

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

"farbtest 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

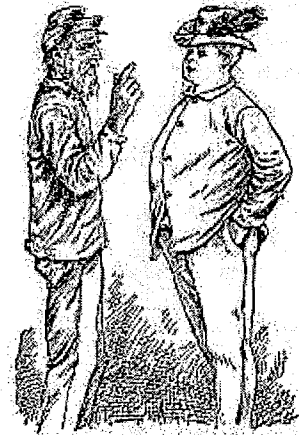
Many reenactors rely too heavily on canned food. For both campaign and garrison-type impressions, enlisted men should forget about canned food altogether. Canned food was available at the sutler, and the men—particularly commissioned officers—did indeed frequently patronize the sutler, canned food is 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 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.

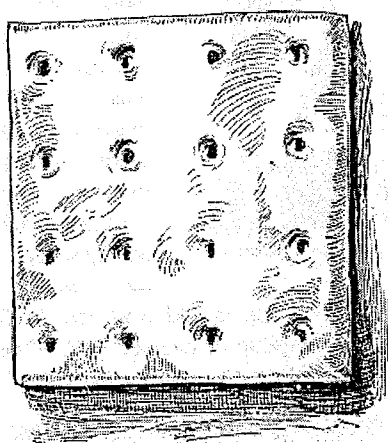
Let us close our game of poker,

Take our tin cups in our hand,
While we gather 'round the cook's tent door,
Where dry nummies 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

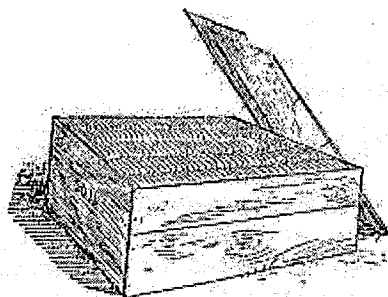


Hardtack was the most legendary foodstuff of the Civil War. It was the soldiers' staple and was a biscuit or "cracker" made from flour, water, and salt. A piece of hardtack was about three-eighths to one-half inch thick, more-or-less, and about three inches square with small air holes, usually in a 4 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

communal scale. Unit "hardtack baking days" can be held in the reenacting off-season; best results and productivity are achieved by using an industrial oven and a team of about five to six experienced hardtack bakers.



The final means for producing hardtack is baking by the individual reenactor. While this is convenient and often results in fairly "fresh" (i.e., soft) crackers, it is also the least accurate because each reenactor introduces variations into the dough-mixing and baking process. The original recipe included only three ingredients: water, cracker flour, and

salt. The composition of cracker flour is under debate, and may or may not have included the baking soda (period term: 'saleratus') of our recipe.

That said, this writer has used the recipe provided with this article for many years to produce hundreds of decent, rock-hard crackers at home. When baking "teeth dullers" at home, a hardtack cutter is essential to achieve uniformity among the crackers.

Wilbur Hinman wrote, "If bread was the 'staff of life', then meat was life itself." The most common **meat ration** issued to Federal soldiers on campaign was either salt pork or fresh beef. Many firsthand accounts report that issuance of ham was rare in the extreme.¹⁹

Similar to the ills that plagued hardtack, the meat ration issued to Union soldiers was often of less-than-desirable quality, and meat infested with maggots and weevils was not uncommon. Also, fate played a big part in the quality and type of cut issued to the men, as explained by a soldier from Massachusetts:

"In drawing his ration of meat from the commissary the quartermaster had to be governed by his last selection. If it was a [meaty] hindquarter then he must take a [boney] forequarter the next time... The kind of piece drawn naturally determined its disposition in the soldier's *cuisine*. If it was a stringy, flabby piece, straightaway it was doomed to a dish of lobsouse... If the meat was pretty solid...it was quite likely to be served as beefsteak."²⁰

HARDTACK

Place the following ingredients in a large bowl and mix thoroughly with a "pastry fork":

