use grip strength to push the needle home, just as with a palm. You can push far harder than you can with a regular homemakers thimble, worn on a finger, which puts a side stress on your finger joints. I like thumbles. I have a number of them (all home made). A leather one can ride unobtrusively around with you in your pocket or purse for a quick repair when you don't have your ditty bag along... "A stitch in time saves nine" and all that. You might wish to make a leather one first to see if you want to spend time with a metal one. I make a paper pattern by trial and error to fit my thumb. I cut the leather as shown and stitch it up. This is a very quick job and works well for me. The brass one shown takes a little longer. I make the brass overlap by about 1/10 of an inch (2.25mm if you prefer). I put the little dents in aligned by eye. I use a marlingspike or fid as a mandrel to form the truncated cone. It is a bit frustrating to get the rings soldered on and not have them shift about while you apply heat. I have used a bit of stainless steel wire and made a little cage to hold everything in alignment. I have also made the seam with high melting point solder (called hard solder) and come back and added the rings with low melting point solder (soft solder). This takes more practice with the heat source so don't become frustrated if it takes some extra tries to get it right, but it is worth it if you are making a bunch of 'em as it saves the bother of getting everything to stay put at one time. You can eliminate the ring at the small end if the brass is stiff enough but you should try to at least make the bottom, or big end, ring as it guides the needle away from your flesh if the end slips out of the little dents while you are in the learning stage of using the thumble. For me a palm is much safer, faster, neater and stronger but not as portable. Since it seems I always have a thumble with me, or close to hand when I grab a needle: it is my most used sewing aide. The worst of all this is that you can't use your new thumble to measure out a "wee thimble full" of morning mist.

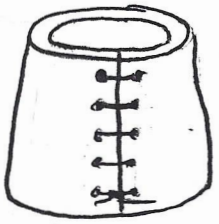
TWO 'THUMBLES' —

R. CHAPMAN 1 OCTOBER, 2001



WIND UP TWO RINGS, FIT TO YOUR THUMB

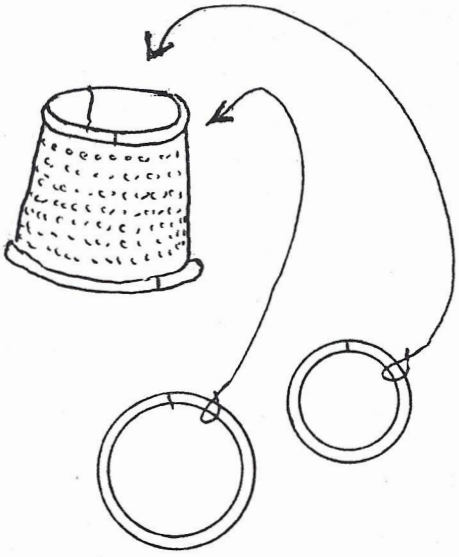
PUNCH HOLES WITH AWL OR NAIL



LEATHER

LACE WITH WAXED THREAD AND REEF KNOT ENDS.

FILE OFF EXTRA (OR NOT).



Canvas Working Tools

By Percy Blandford

This article originally appeared in the Tools and Trades History Society magazine and is reprinted here with the kind permission of the author.

Hand sewing of canvas has much in common with similar work in dressmaking or tailoring, in principle, but in practice the heavier material calls for very different techniques. A sailmaker also uses some ropeworking tools and is skilled at knotting and splicing as rope and canvas are often joined together. In the days of sailing ships the work was similar afloat or in a sail loft ashore. Even today, with the benefits of modern machines, there is need for men skilled in hand sewing, in sailmaking, upholstery and other trades using canvas and other heavy fabrics.

These notes are confined to the tools used on canvas by sailmaker, upholsterer and other workers in heavy woven fabrics. The sometimes rather similar tools used for leather sewing are not included.

Most needles used in the world are made at Redditch, Worcestershire. At one time makers there claimed to be the only providers. Needles of various types are identified by length in inches and a gauge number, which appears to be close to Imperial Standard Wire Gauge.

For lighter work and open-weave fabrics, such as hessian and sacking needles are similar (but larger) to those for domestic sewing and round throughout. They are sold as yarn or bag needles, 2in. x 19g to 3in. x 12g [A].

For sewing up the tops of sacks and similar work, there is a packing or bagging needle [B] in sizes from 3in. x 14g to 10in. x 4g. The curved working end has an acute diamond bayonet section.

