

CAMPAIGN CUISINE FOR THE CULINARILY CHALLENGED

Marching Rations for the Federal Civil War Soldier

by Kevin O'Beirne

"The ration allowed the soldier is large enough, and its component parts are sufficiently variable, to admit of a great variety of very palatable dishes."¹

—Customs of Service, No. 671

by General August Kautz

Rations! Victuals consumed by soldiers in the Civil War and how best to emulate them is perhaps the most controversial topic in reenacting, after hand sewn buttonholes and "achieving the correct patina". For decades reenactors have spun tales such as, "Eat that and you'll reenact dysentery for sure!" to confuse and confound their comrades who attempt to improve their impression through better rations. Reenactors who say these things have managed to create some well-entrenched myths.

When the foggy curtains of uncertainty and ignorance are torn open and the veil of perceived health threats removed, it becomes easy to see how one can greatly improve the historical accuracy of one's impression through the preparation and consumption of historically correct (well, mostly) rations.

Rations are a terribly important component of your living history impression, and can either add greatly to your experience or detract from it. One of the more memorable meals this writer has consumed at a living history event was early one October morning. The fare consisted only of a "raw" piece of hardtack and a few odd pieces of slab bacon cooked in a canteen half the night before, eaten while marching through the beautiful autumn Virginia countryside in a battalion of first-rate reenactors. On this occasion the rations turned an already-good living history experience into one that was excellent.

On the other hand, most reenactors have had a "moment" in camp ruined at the mere sight of plastic food wrappers or styrofoam egg cartons—which are left lying around the campfire while reenactors cook modern omlettes. Inauthentic rations, non-period cookware, and historically incorrect methods of preparing rations are at the heart of most entertaining

"farbfest stories". Some examples witnessed by this writer include: hot dogs and hamburgers sizzling away on a gas grille set up in the company street, big cast iron dutch ovens with bubbling chicken stew prepared by the "civilian contingent" of a unit, plainly labeled cans of Budweiser beer and Dinty Moore beef stew strewn about the camp and, yes, even using a cellular telephone to order pepperoni pizza delivered right to the reenactors' military camp.

Rations consumed by authenticity-minded reenactors can be divided into two general categories: **campaign rations** and **garrison rations**; this article deals mostly with the former, and also provides some insight regarding the latter. The variety and frequency of ration issues while in garrison was certainly much better and more satisfying than the rations available to men on campaign. Campaign rations were generally simple and boring, and their purpose was only to keep a man on his feet so that he could march and fight. While in garrison, the men were fed by a company cook and ate in messes of four to eight men each; on the march the mess system often broke down and each man usually cooked for himself.

One day of garrison rations included:²

- ¾ lb of pork or bacon, or 1¼ lbs of salt beef or fresh beef.
- 1-3/8 lbs of soft bread or flour, or 1 lb of hard bread, or 1¼ lbs of corn meal.
- 0.24 ounces of beans or peas
- 1.6 ounces of rice or hominy
- 1.6 ounces of green coffee, or 1.28 ounces of roasted coffee, or 0.24 ounces of tea.
- 0.24 ounces of sugar
- 0.2 ounces of candles
- 0.64 ounces of soap
- 0.6 ounces of salt

Small quantities of vinegar, pepper, potatoes "when practicable", and molasses were also issued. Regarding issuance of vegetables while in garrison, John Billings wrote, "Desiccated vegetables might be substituted for the beans, pease, rice, hominy, or fresh

potatoes. Vegetables, the dried fruits, pickles, and pickled cabbage were occasionally issued to prevent scurvy, but in small quantities."³

In 1861 the Union army's marching ration for one day included:⁴

- 1 lb of hard bread.
- ¾ lb of salt pork or 1¼ lbs of fresh beef.
- 1.28 ounces of roasted coffee
- 0.24 ounces of sugar
- 0.6 ounces of salt

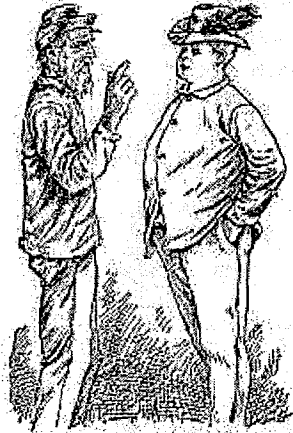
Immediately prior to or during a campaign, the typical amount of food issued to the troops was "three days' rations". Reenactors rarely receive a three-day issue because most living history events are two days in length. Try to fit 2¼ pounds of pork, thirty pieces of hardtack, and coffee and sugar into a haversack and you will gain a new appreciation that haversacks were for food, not "haversack stuffers". When three days' rations were issued during the war, it was not unusual for many men to cook and eat a large meal right away, thus reducing the amount of food to be carried. On occasion more than three days' rations were issued. Perhaps the most extreme example was the 1863 Chancellorsville campaign, in which soldiers of the Army of the Potomac carried three days' rations plus five additional days' rations of hardtack.⁵

Many reenactors rely too heavily on canned food. For both campaign and garrison-type impressions, enlisted men should forget about canned food altogether. Canned food was available at the sutler, and the men—particularly commissioned officers—did indeed frequently patronize the sutler, canned food is still over-represented at most reenactments. Further, modern labels and cans are quite different than cans of the 1860s. A variety of foods were canned in the 1860s, including sardines, tomatoes, peaches, and other items. Sardines and, particularly, canned oysters were especially popular. However, because canned food was rare and generally too heavy to carry on campaign, and because reproduction period-correct cans and labels are rare, and because canned food is already too prevalent in the hobby, the best, most historically correct way to reenact is with issued Army rations instead of canned food.