- 4 cups of unbleached flour*
- Optional: 2 tablespoons of lard or Crisco shortening (may be omitted)**
- Optional: 2 tablespoons of cream of tartar. (This adds some "air" to the finished crackers and makes them a bit "less dense". It does not create big air pockets and the crackers will still turn out quite hard. This ingredient can be omitted.)**

Dissolve the following in one cup of water:

- 1 teaspoon of baking soda**
- 1½ teaspoons of salt

Mix all ingredients well. Roll out dough ½-inch to 3/8-inch thick with a rolling pin. Because original, issued hardtack was uniform, by far the best results are obtained with a hardtack cutter. If a hardtack cutter is unavailable, cut the dough into squares approximately 3 inches by 3 inches. Use a 1/8-inch diameter dowel to create sixteen holes in each cracker in a 4 by 4 pattern.

Bake for 20 to 25 minutes at 450 degrees. When done, let air-dry for minimum of twenty-four hours, preferably more, before the crackers are placed into a bag or sealed container. Yield: 9 to 11 crackers.

* Period hardtack contractors used a flour known as "cracker flour", which can be simulated by mixing one part pastry flour with three parts ordinary, unbleached flour.

** This ingredient is a popular "reenactor addition" to the recipe that was not present in Civil War hardtack. This ingredient will help make your crackers *slightly* more palatable but, for increased authenticity, omit this ingredient.

How was meat carried? The answer is easy and simple: it was simply thrown into the haversack, without cover, wrapper, or bag. Soldier accounts often refer to the haversack as a very nasty, smelly, greasy environ, made all the moreso by raw meat constantly rubbing up against the haversack's other contents.

Fresh beef was often issued on the march, and the Union Army drove with its wagon trains herds of beeves that numbered into the thousands. On the march to Fredericksburg in November, 1862, a private recalled that his brigade was, "detailed as a guard for a drove of 700 head of cattle accompanying

the army... The beasts had recently arrived from the mountains of Texas."²¹

A soldier in the Army of the Potomac recalled how fresh beef was usually issued and prepared:

"Our beef, when we got any, marched with us and was in the best of condition, no fat, all bone and muscle. It was usually killed about 4:00 a.m. and we got it in time for breakfast. We were supposed to get 3/4 of a lb. No choice cuts, take it as we got it, bone and muscle counted, we stuck it on a sharp pointed stick, held it to the fire, and roasted it with our coffee and hard tack."²²



ROASTING BEEF.

Because of its tendency to spoil quickly, one sees little in the way of fresh beef rations in the ranks of reenactors. Living history units that opt to provide the occasional fresh beef ration to their members should issue it very early in the morning. To minimize health risks, reenactors should consider providing only one day's ration of fresh beef per man, which should be cooked immediately upon its issuance. "Good" cuts of beef should be avoided—the average Federal soldier did not feast on sirloin and filet mignon on the march. Instead, go for the cheapest cut of beef available at the butcher shop; issuing a skinny rib or soup-shank is ideal and historically accurate.

Commonly known as "sow belly" by both Federals and Confederates, **salt pork** was perhaps the most common form of meat issued to the men in blue. Salt pork was shipped to the army in barrels, which were full of meat packed in salty lard. One soldier likened the noise made by salt pork being pulled from its lard packing as akin to the sound of a boot being pulled from Virginia mud. As seen in many period photographs, sometimes the salt would leach out of the barrels and create white streaks on the outside of the barrel.

Reenactors should avoid modern "salt pork" sold

in supermarkets because it is very fatty and quite different from the salt pork issued during the Civil War. Accurate salt pork does not seem to be available today, and therefore "the closest substitute" is often resorted to by reenactors.

Reenactors in the Southern states have a leg up on folks who live in the North, because of the greater appreciation for the meat of the swine in Dixie, even today. Southerners have available to them a great variety of pork products, such as corned hams, smoked pork, and other types of meat that are unavailable or very rare in the North.

