Alcohol and the Fighting Man—An Historical Review

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PART 1

Earliest Times to 1830

Alcohol has caused problems to the military from Ancient and Biblical times. Chafetz (1965) discusses defeats due to inappropriate drinking in the distant past and the established tactic by Imperial Roman soldiers of attacking barbarian forces late on a feast night. This author comments that "using liquor in wars and battles was such everyday strategy that ancient writers wondered why their respective protagonists did not obtain the wisdom to forbid drinking in the field." The adverse effect on war of the inopportune use of alcohol which had particular significance for a martial religion may have caused the permanent Mohammedan prohibition; Bales (1966) mentions that during a military expedition by the Prophet "some of his leaders quarrelled while gambling and drinking, and upset the plans of warfare. Mohammed then forbade the use of wines and games of chance forever." Carstairs's (1954) comments on alcohol use have relevance to its military significance in early times since they refer to a primitive society which had changed little over the centuries. This author lived for a period in a large village in Northern India where two forms of intoxicant, alcohol and cannabis, were socially acceptable. He found that only alcohol was used by the warrior caste who valued action, personal bravery and achievement, while the priests who estimated highly contemplation and mysticism took cannabis but eschewed alcohol.

Abuse of alcohol in the Royal Navy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is well documented. Lloyd (1968) comments that "the one universally popular issue was grog, named after Vernon's program sea cloak on account of his order of 1740 that the half pint of rum be diluted by a quarter of a pint of water when issued twice a day at noon and six o'clock in the evening." Since a restriction in the quantity of the rum ration was then unacceptable to the authorities, Admiral Vernon's instruction intended to reduce drunkenness was wise and he was well pleased with the result in "driving that Dragon,

Drunkenness, out of the Fleet." However, captains and surgeons continued to complain that alcohol impaired the efficiency and health of the men. Lloyd (1968) cites contemporary statements that " 'men were groggy in the afternoon' " (that is after consumption of the rum ration) "a remark which illustrates the origin of the adjective." That the generous issue of alcohol caused disciplinary offences is hardly surprising and the same author considers that over half the punishments were occasioned by drunkenness which was also a major reason that flogging was continued for so long in the Royal Navy. The relation of alcohol to mental illness might have seemed less obvious to contemporaries and might have been a very early example of concealed alcoholism had it not been appreciated by Gilbert Blane, an outstanding naval physician of the period. He noted that insanity was seven times more prevalent in the Navy than in the general population and concluded that this higher naval incidence was due to head injury, often the result of intoxication. The occupational hazard of bumping one's head on the beams of these old ships with little space between decks was greatly increased by frequent inebriation (Lloyd & Coulter, 1961).

Alcohol abuse in the Armed Forces of one and two centuries ago was not confined to the Senior Service, nor were commissioned officers immune. Trevelyan (1965) writing of Queen Anne's Army comments that "Courts Martial, by a prudent provision of the Mutiny Act, might only take place before dinner" in order that the judgement of the presiding officers might not be clouded by alcohol. The wise provision in Military Law which remains extant to-day that in exceptional circumstances a junior officer may arrest a senior officer originates from an incident of drunkenness. A lieutenant-colonel was placed under arrest by one of his captains because he was obviously drunk while commanding a regimental parade in Plymouth in 1819. The senior officer was sentenced by court-martial to be cashiered but with regard to his arrest the court did not consider that "the circumstances called for so strong a measure." The Prince Regent himself

observed that this statement was incompatible with the sentence of cashiering which he confirmed (Manual of Military Law, 1951). Hargreaves (1968) refers to difficulties caused to the medical services by the temporary nurses of the eighteenth century selling or giving alcohol to patients in field hospitals. At this time official military establishments allowed five soldiers' wives in each company or squadron to "follow the camp." These women were shown as "married on strength" and drew half pay. Normally employed as launderesses they were used as nurses for the sick and wounded as occasion arose. This problem caused General Sir William Howe to direct in his Order Book for 1776, when he commanded a British force in Boston which was besieged by the rebels under General Washington, that "If any Man or Woman is detected selling or giving Rum to the Sick or Wounded, the former will be severely punished, the latter Dismissed with Infamy from the Camp." Hargreaves (1968) continues that "to ensure that this order was not systematically evaded demanded an unrelenting vigilance on the part of the medical officers which added considerably to the strain imposed upon them in carrying out their labours under conditions of hard-pressed investment."