Rations can also be classified as "issued rations"—victuals that the Army provided to its men—and "foraged rations", which was food obtained from local sources. For most living history impressions, the best bet is to stick to issued rations,

unless extensive foraging is documented for that particular event and portrayal. Federal soldiers on the march did, from time to time, realize opportunities to forage and thus supplement their boring, issued fare, but such opportunities were generally rare. *The average soldier on campaign ate what the Army gave him*, which should be emulated by living historians.

What food sustained Union soldiers **on the march?** Rations issued for the Army of the Potomac's campaigns usually consisted of



THE EFFECT OF "GERTISE USED TO IT."

hardtack, salt pork or fresh beef, coffee, and sugar. Additional variety was sometimes provided, but not often. The soldiers' kitchen was the campfire—not infrequently fueled by fence rails—

together with a tin cup or old fruit can, knife, fork, and spoon, and tin plate or canteen half. One Union man soldiering in Virginia wrote to his wife,

"it would make you laugh to see us cook our grub when we are marching and every man has to carry his grub with him and cook for himself[;] to see every man with his tin dipper boiling his coffee and frying meat on a tin plate."⁶

A Maine soldier in the Third Corps wrote,

"A dirty, smoke- and grease-begrimed tin plate and tin dipper have to serve as our entire culinary department. We boil potatoes, fry pork, and make coffee—all in our dippers."⁷

Yet another reported,

"We serve out our pork and bacon raw except when we have beans to boil with our pork. i youst [used] to get meal when i had a chance and fry flap jacks . you would laugh to see us frying them on a tin plate. and our crackers we sometimes soak them and fry them."⁸

Brief descriptions of most of the common types of food available to Union troops during the Civil War are presented in the balance of this article.

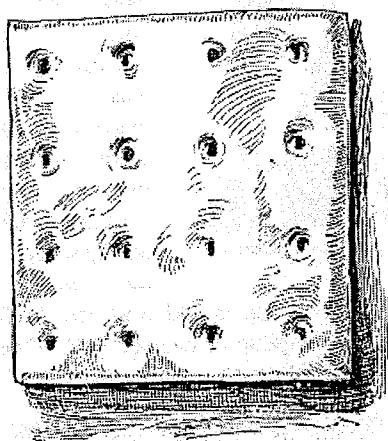
Let us close our game of poker,

Take our tin cups in our hand,
While we gather 'round the cook's tent door,
Where dry mummies of hard crackers
Are given to each man;
O hard crackers, come again no more!

Chorus:

'Tis the song and sigh of the hungry,
"Hard crackers, hard crackers,
come again no more!
Many days have you lingered
upon our stomachs sore,
O hard crackers, come again no more!"

– Soldiers' song

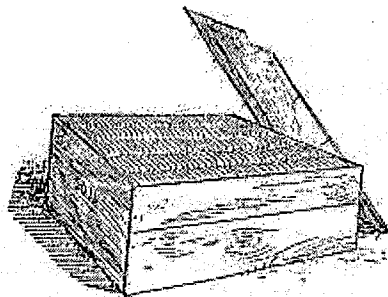


Hardtack was the most legendary foodstuff of the Civil War. It was the soldiers' staple and was a biscuit or "cracker" made from flour, water, and salt. A piece of hardtack was about three-eighths to one-half inch thick, more-or-less, and about three inches square with small air holes, usually in a 4 by 4 pattern, although variations in the size and hole pattern are documented. The crackers were shipped to the soldiers in lots of 250 in wooden boxes. Hardtack boxes became almost as legendary as the crackers themselves, and were used as seats, desks, firewood, digging implements, and even coffins.

Hardtack was usually incredibly hard, and acquired nicknames such as sheet iron crackers, worm castles, teeth-dullers, Lincoln pies, McClellan pies, &c.

"Before he went to sleep, there came to his mind uses to which it seemed to him the hardtack might be put, which would be much more consistent with its nature than to palm it off on the soldiers as alleged food. He believed he could now understand why, when

*he enlisted, the doctor examined his teeth so carefully... He thought what a good thing it would be to line one of his shirts with army crackers, and put that on whenever there was going to be a fight. He didn't believe the bullets would go through them."*⁹



A BOX OF HARDTACK.

