

Why the British Empire Was Built on Rum



For a long time, rum was a drink commonly issued to English sailors and soldiers. In the 18th century it replaced the traditional alcoholic beverages distributed to seamen and infantrymen, namely the more common beer and the less common wine and brandy.

Rum proved to be much more attractive than these old drinks, as it was not only very cheap in the Caribbean but also had a higher alcoholic strength; thereby significantly less room was required for storage and transportation when compared with beer or wine. In short, rum was a more cost-effective option, because it helped to save both space (precious aboard ships) and money.

Until the beginning of the 18th century the regular ration in the Royal Navy was one pint of wine or a half pint of brandy. After the introduction of rum, sailors were issued half a pint a day. Yet in 1740 Admiral Edward Vernon considered the suggestions forwarded by captains and doctors, who insisted that swallowing the whole ration of liquor at a single draught had a bad effect on sailors' health and behavior. Thus he ordered that rum be diluted to half strength with water (half a pint of rum and a quart of a pint of water). At first sailors disliked the new drink and called it "grog" after Admiral Vernon's nickname, "Old Grog," which he got from his coat of grogram cloth. But they soon got used to it.

In 1825 the ration of rum was reduced to a quarter of a pint and in 1850 it was further cut down to one eighth. Beginning in 1928, under the provisions of the special instruction of the Admiralty, sailors could request a money equivalent of their alcohol allowance.

It was estimated that in the second half of the 19th century an army of 36,000 men required some 550,000 gallons of rum annually, including extra alcohol allowances issued before battle

(distributed for better combat) or in its aftermath (for celebrating victory). After all, every occasion for heavy drinking was welcomed, no matter whether it was a royal birthday or the anniversary of a major event. Thus rum played an important role in the management of the army's manpower for, as Major General James Wolfe, known for his training reforms in the British Army, declared in 1758, it was "the cheapest pay for work that can be given."

The year 1875 was a remarkable one, in which the British armed forces consumed the exceptionally large amount of 5,386 million gallons of rum, but later the level of authorized drinking began to drop.

Rum was issued to soldiers because it was believed to make them better fighters and the battlefield experience did indeed seem to prove it. This favorable and highly desirable impact of alcohol on the fighting spirit of the troops was commonly known as "Dutch courage." The phrase derives from the English soldiers who fought in the Netherlands in the English-Dutch wars of the 17th century and who got their courage up by one or two sips of a Dutch gin called "genever." Originally, the English troopers used the expression with reference to Dutch soldiers, who drank both heavily and frequently.

In the 1760s the ration of rum in the British forces deployed in the American colonies was half a pint per soldier per day, which came to 23 gallons per man per year. When the American War of Independence broke out in 1776, it was self-evident to both the English and the colonists that soldiers could not be expected to fight without being provided with regular supplies of rum.

Another explanation for the widespread use of alcohol was the climate, for as a German officer remarked in a letter sent in 1780 from New York: "This is a bad country, this America, where you always have to drink, either to get warm, or to get cool." And it was a commonplace belief that alcohol had valuable healing properties, particularly in that it secured the body against both overheating and hypothermia. General George Washington, the Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army, was firmly convinced that troops must be regularly supplied with alcoholic beverages.

Because he saw alcohol as an indispensable military provision, when in 1777 the supplies of rum for his units were delayed Washington sent an urgent letter to the Continental Congress, in which he argued that "the benefits arising from the moderate use of strong liquor have been experienced in all Armies and are not to be disputed." He also advised that, in order to secure a regular and undisrupted supply of alcohol for the military, Public Distilleries be established in various states. By the time the war ended in 1783, as many as 2,579 distilleries had been registered in the newly independent country. The hostilities, therefore, significantly contributed to the development of the distilled spirits industry in America.

Being such a critical military commodity rum also became a tempting strategic target. Cutting the enemy off from its rum supplies could destroy the troops' morale and thereby facilitate victory. Unsurprisingly then, the British forces sought with great determination to destroy American stocks of the commodity, hoping to break the fighting spirit of the rebel colonists.

Attempting to achieve this goal, the 64th Infantry Regiment resolutely confiscated the entire stockpile of rum (almost 95,000 liters) stored in the shops in the city of Washington. The importance of rum as a strategic asset is also well illustrated by the story of American general Israel

Putnam, a hard and unyielding commander, who was only once reported to be distressed in the battlefield—when “a shot had passed through his canteen and spilt all his rum.”

After Britain introduced a blockade on rum importation to America, the colonists turned to the production of whiskey, the beverage which later, especially in the course of the American Civil War (1861–65), proved a crucial war asset. Early in the Civil War, both the Union and Confederates systematically supplied their armies with whiskey. And although the troops did not generally get drunk before battles, the Confederate commanders noticed a harmful effect of drunkenness on overall combat efficiency and began prohibiting the use of alcohol.