In the Peninsular War General Sir John Moore's difficult retreat in 1808 was rendered more hazardous by "scenes of mass drunkenness" among his troops (Churchill, 1957). Later in the same War intoxication was a major factor in the unedifying plunder of Badajoz by a British Army normally well disciplined by contemporary standards (Guedella, 1946). According to Aldington (1946) this may have been the occasion which caused Lord Wellington to describe his soldiers as "the scum of the earth", a remark which was later represented by his detractors as his considered assessment but which seems to have been made in a moment of understandable anger. The same year (1812) Lord Wellington caused an account of the death of two privates from one regiment on the same day from suffocation when deeply drunk to be read to all troops with the almost gentle admonition that the "Commander of the Forces is concerned to add, that this is not the first instance that has come to his knowledge of soldiers dying drunk; and he trusts that the knowledge of the immediate fatal effects of excessive drinking will induce them to be a little more moderate." (Wellington, 1813).

1830 to 1914

In 1834 a Select Committee on Enquiry into Drunkenness submitted a truly remarkable report. This document, cited by Edwards (1970a) as a striking example of the time lag between the accurate delineation of problems and effective governmental action to combat them, was notable for its logical presentation of carefully collated information, the

accuracy of its analysis of social causes of alcoholism and the beauty of its prose. The Committee's terms of reference included "the labouring classes" of the United Kingdom as a whole. With regard to the Armed Forces it comments: "The comparative inefficiency of the Navy and Army, in both of which, according to the testimony of eminent naval and military officers examined by your Committee, intemperance is a canker worm that eats away its strength and its discipline to the very core; it has been proven beyond all question, that one-sixth of the effective strength of the Navy and a much larger proportion of the Army, is as much destroyed as if the men were slain in battle, by that most powerful ally of death, intoxicating drinks; and the greater number of accidents occurring in both branches of the Service, seven-eighths of the sickness, invalidings and discharges for incapacity, and nine-tenths of all acts of insubordination and of fearful punishments and executions to which they give rise, are to be ascribed to drunkenness alone." This quotation suggests a knowledge of the connection of alcohol with general inefficiency, alcoholism concealed as other illnesses, and its relation to disciplinary offences. Since the Committee's comments on the civil population show a similar accuracy the general impression of the whole report is of an almost uncanny insight for the date it was prepared. Its recommendations included: "The discontinuance of all issues of ardent spirits (except as a medicine under the direction of the medical officers) to the Navy and Army." This plea for the abolition of the rum ration was in fact effected a hundred and thirty six years later. In connection with the Merchant Navy the Committee mentions "loss of property at sea as a result of drunkenness."

During the Victorian era the situation was improving but was still serious and the abuse of alcohol in the Services continued to be the subject of remark. Thus Gordon (1874) states "that the abuse of spirituous and fermented drinks in the Army of Britain, as well as among the population of the country, is an immense evil, is a fact generally acknowledged and deeply deplored by all who take an interest in the well-being of the masses." The outstanding professor of military hygiene, Parkes (1875) comments that "spirits, as an issue, should be kept for emergencies, as when after great fatigue a sudden but short exertion is required, or when, a march being ended, there is great depression and failure of the heart's action, such as occurs when men have been thoroughly wetted during an exhausting march." Later a Major Burrige, writing of his Boer War experiences, states that "the men who fell out on the march were more frequently those who drank to excess." He mentions experiments then (1912) proceeding at the Royal Army Medical

College to find a substitute for the use of alcohol in the addition of "some stimulant such as is found in tea or coffee" to the emergency ration (cited Maus, 1912).