Soldiers' stories abound with tales of the rock hard nature of army crackers. However, there was enough variation in hardtack manufacturing that some pieces tended to crumble in the haversack while others were as hard as iron. Certainly the copious first-person accounts of soldiers frequently eating "sandwiches" of hardtack and salt pork seem to indicate that at least some hardtack was edible without special treatment.

An artillerist in the Army of the Potomac maintained, "Although these biscuits were furnished to organizations by weight, they were dealt out to the men by number, nine constituting a ration in some regiments, and ten in others... While hardtack was nutritious, yet a hungry man could eat his ten in a short time and still be hungry."¹⁰ A New Yorker in the Army of the Potomac's Second Corps remembered, "We usually got three days rations of hard tack and coffee at a time. It consisted of thirty hard tack and nine table spoonfuls of coffee and sugar mixed, that's what Sgt. John Seymour gave us. If we eat it all in one day we went without any the other two."¹¹

Whether as a result of being boxed up too soon after baking, before residual moisture had evaporated from the cracker, or left exposed to the elements in Army stockpiles, it was not unusual for moldy hardtack to be issued to the soldiers. Soldiers generally preferred not to eat moldy hardtack, which was usually thrown away and "made good at the next drawing". However, hardtack infested with weevils or maggots was not uncommon. Weevils are a small thin bug, about 1/8-inch long, that bored small "tunnels" through the hardtack and spun webs on it.

Infestation of hardtack by weevils was much more common than by maggots.

Billings wrote, "It was no uncommon occurrence for a man to find the surface of his pot of coffee swimming with weevils, after breaking up hardtack in it...but they were easily skimmed off, and left no distinctive taste behind." One way to evict the tenants of hardtack was to toast the cracker over a fire, although toasting was not as efficient for removing maggots.¹²

Soldiers ate hardtack nearly every day, and prepared it in various ways; a few of the more ordinary methods were:¹³

- The most common method was to eat hardtack unadulterated and "straight out of the box".
- Hardtack was sometimes crumbled in soup to thicken the broth.
- "Skillygallee" was made by soaking hardtack in cold water for several hours, frying it in grease until golden brown, and salting to taste. Billings wrote that this dish would "make the hair curl", and certainly was indigestible enough to satisfy the cravings of the most ambitious dyspeptic."
- "Hell-fired stew" was made by "pulverizing" hardtack to a powder before soaking it in water and frying it.
- "Lobscouse" was a stew made by boiling salt pork, hardtack, and vegetables.
- "Cush" or "sloosh" was similar to hell-fired stew and was mush made from pulverized hardtack and water fried in grease together with bits of meat.
- "Hardtack pudding" was made, "by placing the biscuit in a stout canvas bag, and pounding bag and contents with a club on a log until the biscuits were reduced to a fine powder; then we added a little wheat flour if we had it... and made a stiff dough, which we next rolled out on a cracker box lid, like a pie-crust; then we covered this all over with a preparation of stewed, dried apples, dropping in here and there a raisin or two for Auld Lang Syne's sake, rolled and wrapped it in a cloth, boiled it for an hour or so and ate it with wine sauce. The wine was usually omitted and hunger inserted in its stead."
- One Yankee wrote, "When crackers were extra hard they were softened—a curious fact—by toasting" over the fire on a split stick. Billings

reported that charred hardtack was "thought good for weak bowels".

- Hardtack was sometimes eaten "raw" with sugar spread on the cracker.

"Crumbling" a piece of the really hard variety of hardtack sounds easier than it truly was, and often soldiers had to apply brute force to break them; smashing hardtack a mighty blow with a rifle butt was a common way of "crumbling" the crackers. A Zouave in the 5th New York wrote during the Peninsula campaign, "Our meals are composed chiefly of coffee and hard crackers which I should judge to have been undergoing a gradual bake for 6 months."¹⁴

Sergeant: Boys, I was eating a piece of hard tack this morning and I bit on something soft; what do you think it was?

Private: A worm?

Sergeant: No by G__d, it was a ten penny nail.¹⁵

Soaking hardtack in water to soften it was useless, as one soldier recalled that immersion in water overnight turned the cracker into, "sole-leather. They were flexible, but as tough as the hide that was 'Found in the vat when the tanner died.'" One soldier likened the taste and texture of soaked hardtack to "cold codfish", while another maintained that it had the elasticity of gutta percha.¹⁶

Soldiers both hated and loved hardtack. A sergeant in the Irish Brigade wrote to his wife,

"The hard bread we get is with few exceptions very good and situated as we are it is much better for men than soft bread. i would get tired of soft bread when i could not get vegetables but i can eat the hard bread any time when marching. i eat a cracker or two every time we halt to rest and you have no idea how one will relish a dry cracker without anything on it."¹⁷

An officer in the 164th New York, stationed at Suffolk, Virginia in early 1863 rhapsodized, "How sweet a cracker is when one has the stimulating effect of hunger upon him!"¹⁸

For living historians, the most historically accurate impression is attained by issuing hardtack to the men at each event. There are modern commercial vendors of hard crackers, although this route can be relatively expensive when shipping charges are added. An alternative is to make hardtack on a