The standby of the sailmaker is the sail needle, with a triangular section behind the point slightly larger than the round part [C]. This opens a hole that the eye-end with its looped twine can pass through. Most workers have a large assortment of these in sizes from 2 ½ in. x 18g up to 5in. x 6g. For roping the edge of a sail there are needles with curved ends similar to packing needles.

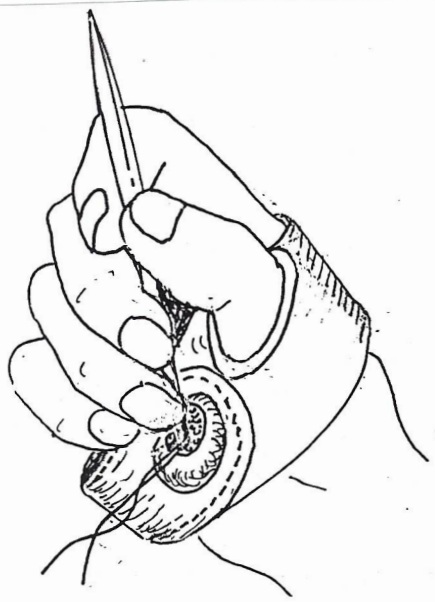
The upholsterer has uses for plain needles, but larger than domestic ones, in sizes from 4in. x 15g up to 16in. x 11g. The upholsterer also uses needles pointed at both ends [D]. The eye is located near one end. Both ends could have round or bayonet points or there could be one of each. Sizes are from 4in. x 15g up to 16in. x 11g.

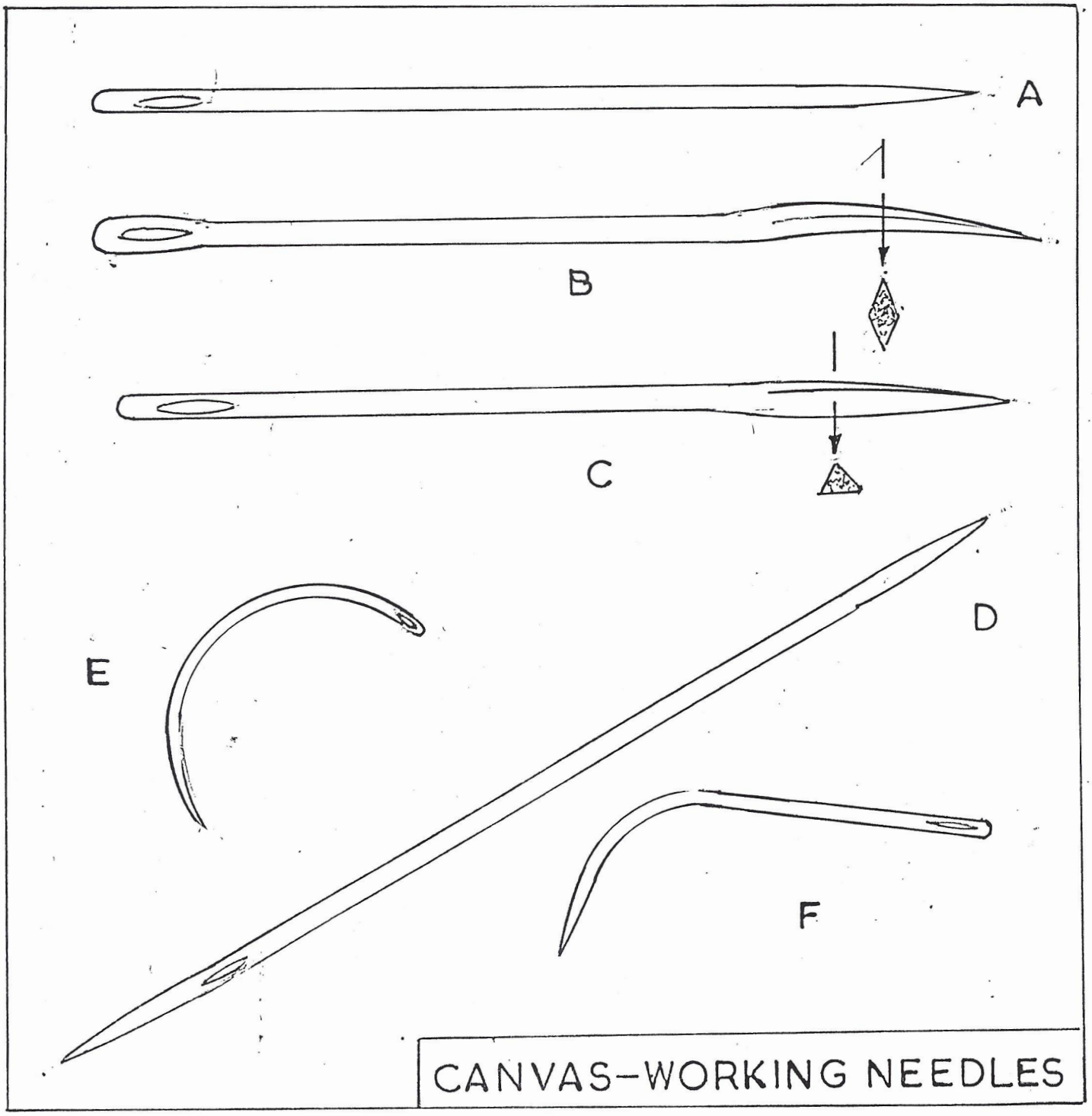
To get in and out of a job on one side there are curved needles, mostly forming a semi-circle [E]. They may be pointed at one or both ends. Sizes are from 2in. (around the curve) x 17g up to 8in. x 14g. If the needle has one point and is straight towards the eye it is an upholsterer's spring needle [F]. If you need a very long needle thick behind the point it is probably intended for trussing poultry.

