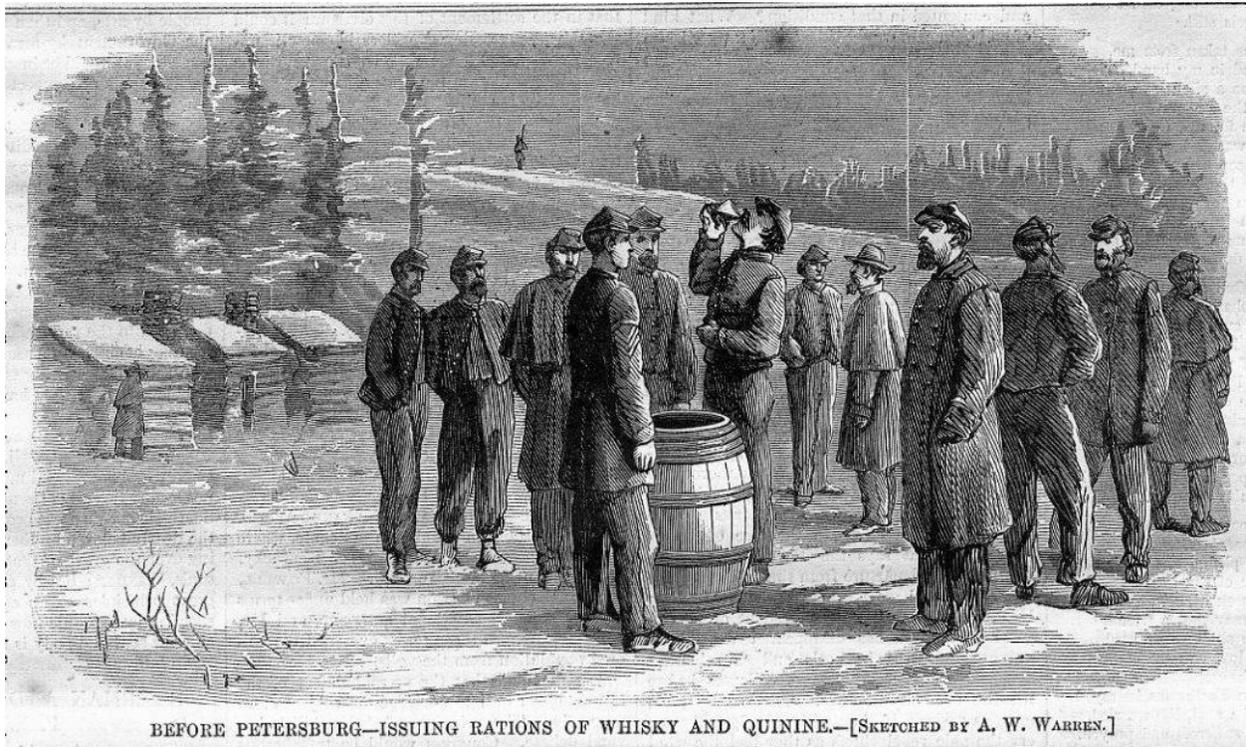


“Half the Time Unfit for Duty”: Alcoholism in the Civil War

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In The National Museum of Civil War Medicine

“Going to him as he sat on his bed, I took him by the collar and seat of the pants, lifting him like I would a small boy, I threw him on the bed, and with such force as to bump his head severely on the iron head piece.”^[1] These are the words of James Henry Avery, a hospital steward of the 5th Michigan Volunteer Cavalry. The man he threw on the bed, knocking him unconscious, was an Irish soldier who was known for leaving the hospital on many occasions only to return in a drunken stupor, often causing a disturbance of some kind in the ward.

Alcohol consumption was very high throughout the 19th century, sparking several temperance movements throughout the century. Much of this was caused by the belief that alcohol, specifically liquors in the whiskey family, were thought to be beneficial to one’s health. Physicians would often prescribe whiskey for a variety of ailments. During the Civil War, a variety of alcoholic beverages were distributed as medicine in the forms of *spiritus frumenti* (whiskey) and *spiritus vini gallici* (brandy).



Harpers Weekly sketch of soldiers taking a quinine ration. The whiskey was meant to help with the bitterness.

