

Eight Bells and all is well

Sailor's Phrase

The phrase *eight bells and all is well* is something a sailor on watch would call out at the end of his shift.

Context

Back in the days before there were any kind of reliable chronometers useable on a ship - grandfather clocks did not work on ships - time was nevertheless a very crucial piece of information for navigation.

In order to be able to do things like reckon your position from the stars, you needed to know the date and time.

To keep track of time, on ships they used a glass that they kept turning over when the sand ran all the way down. These glasses were calibrated at 30 minutes.

Someone was always responsible for turning over the glass when it ran down. That was the sailor on watch.

A sailor's watch lasted four hours, and each time the glass was turned over, the sailor rang a bell.

His watch lasted four hours, eight bells, until someone else would take the next watch. At six watches per day, the ship could keep track of the date.

So at the end of a sailor's watch, if nothing out of the ordinary had happened, he would shout out, eight bells and all is well.

Eventually in english marine culture this became a metaphor for a sailor's life, the end of his life was the end of his watch. Eight Bells signified a sailor's death, the end of his watch.