Needles are stored in various ways. They could be stuck in cork or put in a box. Te favored container is a wood tube [G]. Wood containers are preferred, as there is no risk of damaging the needlepoints. Some containers were highly decorated.

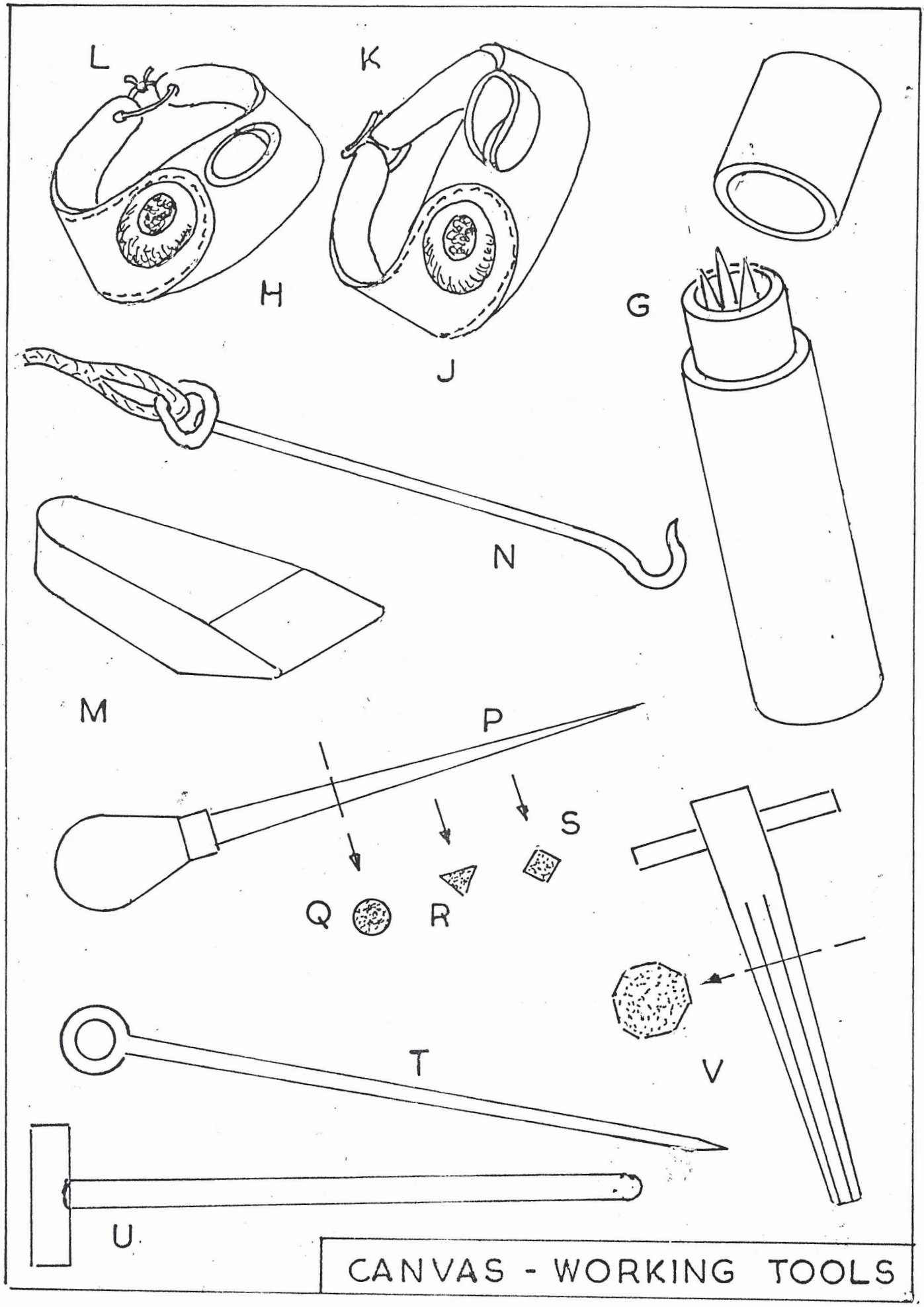
Large needles cannot be pushed through tough canvas with anything like dressmaker's thimbles. Instead, the thrust comes from the palm of the hand, with tools appropriately called a *palm*.