Perhaps one of the most famous Civil War characters people associate with alcohol was General Ulysses S. Grant, but was his love of whiskey really as bad as people think? The short answer by all accounts is no. Grant did enjoy his whiskey and has been recorded as having a binge drinking session on occasion. However, Grant never drank if he believed that it would jeopardize the men under his command. He did have to resign his command in 1854 due to alcoholism early in his military career, but shortly after, he swore off alcohol and stayed true to his word. Many of the stories about Grant being too drunk to function came after his victory of Cold Harbor where he sent wave after wave of Union men charging the Confederate frontlines. Historians have long been trying to set the record straight in regard to Grant's alcoholism. He loved whiskey but he never let it affect his performance as a general during the Civil War or as a two-term President.



Ulysses S. Grant c 1865 Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Just as it did for the common infantryman, alcohol found its way into the bellies of surgeons and physicians on occasion. However, it was not as common as some would lead you to believe. Historian George Adams in his study *Doctors in Blue* wrote, “In more than two years of service, a highly reputable surgeon in the Army of the Potomac saw only one drunken surgeon...”^[2] In addition to this report, Adams also found that, “It was the belief of Dr. Elisha Harris, of the Sanitary Commission, that medical officers were more temperate in their drinking than any other kind of officers.”^[3] Out of the minimal 622 disciplinary charges against Union surgeons, 83 were officially recorded as related to drunkenness. Confederate disciplinary charges were mostly lost after the burning of Richmond before the Confederate surrender at Appomattox but of the surviving recorded charges against surgeons, four referred to drunkenness.^[4]

The consumption of alcohol was relatively common among soldiers living in camp or stationed in large cities. Civil War surgeons typically only hospitalized soldiers for drunkenness if they were suffering severe effects.^[5] It was uncommon for a soldier to spend the night in a hospital ward for simply being drunk. Drunk soldiers were usually left in camp to sober up, one surgeon would remark about a hospital steward, “I do not know how he is at home; but here where he can get whiskey and liquor of all kinds, like water in abundance, he is half the time unfit for duty and the other half so disagreeable in temper that it seems as if I really had got into a den of wild beasts or devils.”^[6] Throughout the course of the Civil War “4,625 Union soldiers were hospitalized or relieved from duty for inebriations; of these, 98 died... Of the 3,284 soldiers admitted for delirium tremens, 423 died...”^[7]

