

Liquor Numbed the Pain, Took the Edge Off Homesickness... and Caused Havoc During the Civil War

Both common soldiers and commanders struggled with the bottle during the war.

by Megan L. Bever, 2023



At his Westover Landing, Va., headquarters Colonel James H. Childs of the 4th Pennsylvania Cavalry pours drinks for his officers and those visiting from the 3rd Pennsylvania Cavalry. Officers had the luxury of buying liquor from sutlers, while enlisted men had to “forage” for their booze. (Library of Congress)

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Rain fell along Virginia’s Rapidan River in December 1863 as the 5th New York Cavalry set about building its winter quarters at Germanna Ford. The thickly wooded hill of Devil’s Leap offered a good location—so good, in fact, that Confederate soldiers encamped along the other side of the river were also racing to clear the hill’s timber for their own winter quarters.

Rain fell. Cold, wet, and miserable, the Federals built their temporary home among the hills. The taskmaster camp adjutant pushed the men to finish while enlisted men pooled their carpentry skills, motivated to put up shelters as quickly as possible to get themselves out of the weather.

But on December 30, the building process hit a snag, of sorts. The adjutant took a break from construction to enjoy “a jollification time with an old crony.”

After what must have been a pleasant evening of drinking, the adjutant decided “to make use of one of the deep-dug sinks”—presumably newly constructed by hard-working soldiers. Unfortunately, the adjutant lost his balance and tumbled into the latrine trench head-first—“spoiling his entire suit of clothes.” The adjutant suffered no long-term ill effects of his tumble, although work on the camp construction ground to a halt the next day (presumably because he was hungover and, perhaps, doing laundry). Most of the cavalymen found his misfortune to be hilarious.

Although the story remains comical more than a century and a half later, it also contains many of the typical elements of soldier drinking during the Civil War: the soldiers in this story were cold and wet from exposure; they were performing what they called fatigue duty by building winter structures; they were in winter camp; the officer was, seemingly, the first to get drunk; and though the mishap caused by the drinking was fairly minor (in this case) it prevented the completion of tasks.

So while it may seem like a random occurrence that a poor drunken adjutant would inadvertently fall into the latrines on Devil’s Leap, military regulations in place during the war created the culture that led to his drinking and subsequent tumble. Liquor was an integral part of military medicine and military life in both the Union and Confederate armies. And officers and soldiers used various forms of liquor for self-care in order to treat themselves for various ailments, both physical and mental. The result of their drinking was a chaotic environment full of mishaps and uncompleted tasks.

In the 21st century, Americans typically associate alcohol with its numbing characteristics—its painkilling, cough relieving, and seeming alleviation of emotional distress. When the Civil War began, the medical community did not describe alcohol (which they typically called “liquor” or “ardent spirits”) as a depressant at all. In fact, medical manuals regarded liquor as a stimulant.

Confederate surgeon John Julian Chisholm described two ways that liquor stimulated the body: it could reinvigorate a body that had lost a lot of blood and it could “restore nervous energy” when men were suffering from shock. U.S. Surgeon-General William A. Hammond noted that when people became intoxicated, “the nervous and circulatory systems become excited, the mental faculties are more active, the heart beats fuller and more rapidly, the face becomes flushed, and the senses are rendered more acute in their perceptions.” Because of these properties, he believed that too much liquor could be “a violent poison,” but he also urged Union hospitals to keep liquor on hand at all times. So during the war, surgeons were instructed to prescribe liquor when soldiers were sick or wounded to stimulate the body to help it recover. Every use of liquor was designed to give the body a jolt.



A Civil War-era alcohol flask, shaped like an oval so it could easily slip into a pocket. The bottom section slid off to be used as a cup. But if time was short and shells were flying, you could simply take a wee nip right out of the flask. (Clark's Auctions)

Both the Union and Confederate armies published guidelines on when to use liquor, which were based on the guidelines of the antebellum United States Army. The most obvious uses involved prescribing liquor in hospitals to treat acutely ill soldiers. The medical departments also used whiskey rations to try to prevent malaria by mixing it with quinine. In the 1860s, physicians still did not know that malaria was a mosquito-borne illness, but the British empire—and the U.S.