There are variations, but a palm is a stout leather band, adjustable to fit the hand and allow the thumb to project through a hole, to grip a needle with its eye end against an iron pad, which is covered with hollows to take the end of the needle. Thrust on the needle then come from the center of the hand. Sailmaker's palms [H] are the common type. A roping palm [J] for sewing rope to the edge of a sail has an extra protection around the thumbhole. Some collectors treasure a left-handed palm as extra valuable, but they have always been made and some of us say all the best people are left-handed! The back of the palm may have the ends joined with a buckle [K] or just have two holes for a piece of twine [L].





CANVAS-WORKING NEEDLES



CANVAS - WORKING TOOLS

Seam rubbers are used to press down folded canvas for sewing seams. The vital part is the wedged end [M], but like needle boxes they lend themselves to decoration.

A sailmaker sits on a long low bench, with tools in holes at one end. An important tool is his bench hook [N] on a lanyard. When sewing a seam, the hooked canvas is held to the bench with the lanyard, so the job can be pulled taut with one hand while sewing with the other. The hook may have a plain eye, but is better with a swivel.

Sailmakers use spikes similar to the marline spikes of the rope worker, but mostly slimmer. [P]. They could be round throughout [Q] or ends might be triangular [R] or square [S] in section. They may be called prickers, stabs or awls. An upholsterer also uses skewers [T], which are like smooth versions of the butcher's skewer.

A sailmaker has mallets, although they are not for hitting, but are used for tensioning thread or sail twine. One type looks like a light hitting mallet [U]. In use, the twine is taken several times around the head and held against the handle, then the head rolled on the bench to pull the twine. Another type can be wood or metal and has a tapered octagonal end. A lever bar turns it [V]. Twine is wrapped round the octagonal part and held, while the handle rolls the tool on the bench.

Most hand tools for canvas work are still used and available, despite mechanization. Modern ones tend to be plain and functional. Earlier ones, often hand made, were functional of course, but often had decorative touches that could not be regarded as essential.

Books

Working in Canvas by Percy Blandford
Brown, Son & Ferguson
Tools of the Maritime Trades by John E. Horsley
David & Charles

From the Mailbag

Geoffrey Budworth of [redacted] Kent was kind enough to take the time to send these comments:

Future Imperative

Joe Schmidbauer asked in issue #31 of *Knot News*, for input on the future direction of the Pacific Americas Branch. As a mere trans-Atlantic ally and observer, it is not for me to weigh in with any opinion of mine own. Only homegrown members have that privilege. As one of the original gang of IGKT founders, however, may I be allowed to outline for your consideration one fundamental precept.

Those of us, who were hale and hopeful 40-something-yearolds, when we posed for our photograph aboard *RRS Discover* at the Guild's inaugural meeting in 1982, are now in our somewhat slower 60's. Surviving 60-year-olds from that day have turned into octogenarians. So, be alert to the irrevocable flow of your own years from the future into the past. Whatever you do, individually or in a group, invest each knotting opportunity fruitfully for cumulative effect to promote the growth and development of the Pacific Americas Branch and, indirectly, to ensure the continued existence and evolution of the Guild as a whole.

As Groucho Marx said, "You have a goal. I have a goal. Now all we need is a football team."