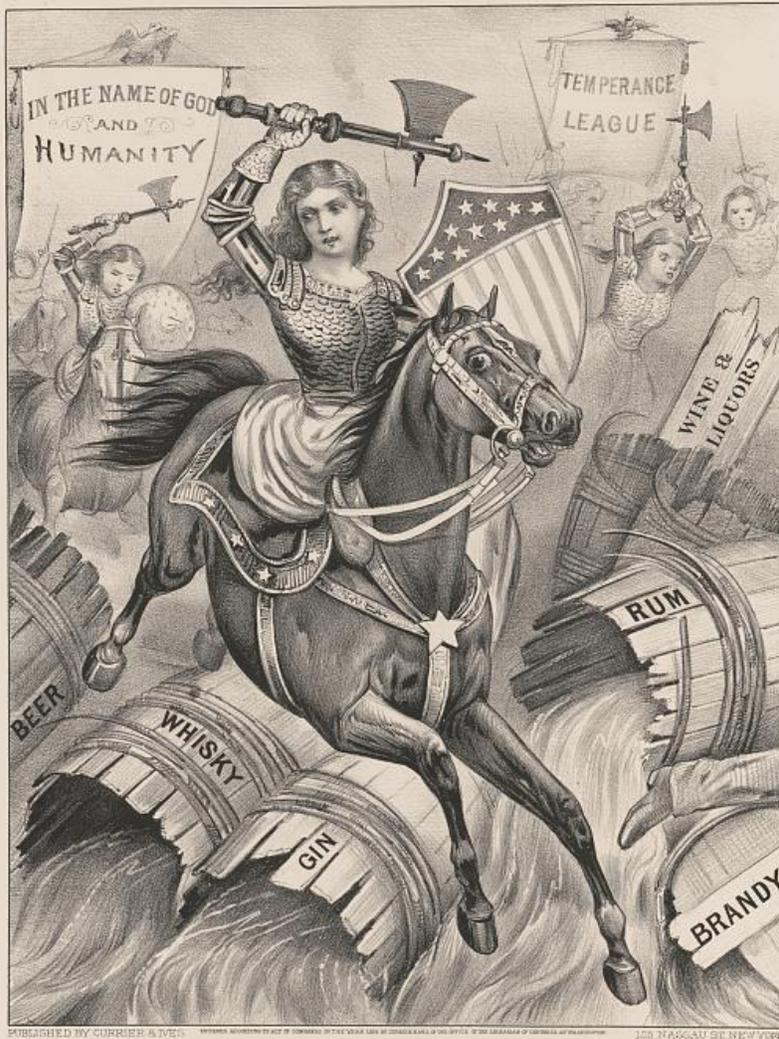


Two soldiers pose with a whiskey bottle. Courtesy of the Library of Congress

During the Confederate occupation of Frederick, MD in September of 1862, Union Surgeon C.E. Goldsboro recorded what he experienced. He records that as the Union army approaches the city, “the Confederate Surgeons now arose, and, telling us that our army was approaching and they would soon leave the city, took a long, last pull at our supply of spiritus frumenti, shook hands, bade us goodbye, and mounting their horses rode away.”^[8] The looting of alcohol was relatively common among Confederate soldiers while on campaign as recorded by historian Horace Cunningham, “Canteens were sometimes filled from stills located along the line of march in secluded mountain areas, and hospital patients purchased whiskey from nearby distillers and shipped it out to the camps in boxes marked ‘Soldiers’ Supplies.’”^[9]

The Civil War led to a strong, widespread presence of the temperance movement, Many of the women who served as nurses during the war became advocates for temperance since they saw its ill effects first hand.^[10] Those involved in the movement called upon their experiences working with soldiers during the war along with newspaper reports from around the country involving veterans and alcoholism. Brian Jordan, in his book about Union veterans wrote that, “Public officials in several cities, including Baltimore, Harrisburg, and Jackson, Michigan, ‘took every

precaution' by criminalizing the sale on intoxicating liquors to returning troops."[\[11\]](#) Across the nation, newspapers were publishing accounts of brutal deaths and crimes committed by intoxicated veterans including the story of a man in New Albany, Indiana. His decapitated body was found near train tracks with an empty and crushed flask of whiskey near his body.[\[12\]](#) Stories like this one and the images associated with the drunken veteran of the Civil War inspired a new wave of the temperance movement, the precursor to Prohibition in the early 20th century.



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Cartoon broadside alluding to the importance of women's role in the temperance movement c 1874. Courtesy of the Library of Congress

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About the Author

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Endnotes

- [1] James Henry Avery Journal, 5th MI Cavalry – Copied, Jake Wynn 1-14-2015
- [2] Adams, George Worthington. *Doctors in Blue: the Medical History of the Union Army in the Civil War*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996. 55
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- [4] Lowry, Thomas P., and Terry Reimer. *Bad Doctors: Military Justice Proceedings against 622 Civil War Surgeons*. Frederick, MD: NMCWM Press, 2010.
- [5] Bollet, Alfred Jay. *Civil War Medicine: Challenges and Triumphs*. Tucson, AZ: Galen Press, 2002. Pg. 323
- [6] Coryell, Janet L., James M. Greiner, James R. Smither, and Janet L. Coryell. *A Surgeon's Civil War The Letters and Diary of Daniel M. Holt, M.D.* Ashland: The Kent State University Press, 2012. Pg. 32
- [7] Bollet, Alfred Jay. *Civil War Medicine: Challenges and Triumphs*. Tucson, AZ: Galen Press, 2002. Pg. 323
- [8] Goldsboro, C.E. "FIGHTING THEM OVER: What Our Veterans Have to Say about Their Old Campaigns." *The National Tribune*. October 14, 1886.

[9] Cunningham, Horace Herndon. *Doctors in Gray: The Confederate Medical Service*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993. Pg. 212

[10] Bollet, Alfred Jay. *Civil War Medicine: Challenges and Triumphs*. Tucson, AZ: Galen Press, 2002. Pg. 323-4

[11] Jordan, Brian Matthew. *Marching Home: Union Veterans and Their Unending Civil War*. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2016. Pg. 43-4

[12] Jordan, Brian Matthew. *Marching Home: Union Veterans and Their Unending Civil War*. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2016. Pg. 49