Army—had figured out that malaria tended to occur in swampy, low-lying areas. They also perceived that quinine (which comes from the bark of a cinchona tree) prevented and treated malaria. But quinine tasted unbearably bitter, so whiskey made drinking quinine possible. Any time that the armies were encamped near water, medical departments doled out whiskey and quinine rations (if those supplies were available).

Beyond the medical department, military regulations stated that whiskey (or other types of liquor) could be used in cases of exposure, which meant that soldiers could receive a spirit ration whenever they were stuck in extreme elements, such as rain, snow, or mud. Liquor rations at the end of a shift on picket duty were therefore especially common, as the goal was to prevent the soldiers from becoming ill after they had been cold or damp.

Finally, whiskey rations were used in cases of extreme fatigue. Officially this meant that soldiers could have whiskey rations any time they were building bridges, digging trenches, burying the dead, or performing other similar tasks. In practice, this regulation was often expanded to include any task that was arduous, such as marching long distances.

The guidelines, on paper, seemed fairly straightforward. The uses of liquor were clearly defined and the amount of the rations were regulated, usually at a gill or a half gill (so about a shot or two, in the modern sense). In practice, however, these guidelines were not actually very specific at all. In large part the confusion came from the fact that supplying rations was left to the discretion of the commanding officer. In some cases, commanding generals set their own rules for spirit rations. For example, after [Fredericksburg](#), General Robert E. Lee forbade Christmas rations. But just across the river, in the camps of the Army of the Potomac, Union Maj. Gen. Joseph Hooker celebrated the holidays by doling out whiskey rations widely. Often, though, the decision about whiskey rations passed down the chain of command, so the implementation of regulations varied a lot by who was in charge. If a colonel or a major was a teetotaler, the soldiers were probably not getting any rations. Other times, the company officers happily ladled out whiskey.

Throughout the conflict, many low-ranking officers (some of whom had been elected by enlisted men) made decisions about what constituted “exposure” and what constituted “fatigue.” When men had to march, for example, some commanding officers thought that a ration of whiskey could stimulate them for the journey. This did not always work. Whiskey rations promoted straggling.



Federal troops line up for a ration of whiskey or rum—a bit of liquid courage—before they continue the hazardous work of entrenching during the 1864 siege of Petersburg, Va. (Niday Picture Library/Alamy Stock Photo)

Perhaps the most infamous instance of whiskey-related trouble occurred during Maj. Gen. [Ambrose Burnside](#)'s Mud March after the Battle of Fredericksburg. The soldiers were demoralized. Union officers decided to try to cheer them up with whiskey rations. Instead, the men became drunk and fought. Sometimes, commanding officers would try to give the ration at the end of the march, which seemingly made more sense. Except that orders could change. For example, in 1863, Confederates had similar troubles (albeit on a smaller scale) while on their way to Pennsylvania. After crossing the Potomac River in Maryland on a rainy, muddy day, Confederate soldiers were told they would have time to eat dinner. They received hearty rations of whiskey to combat the nasty weather, and “about one-third got pretty tight.” Orders came to march again, and the tipsy soldiers “dragged” themselves toward Pennsylvania. “Many slipped down and literally rolled over in the mud for it rained all the time.”

In the most extreme instances, officers concluded that battle constituted extreme fatigue. Obviously, this was not what the military considered fatigue duty. But the officers' perspective seemed to be that if soldiers needed whiskey to dig a ditch, they definitely needed whiskey to charge a hill. The general understanding was that it calmed the men's nerves and stimulated the body for the attack. But serving these rations could backfire. At the start of the siege of Petersburg in June 1864, a Union captain gave his men a whiskey ration right before an engagement. The men began “dropping into a little ditch just outside of the line of trees.”

The captain stood, “with tears streaming down his face,” screaming at his men, prodding them, and “begging them to get out and keep in line and not disgrace themselves or him.” Despite this

fear that men might stop fighting if drinking during battle, plenty of officers served their men rations if they had been under heavy fire, especially if they were celebrating a victory. When Union Maj. Gen. Fitz John Porter heard of the U.S. Army's successes in Tennessee in early 1862, he gave all the colonels permission to issue celebratory whiskey rations to their men. Porter happily predicted that the U.S. Army would take Richmond within six weeks. These celebratory whiskey rations were, in a way, the biggest stretch of the official regulations. Yet officers passed out the drinks because it raised morale. This, indirectly, combated exhaustion.