Perhaps the closest that modern "Yankees" can get to period salt pork is slab bacon. Slab bacon is both smoked and lightly salted—it is not nearly as salty as original salt pork—and will "keep" in a haversack for a three-day event, as long as common sense is employed (i.e., do not leave your black haversack loaded with slab bacon lying in the July sun all day). Slab bacon can be obtained in many supermarkets or butcher shops, usually with a one- or



THE FLESH OF SWINE.

two-day advance order. Slab bacon can be purchased at a fairly reasonable price, although some comparison shopping is a good idea, because prices can range from less than two dollars to as much as four dollars a pound. Most butcher shops can provide the bacon as a "slab", with or without the rind (skin), or cut up in to individual rations of three-quarters of a pound each. Most slab bacon is fairly lean and makes truly first-rate eating at a living history event.

Like the original soldiers, reenactors can cook their slab bacon in a variety of ways. When in garrison and rations were prepared by the company cook it was, according to a man in the Army of the Potomac, "fated to be boiled twenty-four times out of

twenty five".²³

When prepared on the march by the private soldier, sow belly was typically roasted over the fire at the end of a stick, ramrod, or bayonet, or fried, usually on a tin plate or canteen half held at the end of a split stick. Billings maintained, "broiling was, I think, the favorite style with the oldest campaigners."²⁴ Salt pork was also used as an ingredient in lobscouse and was often boiled as soup. Often the soldiers simply ate their sow belly raw, sometimes sandwiched between hardtack. Eating it raw took less effort than cooking; a teenaged private serving under Grant in 1864 recalled, "Our pork we did not cook, it would be wasting the fat."²⁵ Regardless of how authentic it may be, reenactors should not eat their pork raw due to well-known health considerations, such as trichinosis.



ROASTING STEAK.

The last element of victuals in the campaigner's haversack was coffee, with which the boys in blue of 1861-1865 were well supplied. Due to a shortage of milk at the front, coffee was almost universally consumed black, often with the soldier's issued sugar added to sweeten the brew.

It was said that the longer a man was in the army the blacker he liked his coffee. One of Sherman's veterans described his coffee as, "Black as the face of a plantation, and 'strong enough to float an iron wedge'... It gave strength to the weary and heavy laden, and courage to the despondent and sick at heart."²⁶

Federals loved their coffee and grew to depend on it, with the average man often drinking as much as two or three quarts of it per day. When a halt of sufficient length was called in the march, the first thing soldiers usually did was to start a small fire and boil coffee. It was the first thing boiling on the fire at the end of a day's march, and was the first thing on the rekindled fire the next morning. A man in the Irish Brigade wrote, "our coffee is very good and that is a great thing for a good mug of coffee when a man

is cold or tired refreshes him greatly."²⁷

Coffee was typically issued to the troops already roasted, but unground. Coffee grinders were exceedingly rare in the field, and soldiers often resorted to grinding their beans in their dipper using the socket-end of a bayonet, or mashing them on a tin plate with a canteen half.

On occasion green coffee was issued and the men roasted it brown in canteen halves or on tin plates. A soldiers' handbook advised, "When issued in the grain [green], great care is necessary in roasting it. The pan in which it is roasted should be slightly greased, to prevent scorching. A steady fire should be maintained, and the coffee constantly stirred."²⁸

Plain, unground coffee beans can be obtained today in any supermarket. If used, for a company ration issue, coffee beans should be transported in a burlap sack. Sugar used by living historians should be non-bleached, unrefined sugar, which is granular and has a tannish color. Veterans learned that the easiest way to carry their coffee and sugar was mixed together in the same cotton poke bag.

Coffee beans were common, and the mid-war issues of "essence of coffee", which was a brown paste and served as "instant coffee", was more rare and well-hated by the troops.