⌘

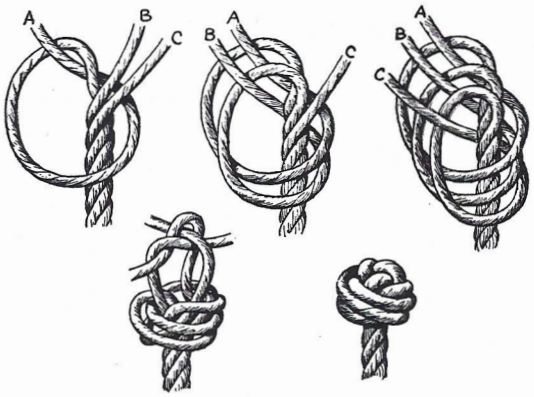
Dan Cashin of [redacted] Pennsylvania asks this question: "I just met the chief bugler for Arlington National Cemetery and he asked if there was any information on how a bugler during the Civil War would have tied a lanyard to his bugle? He has not been able to find any photos or drawings of this type of fancy work. Have you or any other PAB folk ever come across anything like this?

The gentleman's name is Master Sergeant Jari Villanuava and he sounds taps at not only daily funerals but also at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. He is trying to be as accurate as he can."

[If anyone can help Dan in his quest, please contact him at dcsckp@aol.com — Editor]

Whoever Matthew Walker was (or whoever invented this knot), he deserves considerable credit. I am continually amazed that such a deceptively simple sequence of tying produces such a beautiful result. A Matthew Walker is more easily tied than a Wall-and-Crown, but few are familiar with it. I have trouble with this knot, apparently because the steps involved seem to be unrelated to the goal. In most knot tying, as in life in general, work usually consists of filling in the blanks provided by a mental image of the finished product. But in tying the Matthew Walker knot, one seems to be performing the arbitrary steps in a magic trick; consequently, I tend to forget how to do the trick.

William P. MacLean
Modern Marlinspike Seamanship



Thinking of Knotting:

By Roy Chapman

Everyone who plays around with line or works with it for a living will develop a repertoire of traditional knots. Most of us have some "original" knots too. These may seem original only because we haven't encountered them in print or in person. Please use that thought "my knot" very carefully. Even more importantly, use that knot very carefully. Traditional knots have survived by being good at what they do, classically time tested. When your life or mine is on the line, you can be sure I won't be using my "Whatzitz Bend" any more than I would want my surgeon to work out a new technique on me. Our security is on the line more often than you might suppose. Even if you are not in the direct line of fire when something lets go, it may well trigger a domino effect that can be fun to watch until the next to last act is something being flung at you. I don't care to be the test subject for a new surgical technique and I would just as soon be supported by well-proven knots, something with a few centuries behind it. To my knowledge there isn't really a good and economical way to test knots. My neighbors inadvertently test many "new" knots. Generally they do it by puling 10,000 lb of truck loaded with 12,000 lb of wood with a line you wouldn't use to tie up a cow. They are creative. Ever see anyone knot a log chain? By the way, there is a proper technique, but that is a subject for another column. More to the point: I have tested some bends and loop knots using my car. I use new cheap line. I use small line, cotton sash cord for example... something with a breaking load under 200 lbs. No point in tearing my car to shreds. I have two cars with sturdy trailer balls so there is no chance to hurt the car and no sharp edges to cut the line. I do only comparative testing; this is to find if bend "A" is stronger/better than bend "B". To test bends I hitch to each trailer ball with a proven traditional hitch (ABOK #1815 works well). Then I bend two tow lines to a third line with my two "questioned" bends. I chock the wheels and set the brakes on one car and I drive the other off gently or briskly (depending on what I use I am testing for) until the line breaks. By process of elimination one bend may emerge as the victor. Of course the line may not break at the knot, or both bends may jam, or neither. But at least I have learned *something* about those two bends. Note that all I can get from this test (at best) is relative strength and relative resistance to jamming. No pounds-feet or numerical data is available. Still it is sort of fun. I wish I had a lab with a hydraulic ram and a dynamometer, unlimited cordage and unlimited time. I might not learn much but I would get reams of data. Because my method is so rough I offer no conclusions except these: please lower me with ABOK #265 and if you hear my surgeon say, "Oh, well, let's try and see if this will work this time" would you please have then wake me? If you have a method you have used to test knots I would enjoy trying it. Notice I say, "You have used". That should save me from suggestions that I go jump off a cliff!

PAB Knotting Schedule

The IGKT-Pacific Americas Branch holds monthly meetings at the Los Angeles Maritime Institute in San Pedro, California. The address is Berth 84 at the foot of Sixth Street. They occur on the second Tuesday of the month and run from 7:00 to 9:00 PM. They are quite informal and are often a great deal of fun. Knot lectures are held as well as knotting demonstrations as well as displays of someone's current work-in-progress. You are always welcome to attend the festivities and remember to bring along some string!

Knot News
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