

Morale had to be Created: The Importance of Alcohol and Tobacco among Commonwealth¹
Troops during the First World War

Four years after the end of the First World War, the 1922 Report on Shellshock closed its address with “morale, can be, and had to be, created.”² In the horrific conditions of trench warfare on the Western Front, soldiers were left to endure a murderous, drawn-out struggle with little comfort. There were no victories that would ensure a period of rest, nor was there glory to be found for the common trench soldier who simply survived another day. The troops instead found their willingness to endure the war in the regular rations of rum and cigarettes. Recent studies on the subject have downplayed the importance of alcohol and tobacco during the First World War, instead focusing on either the unquantifiable rumours of front line cocaine use or the medical efficacy of morphine. The writings of soldiers themselves, however, whether it be in memoirs, novels, letters, or poems, nearly always include mentions of the rum ration or describe a scene wherein two companions pass the time smoking cigarettes. The effect of alcohol and tobacco on the average infantry soldier was significant, and at times, life-saving. During the years of conflict, regular rations of alcohol and tobacco were used for their physical effects, as a connection to home, as a reward system, and as facilitators for social interaction. The multiple uses of these psychoactive substances created a culture of camaraderie among front-line soldiers, bolstering morale within the ranks of soldiers and in the War Office. The cigarette became recognized by the British government for its morale-boosting effects, and every soldier soon

¹ While the term “Commonwealth” is anachronistic, it will be used as it is the most succinct term that encompasses British, Canadian, and ANZAC forces

² Tim Cook. “More a Medicine than a Beverage: “Demon Rum” and the Canadian Trench Soldier of the First World War.” *Canadian Military History* 9, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 7.

found himself equipped with Woodbine cigarettes in his ration pack.³ A medical officer interviewed in 1922 felt similarly about the rum ration. He went as far as to claim that “had it not been for the rum ration I do not think we should have won the war.”⁴

Morale among troops during an attack was created by fostering a spirit of unity against a common enemy. Dispelling fear among said troops before the attack was arguably more important. The ties of brotherhood that existed in the trenches led many men to “hide [fear] from the others and not let fellows know you’re scared⁵” but, as George Bell of the 1st Battalion wrote, a “good stiff ‘tot’ of rum served to buck up the spirits of those wavering.”⁶ Charles Yale Harrison, author of the celebrated war novel, *Generals Die in Bed*, drew heavily on his experiences as a machine gunner in the Canadian Army to deliver a blunt and realistic depiction of life in the trenches. The narrator, at one point, volunteers to participate in a raid on enemy trenches. He and his fellow Canadian soldiers are each given a “sizeable shot of rum” before removing all personal belongings from their pockets and embarking on the suicidal mission. The narrator, rather than feeling apprehensive, states that “the rum has made me carefree and reckless. I feel fine”.⁷ Despite this being a fictionalized account of Harrison’s experience in the war, plying troops with alcohol before going “over the top” was commonplace across Commonwealth armies. In this context, the rum ration not only supplied men with extra courage, but was intended to increase aggression. Alcohol has long been the most popular drug used by the military to enhance combat performance in this manner. In addition to suppressing emotions such as fear, alcohol was viewed as a way to reinforce hyper-masculine attitudes and the so-

³ Michael Reeve. "Special Needs, Cheerful Habits: Smoking and the Great War in Britain, 1914-18." *Cultural and Social History* 13, no. 4 (October 10, 2016): 487.

⁴ Łukasz Kamiński, *Shooting Up: A History of Drugs in Warfare*. London: Hurst Et Company, 2017, 19.

⁵ Cook, “More a Medicine than a Beverage”, 12.

⁶ Cook, 12.