Two papers are of interest as early attempts to obtain experimental evidence of the effects of alcohol on Service skills. Mitlander (1905) reports experiments on soldiers which showed that alcohol caused considerable impairment of the accuracy and rapidity of shooting and of the endurance of the marksman while he was under the impression that his performance had improved. Horsley (1912) describes a somewhat similar naval enquiry as "an elaborate research which extended over a long period, was carried out by Captain Ogilvy, R.N., Gunnery Instructor. This investigation showed that the rum ration caused a falling-off of at least 30% in the accuracy of gun-fire." Brunton (1915) criticises both these experiments and suggests that if the subjects had been hungry or fatigued their performance might have been improved by moderate amounts of alcohol. He continues that "an officer in the Army who had much experience in shooting competitions several years ago in Australia, informs me that while alcohol did not improve, and probably interfered with the accuracy of shooting when men were up to the mark, yet if they were tired or exhausted some alcohol revived them so that they shot better." He calls for a large scale test by the Government using 500 to 1000 men "as this would settle this nationally important point at little cost."

The particular needs of the British Army in India are raised by a Miss Agnes Slack in the record of the discussion of a paper by Brown (1909). She emphasises that "in India particularly we need to encourage the efforts of the Army Temperance Association; the climatic conditions of the country make this particularly necessary. I saw there the great need for counter-attractions in the military cantonment to the canteen: I would urge the importance of libraries or soldiers' homes."

1914 to 1939

The First World War stimulated much interest in the excessive consumption of alcohol both in the Services and in the civilian labour force. The concern of Commanders is indicated by the insertion in the paybook of every soldier of the British Expeditionary Force in 1914 of a somewhat hopeful exhortation by the ascetic Field-Marshal Lord Kitchener to "keep constantly on your guard against excesses. In this new experience you may find temptation both in wine and women. You must resist both temptations, and, while treating all women with perfect courtesy, you should avoid any intimacy." (cited "History of the Twentieth Century", 1967).

An official pamphlet issued to the German Army carried a similar if less quixotic message: "There is no justification for calling beer 'liquid bread'; a glass of heavy beer costing 25 pfennigs has no more nourishment than a piece of bread costing one pfennig . . . Almost all excesses and disturbances in the Army are traced to drink . . ." (cited Bowers, 1916). It is noteworthy that military and civil crimes in the German Army are said by Weiler (1923) to have shown a marked decrease in 1916 to 1918 compared with 1914 to 1916 because of the shortage of alcohol in the last two years of the War when the British naval blockade of the Central Powers was biting.

All the administrative measures taken in Great Britain to control drinking in the Great Wars are collected together in a single volume (Carter, 1919). This book which is basically an account of the work of the Central Control Board is of much interest, particularly since many of its measures were perpetuated by the deliberate omission to repeal the Defence of the Realm Act at the end of hostilities until many of its enactments had been incorporated in permanent legislation. It thus forms the basis of the present licensing laws. The main impetus to set up the Board came from the effect of excessive drinking in industry on lowering the production of munitions. In the early part of the War there was rapid rise in wages accompanied by an increase in the price of all commodities, most of them to a greater extent than alcohol. There was thus a sudden decrease in the cost of alcohol relative to income and consumption rose to an extent which hampered production at a time when the munition shortage necessitated maximum output. The author, himself a member of the Board which included Mr Neville Chamberlain and Major the Honourable Waldorf Astor, cites a speech by Mr David Lloyd George, then Minister of Munitions in 1915 in which he stated that "drink is doing us more damage in the War than all the German submarines put together." The problem of alcohol abuse in the Services is considered at length appropriate to the enormous number of men then under arms. An interesting "period piece" was the attempt to discriminate against serving alcohol in public houses to certain classes of the population, notably soldiers, sailors and women. This was soon recognised as ineffective. Measures of particular importance to the Armed Forces included the provision of facilities for non-alcoholic refreshment and the prohibition of the sale of spirits in excessive strength or in small bottles (by the "quart bottle clause" which prevented the sale of spirits in bottles of smaller size). These had been extensively purchased and consumed by troops, particularly on railway journeys causing surprisingly serious problems in the relations between travelling

Servicemen and civilians. Many contemporary descriptions of the Home Front are included of which that by the Bishop of Liverpool of Lime Street railway station in 1915 is typical: "The departure platform was crowded from end to end. Here were three drunken sailors with linked arms, rolling up the platform to the train; here were soldiers, leaning against each other and supporting each other, trying to find their carriage; here were friends, themselves half intoxicated, seeing off half drunken men they had been treating. The whole place was pandemonium. There were drunken shouts, drunken songs, and a babel of conflicting sounds . . . It was the saddest send off I ever saw, and it was a scandal and disgrace to a great city." A speech by Sir Thomas Whittaker in the House of Commons in 1914 is cited: "There has been great damage done to the Army through drinking and the evils that result from that. I myself, with regret, have seen our new soldiers in uniform rolling about our streets at mid-day, and I saw one man fighting wildly, and it took three policemen to get him to the station. I do not suggest for a moment — the fact is the contrary — that our soldiers are an intemperate set of men, but this is a time of excitement, and it is the public themselves who, mistakenly, through generosity and kindness, tempt these men, who are to blame. That is the cause of the trouble, and it is a serious interference with the efficiency of our men." Carter's (1919) book contains detailed and convincing statistics that the measures taken on the advice of the Board were highly effective. The resilience of vested interests to facts is indicated by a eulogy by the Chairman of the Brewing Industry Foundation of the major contribution of the drink trade to victory in the First World War (Griesedieck, 1942).

Papers by medical authors on alcohol abuse in the Services in the First World War seem to have been few and of limited value. Bowers (1916) makes numerous comments on the adverse effects of alcohol on the efficiency of the Army and Navy but his statements are poorly substantiated and his book is mainly a treatise in support of prohibition vitiated by its partisan approach. Its main item of interest is its quotation of a German order abolishing the rum ration at least locally as early as 1911: "From German Navy to Baltic Naval Station. Henceforth the grog receptacle is to be used as salt-holder for the crew." Hurst's (1944) textbook is a classic work for its date dealing with the whole spectrum of disease related to War. While containing some material from the Second World War it is based primarily on the author's experience at the Royal Victoria Hospital, Netley, and as a peripatetic consultant physician to the Army from 1914 to 1918. The parts dealing with alcohol are, however, poor and contrast with the high standard of the account of

the battle neuroses. He states that: "Chronic alcoholism is rare in men of military age. The few alcoholics who become soldiers benefit greatly from the discipline and comparatively healthy life they lead during training." He quotes statistics by Lewis (1918) as showing that "53% of 454 patients suffering from effort syndrome were abstainers, and those who are abstainers or drink very little do considerably worse than those who drink more heavily. He suggested that this is due in part to the greater frequency of abstinence among men following sedentary occupations than among the stronger men who live a more active life." Wolfsohn (1918) in an investigation of the predisposing factors to war psychoneuroses in which he compared 100 such cases to a control group of 100 cases of battle injuries, came to a rather similar conclusion to Lewis (1918) on the increased morbidity of abstainers. He considered that teetotallers had an increased liability to neurotic breakdown. His rather curious explanation is that since a higher proportion of abstainers than drinkers had alcoholic parents they were more liable to neurotic illness as a result of the genetic damage which chronic alcoholism was then believed to cause. Armstrong-Jones' (1918) account of the relation of alcohol to mental illness is of a higher quality than other medical papers of this period. This article is very prescient for its date and includes an interesting anticipation of the Jellinek (1951) Formula for the calculation of the incidence of alcoholism from the number of deaths from hepatic cirrhosis with the comment that "if drunkenness can be taken as an index of the amount of drink consumed, the number of deaths from cirrhosis, delirium tremens or Bright's disease may be taken as an index of this social disease." The author recommends Service canteens where soft drinks can be consumed in pleasant surroundings and complains of the poor quality alcoholic drinks sold to the British Expeditionary Force by French civilians. A sad postscript is given by Barrett's (1943) report of an increased admission rate of alcoholics to Veterans' Hospitals due to patients with service in the First World War then reaching their forties.

A paucity of papers on alcohol abuse in the Armed Forces between 1919 and 1939 suggests little interest during this period. Skidelsky (1968) supports this suspicion of unconcern. This author, in discussing the economies considered by the newly formed National Government in face of the 1931 economic crisis, comments that "the Navy in fact occupied much of the Cabinet's time. The May Committee had recommended a cut in the naval clothing allowance. The Admiralty reported discontent. Pressed to find equivalent economies, Austen Chamberlain proposed instead to cut the bonus paid to naval ratings for keeping off grog."