In 1861, for example, Confederate General Braxton Bragg introduced a ban on sales of alcohol within five miles of Pensacola, where his troops were stationed. The general argued that “distilled evil” not only brought demoralization but was causing death and disease. Thus he proclaimed that: “We have lost more valuable lives at the hands of the whiskey sellers than by the balls of our enemies.” Following Bragg’s advice, bans on alcohol were initiated in other Confederate camps, but it was impossible to rigorously enforce them as soldiers smuggled alcohol, for example in the barrels of muskets or in watermelons (large fruits could absorb as much as half gallon of injected whiskey).

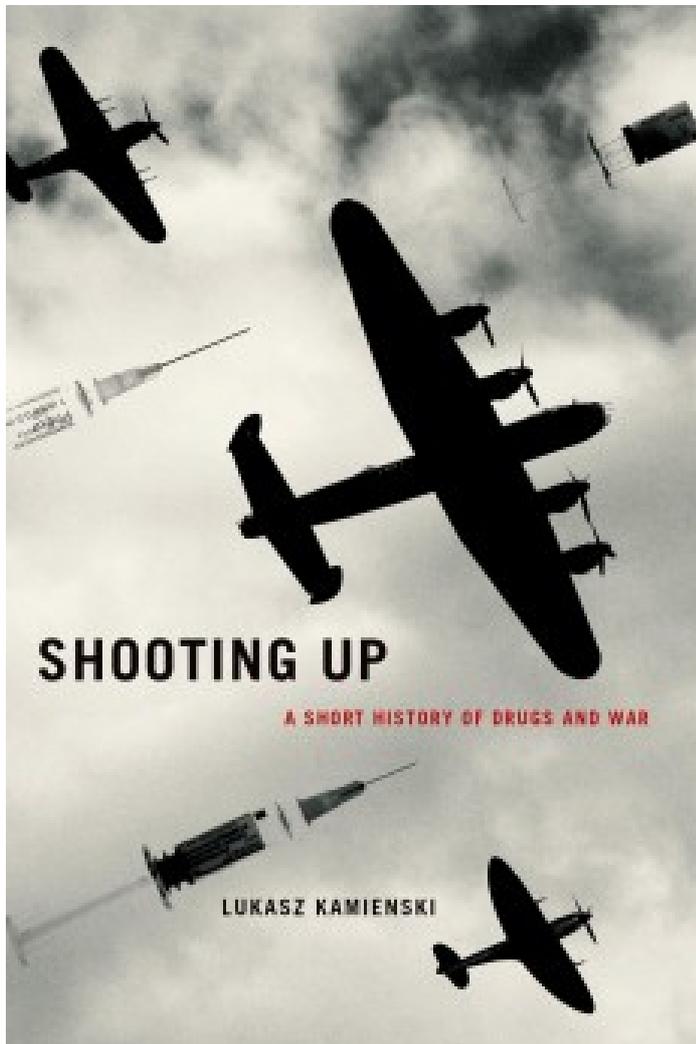
In the mid-19th century the British army also noticed alarming alcohol problems. Instead of providing “Dutch courage” it increasingly caused health issues and a diminution of *esprit de corps*. Scott Hughes Myerly notes that “For most soldiers, alcohol was the only escape; it was customary in many regiments to pay the men once a month, and most would then drink until their money was gone.”

As early as in the 18th century alcoholism had become a nightmare for both the army and the navy, although it was not yet officially recognized as a social problem. In the 19th century drunkenness in the ranks took on epidemic proportions. Armed forces were largely recruited from among the working class (often in the taverns) and the newly enlisted men brought with them the culture of heavy drinking. Moreover, the custom of daily rations of alcohol somehow “encouraged” drinking, yet the officers were convinced that without the standard government allowance their men would laze and refuse to follow orders. Alcohol, the liquid means of army management, went out of control, so that its use required new forms of control and administration.

To conclude, in the colonial and imperial age the use of alcohol in war was prevalent. Victor Gordon Kiernan puts this particularly well in his study of European imperialism: “Alcohol was almost as indispensable as food. It supplied some nutrition, mollified hardships, and sharpened appetite for battle: there must have been a dash of Dutch courage in all Western armies in action. ... Without this solace the empire could not have been won.” After all, the British writer H. Warner Allen did not exaggerate when in 1931 he wrote:

Rum is the Englishman’s spirit, the true spirit of adventure. Whiskey belongs to Scotland and Ireland, Brandy to France, Gin to Holland, but Rum is essentially English, despite its tropical origin. The very word calls up heroic memories of the iron seamen who on the lawful and unlawful occasions built up the British Empire overseas, and if ever Rum were to disappear from navy rations, a great tradition would be tragically broken.

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