⁷ Charles Yale Harrison. *Generals Die in Bed*. Toronto: Annick Press, 2014, 58-59.

called “predator’s instinct”⁸. Killing was a necessary, yet unnatural, aspect to life in the trenches. It was well-known that the German soldiers in the trenches nearby were as equally young and frightened as the Commonwealth soldiers.⁹ The willingness to kill relied on the psychological effects of alcohol, and this was recognized by the governments supplying it. The Canadian attack on Vimy Ridge, for example, was preceded by operational orders that stated that “the comfort, efficiency, and fighting value of the troops are greatly increased by the issue of solidified alcohol for use during the opening days of an attack”.¹⁰ Sometimes, as Lieutenant Lunt of the 4th Battalion recalled it took quite a bit of rum to rid a soldier of his crippling fear. He recalls forcing four double shots of rum on a new recruit prior to going over the top, and then watching him stumble across No-Man’s-Land in a drunken stupor before he was killed.¹¹

Had the young recruit made it back to his trench, he may have been rewarded with yet another shot of rum and a moment’s peace to indulge in a cigarette. The cigarette quickly became a symbol of the war, replacing the masculine image of “Tommy”, the ideal British soldier portrayed in wartime propaganda. As early as November 1914, newspapers such as *The Times* were reporting that “a cigarette that remains in one’s mouth despite the near-miss of a ‘Jack Johnson’ (heavy shell) is another example of British grit.”¹² Official war artist and volunteer ambulance driver C.R.W. Nevinson painted many battlefields, but also portrayed the Allied armies in scenes of rest.¹³ One of these paintings showcases a group of soldiers slumped amid cargo boxes, clearly exhausted and enjoying a period of free time. While his companions

⁸ Kamieński, *Shooting Up*, 5.

⁹ Kamieński, 1, 19.

¹⁰ Cook, “More a Medicine than a Beverage”, 12.

¹¹ Cook, 12.

¹² Reeve, “Special Needs, Cheerful Habits”, 489.

¹³ Reeve, 488.

sleep or sit with their heads in their hands, the man in the front and centre smokes a cigarette.¹⁴ Smoking became an act that equated itself with comfort, both in the trenches and at home. Both soldiers and civilians took to smoking with enthusiasm. Tobacco was effective as a stress reliever, and the shared activity provided a link between the home front and the Western Front. The connection to pre-war life was one of the most important factors in maintaining morale. The simple act of smoking, an act of normalcy amid heavy shelling and poison gas attacks, connected the soldier to his home and loved ones. Many individuals and groups, such as the Over-seas Club and the Empress Club, caught on to the patriotic act of raising morale and began to advertise, raise money, and send cigarettes and tobacco to the front. The Over-seas Club packed their cigarettes with postcards and pencils for the recipient soldiers to fill out and return to the civilian donor, creating another link to the nation and the civilians at home that were supporting them.¹⁵ This manufactured morale was a delicate thing. Rum and cigarettes were two of the very few pleasures that infantrymen enjoyed, and if shipments were interrupted, as they often were, men would “swear and scream bloody murder”¹⁶ over their missing cigarettes. Likewise, the rum ration served as an equalizer among men; it was given in equal amounts to men of all class and backgrounds. If one man believed he was given a smaller shot of rum than the man next to him, all sense of camaraderie was lost.¹⁷

The main factor that drew battalions together was undoubtedly camaraderie and shared experiences. The technological advances and changing nature of warfare were greater than anyone at home could ever fathom, and it was his companions beside him that gave the

¹⁴ C.R.W. Nevinson (1916). *Dog Tired* [Painting found in Bristol Museum & Art Gallery, Bristol]. Retrieved November 3, 2018, from <https://www.artuk.org/discover/artworks/dog-tired-188899>

¹⁵ Reeve, “Special Needs, Cheerful Habits”, 484, 489, 495.

¹⁶ Cook, “More a Medicine than a Beverage”, 14.

¹⁷ Cook, 14.

individual soldier the strength to endure.¹⁸ A pre-war comment on tobacco praised it as “the friend of peace, the foe of strife, and promoter of geniality and good fellowship”¹⁹, and cigarettes certainly came to represent this in the trenches. The availability of tobacco, as well as its prevalence in being used as a form of relaxation made it a common pastime for soldiers to imbibe. In terms of morale and maintaining fraternal ties, the cigarette was an important social prop. The sharing and lighting of a cigarette always provided an opening to conversation that transcended class and rank. Because of this, many recruits who had never considered smoking tobacco before found themselves in situations where they were easily persuaded, either by social pressures or a need for the anxiety-reducing effects of tobacco. One young man began to smoke cigarettes on a recommendation by a friend: “Continuous shelling was beginning to shake my nerves and a friend recommended smoking as a means of steadying nerves”.²⁰ The ties of brotherhood established over sharing cigarettes extended beyond the limits of shared quarters, or even shared nationality. It was considered a “truly human gesture”²¹ to offer a wounded German soldier a cigarette, an act that was witnessed on multiple occasions. Charles Yale Harrison’s narrator tells a similar story after capturing two German prisoners during a barrage. Trapped by the heavy shelling, he removes a package of cigarettes from his pocket to “offer them each one. We light up from the candle and sit smoking.”²² While they smoke, the narrator contemplates the forces that led him to be fighting the men he now shares his cigarettes with, but the barrier of language prevents him from conversing with the Germans. Instead, he relights one prisoner’s cigarette when it goes out; a true act of “geniality and good fellowship”.²³

¹⁸ Cook, *More a Medicine than a Beverage*, 8.

¹⁹ Reeve, “Special Needs, Cheerful Habits”, 484.

²⁰ Reeve, 493.

²¹ Reeve, 486.

²² Harrison, *Generals Die in Bed*, 66-67.

²³ Harrison, 66-67.

Many generals found that the promise of alcohol was the best way to motivate their troops. A number of British battalions and nearly all of the Australian forces followed the pattern of withholding alcohol before battle and using it instead as a reward for survivors.²⁴ This way, their heads were clear during battle and rum remained a reward for survival. Extra rum rations were reserved for those men who “went beyond the call of normal soldiering”²⁵. Duties such as carrying wounded, night patrols, or grave digging were difficult and dangerous work, and therefore resulted in an extra shot of rum, both to entice potential volunteers and to “prime” them for the gory or dangerous task ahead. In a letter written in 1917, Private Ernest Spiller described the importance of rum as a tool to “take the taste of dead men out of my mouth”²⁶ after having to clear corpses from the front line trenches. Higher-ranking soldiers had greater access to alcohol, and many found themselves relying on the depressant effects of alcohol as the only way to fall asleep while wet and cold.²⁷ Captain Robert Graves, poet and captain in the Royal Welch Fusiliers, used alcohol instead as a way to stay awake. In his memoirs, he writes, “From the morning of September 24th to the night of October 3rd, I had in all eight hours of sleep. I kept myself awake and alive by drinking about a bottle of whisky a day. I had never drunk it before, and have seldom drunk it since; it certainly helped me then.”²⁸ Like many soldiers who took up smoking to calm their nerves, Captain Graves found a special need for whisky that was limited to his time in the army. The importance of alcohol was such that the average infantryman had no qualms choosing it as a reward over traditional military values of glory and honour. Harrison

²⁴ Cook, “More a Medicine than a Beverage”, 12.

²⁵ Cook, 11.

²⁶ Cook, 11.

²⁷ Cook, 11.

²⁸ Robert Grave. *Goodbye to All That*. Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin Books, 1960, 137.

tells of a conversation between two Canadian soldiers discussing their orders to move to an area of the front with heavier fighting. This was a common order; the Canadian army had a reputation for achieving victories no other army could boast. One soldier states “lookit all the glory yuh get. Canadians saved the day”, while his companion replies “It’s beer we want. To hell with glory.”²⁹

Enduring the horrid conditions the Great War created was expected of every man who served in the army. The act of simply surviving on a day-to-day basis went largely unrewarded. It was the simple pleasure of being given a shot of rum by a lieutenant or sharing a cigarette with a companion that gave Commonwealth soldiers the will to carry on. The psychological effects, motivating factors, connection to home, and ideas of fraternity fostered by alcohol and tobacco made these two drugs indispensable to both the individual soldier and the war effort as a whole. The impact on morale that these psychoactive drugs had was recognized by higher authorities, and their use was encouraged. As government-issued rum was shipped to the front lines and civilian initiatives sent carton after carton of Woodbine cigarettes to their loved ones, men at the front found themselves relying on the semi-regular shipments to keep up morale. Ending the day

²⁹ Harrison, *General Die in Bed*, 56.

with a shot of rum and a cigarette was not simply a small luxury to the front-line soldier, but a reason to survive another day.

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