

Information sheet no 115

Rum in the Navy

The Royal Navy has carried a range of alcoholic drinks for the officers and crew, including beer, wine, brandy and rum. Prior to 1655, the only alcohol sailors had access to was water and beer. The ration of beer at this time was a gallon a day.

During an expedition to Jamaica under Vice-Admiral William Penn in January 1655, the beer spoiled, so then rum (or rumbustion as it was sometimes known in the 17th Century) became the only alcoholic alternative for Royal Navy ships in the West Indies. As it could be stored for longer than beer, its popularity spread through the Navy, as can be found in this contract from 31 May 1688:

"fitt for his majesties subjects viz., three quarters of a pint of rum and quarter of a pound of muscovado sugar of 2 pence a pound to each man in lieu of half-a-pint of brandy formerly allowed by His Majesty to them."

By 1740, the standard allowance was half-a-pint of rum per day for each of the officers and men. Vice-Admiral Vernon commented on 21 August 1740, that the effect of the rum issue to the men was "attended with many fatal effects to their morals and well as their health" and he therefore ordered that "their half-pint of rum to be daily mixed with a quart of water". The mixture of water and rum became known as "Grog" from Vice-Admiral Vernon's nickname "Old Grogram" which stemmed from his habit of wearing a grogram coat.

In 1805, a naval ballad introduced the phrase "Splice the Main-brace" to popular naval folklore as a term for the special issue of the rum ration, although there is a reference to it from 1797:

"Up hammocks! Down Chests! Clear the deck!

And see your matches alight!

Now splice the main-brace and to quarters away

Stand every one

True to his gun,

Till the Battle be done"

During the Napoleonic wars, drunkenness was perceived to be a growing issue in the Navy. After the end of the wars, in 1823 the experimental ship, HMS *Thetis* tried out a reduced rum ration of a quarter of a pint (a gill). The experiment was considered a success and in 1824 the standard rum ration was reduced to a gill a day to be given at noon only. This was still a fairly potent drink but it was not until 1850 in an Admiralty Circular that the rum ration was further limited to half-a-gill.



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A definition of "Splicing the Main Brace" was listed in Admiralty Fleet Order 1684, 11 July 1935.

The order to "Splice the Main Brace" is regarded as authorising the special ration issue of one-eighth of a pint of rum to each officer or man of over 20 years of age or over who desires it. Officers and men under 20 years of age or those not desiring the rum ration may receive a special issue of one-twentieth of a pint of lime juice mixed with 1 oz. sugar. No money payment in lieu is allowable. The order is now only issued for special occasions by the monarch – usually after the conclusion of a royal visit to a serving ship.

The rum ration was finally abolished in 1970 under the Second Sea Lord, Admiral Frank Twiss, although not without some protest from the ratings; the argument was that naval personnel operated more efficiently while not under the influence of alcohol, and with the highly technical equipment in use, there should be no error that might be attributable to rum. The last issue of rum was on the 31 July 1970 but in recompense, Chief Petty Officers and Petty Officers were given access to their own bar on board ship and ratings allowed to purchase a limited amount of beer. The money saved from the purchase and administration of the rum ration was used to start up a Sailors Fund for the benefit of ratings.