

A Rope Ladder with a Twist

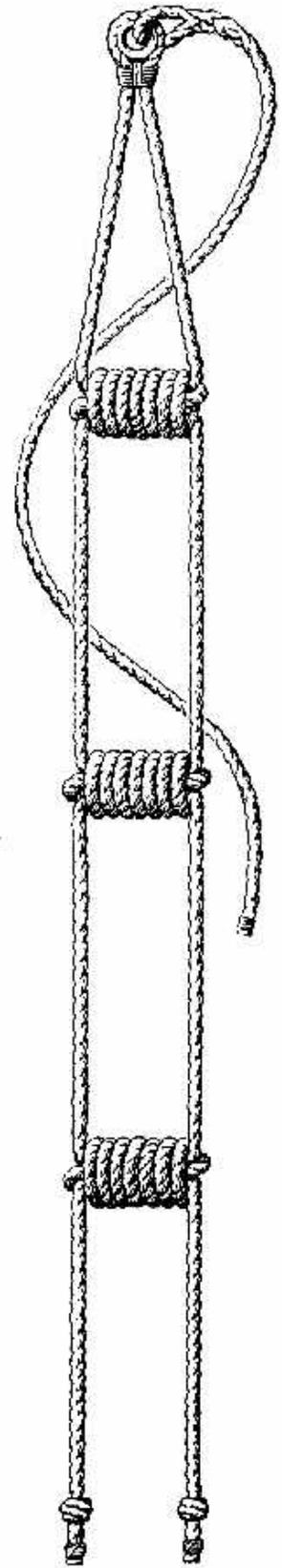
From: The Marlinspike Sailor by Hervey Garrett Smith

Almost every yachtsman at some time in his career feels that he must have a rope ladder, primarily for swimming from his boat. This is a perfectly logical desire which can be satisfied in two ways. He can walk into the nearest marine supply store and buy a serviceable rope ladder for less than ten dollars, or if he's so constituted he can take some salvaged material and spend seventy-five dollars worth of time making his own. It is t' the man who chooses the latter method that these remarks are directed.

Common rope ladders have wooden rungs or steps and are called Jacob's ladders, have been used for centuries as boarding ladders, and in modern times as swimming ladders. Generally speaking they are bulky and awkward to stow, although otherwise very practical. However the ladder I am showing here is definitely not a Jacob's ladder, but an honest-to-codfish rope ladder, made with a single length of rope and nothing else. It is a very ancient form, yet strangely enough few yachtsmen are familiar with it. As a swimming ladder it is excellent since the rope rungs are large in diameter and comfortable to bare feet.

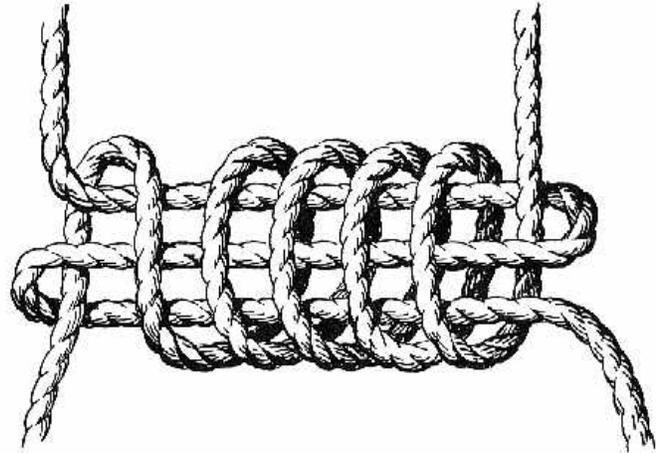
I would like to suggest another use for it which is strictly my own idea and as far as I know original. Instead of going aloft in a bosun's chair why not use a long rope ladder for an easy climb? It need be only as long as the luff of your mainsail, and when hoisted aloft by the main halliard, with the lower ends secured to the boom or gooseneck, you can quickly reach any part of your spar with little effort. On a recent afternoon I made ten trips to the mainmast head in a bosun's chair on a luff tackle, hoisting myself up and lowering away laboriously. Each time I seemed to gain in weight, and on the last trip I went aloft slowly and came down rather fast, finally collapsing on deck like a ruptured jellyfish. Now had I used one of Smith's Patent Mast Climbers the job would have been easy. Of course there's nothing beats a bosun's chair if you are going aloft to stay awhile, but when you go up to take off a fitting, bring it down to bore a hole, go up and put it back, come down on deck for the tool you forgot to take on the first trip, and so on ad infinitum, it sort of wears you down.

However, you wish to use it, this is an easy ladder to make. First decide how long you want it and the number of steps required, about fifteen inches maximum or twelve inches minimum for spacing. You will need a piece of half inch manila twice as long as the ladder, plus about three feet for each step. Better add a little extra to be sure. Middle the rope and put in a thimble with a stout round seizing. To start the first rung or step, pass a bight of the left hand leg to the right around the right leg, then pull another bight across to the left. Now take the right hand leg and make seven or eight round turns about the three parts of the two bights just formed and finally pass the end down through the lower bight at the left. The illustration, I think, shows the



sequence fairly clearly. Draw the parts up as tight as they will go and you will see that the step just formed is stiff, bulky and just wide enough to fit your instep. While I don't doubt that it could be made wide enough to stand on with both feet, the step would undoubtedly sag to an uncomfortable degree. To the best of my knowledge this ladder has always been made as a "one-footer".

Measure down the left leg for the next step. Again start from the left side with two bights as before, but notice that what is now the left leg was originally the right leg. The reason I call your attention to this is that you thus are expending the same amount of rope in each leg, and when you reach the end of the ladder it comes out even. So always work from the left side.



To finish off the lower end of the ladder you have your choice of several methods. The legs should extend at least twelve inches below the bottom step. They can be finished off with a palm and needle whipping, or a fancy manrope, lanyard or Matthew Walker knot, or the two ends can be short-spliced together to form a loop.

To my mind the most important feature of this ladder is the ease with which it can be stowed. Being made entirely of rope, and not over five or six inches wide at the most, it can actually be coiled down compactly and crammed into almost any shape of compartment. The rope rungs will not loosen or slip and are safer than wooden ones, since your foot is in effect held in a stirrup.

50ft of rope will give you about 13 ft of ladder with 7 rungs. For best results, make the following jig that will help you maintain exactly the same widths of your rungs and their distances from each other:

