

HARDTACK BISCUITS



Hardtack (or hard tack) is a simple type of cracker or biscuit, made from flour, water, salt.

Inexpensive and long-lasting, it was, and is, used for sustenance in the absence of perishable foods, commonly during long sea voyages and military campaigns.

The name derives from the British sailor slang for food, "tack". It is known by other names such as pilot bread (as rations for ship's pilots), ship's biscuit, sea biscuit, sea bread (as rations for sailors), "dog biscuits," "tooth dullers," "sheet iron," "worm castles", "molar breakers" or my favourite "Reserve Ammo".

Because it is so hard and dry, hardtack (when properly stored and transported) will survive rough handling and endure extremes of temperature. The more refined Captain's biscuit was made with finer flour.

No one is really certain as to exactly when "Hard Tack" as we know it today was actually invented, as there are records and remains of a hard unleavened breads being around in Roman and Egyptian times. It first saw its extensive use from the early 1500's for use on ships voyages. At the time of the Spanish Armada in 1588, the daily allowance on board a Royal Navy ship was 1lb of biscuit plus 1 gallon of beer. Biscuits remained an important part of the Royal Navy sailor's diet until the introduction of canned foods; canned meat was first marketed in 1814, and preserved beef in tins was officially introduced to the Royal Navy rations in 1847.

Its next major use was in the American Civil War, by which time it had been conformed to the 3-inch by 3-inch square with 4 rows of 4 holes which still remain its dimensions to date. The hardtack was shipped out from Union and Confederate storehouses, and some of this hardtack had been stored from the 1846-8 Mexican-American War. With insect infestation common in improperly stored provisions, soldiers would break up the hardtack and drop it into their morning coffee. This would not only soften the hardtack but the insects, mostly weevil larvae, would float to the top and the soldiers could skim off the insects and resume consumption. Another way of removing weevils was to heat it at a fire, which would drive them out. Those troops too impatient to wait would simply eat it in the dark so they wouldn't have to see what they were consuming.

Hard tack again was a staple part of the diet of the First World War "Tommy", along with Tinned Corned Beef (Bully), this must have been a demoralising diet day after day considering the conditions most men had to endure.

Another problem was that some of those that had rushed to enlist after Kitcheners call of "Do your duty" and "Your Country Needs You" - were of an older age, and with that had poorer dentistry, which led to them having to put the biscuits into their haversack and then smashing them to pieces with the butt of their rifles before they could be consumed.

One soldier proved they could withstand anything by writing his home address on it and posting it home to his family—it still exists as an exhibit in a London museum. (See above pic)

Their regular use by the Army /Navy continued right through the Second World War and beyond the Korean War.

It is still popular as an emergency food in Alaska and Canada.