A Massachusetts soldier described a common method by which coffee was issued:

"[Coffee] was brought to camp in an oat sack, a regimental quartermaster receiving and apportioning his among the ten companies, and the quartermaster-sergeant of a battery apportioning his to the four or six detachments. Then the orderly-sergeant of a company or the sergeant of a detachment must devote himself to dividing it. One method of accomplishing this purpose was to spread a rubber blanket on the ground,—more than one if the company were large,—and upon it were put as many piles of the coffee as there were men to receive rations; and the care taken to make the piles of the same size to the eye, to keep the men from growling, would remind one of a country physician making his powders, taking a little from one pile and adding to another. The sugar which always accompanied the coffee was spooned out at the same time on another blanket. When both were ready, they were given out, each man taking a pile, or, in some companies, to prevent any charge of unfairness or injustice, the sergeant would turn his back on the

rations, and take out his roll of the company. Then, by request, some one else would point to a pile and ask, 'Who shall have this?' and the sergeant, without turning, would call a name from his list of the company or detachment, and the person called would appropriate the pile specified. The process would be continued until the last pile was disposed of. There were other plans for distributing the rations; but I have described this one because of its being quite common."²⁹

To make a cup of coffee, cover the bottom of your dipper in roasted beans and sugar, and use the bayonet socket to grind them up. Grinding the beans thoroughly may take upwards of several minutes. When the beans are ground up, fill the cup about half way with water, place it on the coals, and allow it to boil for about two minutes or less; longer boiling will make bitter coffee.

Using a rag or bail wire, remove the boiler from the fire and pour cold water from a canteen into the cup until it is about three-quarters full, which will help to sink the floating beans and husks. To complete the treat, slowly pour or "strain off" the coffee from your boiler into a dipper—sometimes termed "coffee cooler"—taking care to leave the beans and husks behind in the boiler, and your coffee is ready to apply to your taste buds.

The staples of the soldier on campaign were hardtack, meat, and coffee. However, other rations occasionally supplemented this fare. Starting in the mid-1862, one of the most common alternative rations was dehydrated vegetables, called "**desiccated vegetables**" by the Army and "desecrated" or "consecrated vegetables" and "baled hay" by the troops. Two types were common: desiccated potatoes, and desiccated vegetables. The latter consisted of pieces of turnips, parsnips, carrots, beets, onions, string beans, potatoes, corn, cabbage, and, "what seemed to be cornstalks, potato-tops, and pea-vines."³⁰

Desiccated vegetables were issued in "blocks" that measured approximately twelve inches by twelve inches by one inch thick. In the manufacturing process, the vegetables had been cut up into bite-sized pieces, hydraulically pressed or steamed into blocks, and thoroughly dehydrated. At first soldiers ridiculed the "baled hay", but soon came to, if not "like" at least to tolerate it. "Desecrated vegetables" made a capital soup, and one cubic inch of "the stuff" would make a full quart of soup.

Desiccated vegetables can add to your mid- and

late-war living history impression and introduce some variety to your weekend diet. At present, this writer is not aware of a way to replicate the compressed blocks of desiccated vegetables and, therefore, to incorporate them into a living history impression they have to be carried "loose" in a poke bag.

To make dehydrated vegetables, obtain some or all of the vegetables listed above and cut them up into bite-sized pieces. Place them into a dehydrator for 36 to 48 hours until they are thoroughly dried, then place them in a cotton bag and bring it to the next event. Alternately, an oven on low heat—about 200 degrees Fahrenheit—for the same length of time can also be used to dehydrate vegetables.

This writer has used desiccated vegetables at events for years with highly favorable results. A few "fingerfuls" of dehydrated vegetables, a meal's ration of slab bacon cut up fine, and a boiler full of water, boiled together for thirty to forty minutes, makes a first-rate lobsouse with a hearty, tasty broth.

Other types of rations were occasionally issued to Union soldiers on campaign, but they were relatively rare and are outside the scope of this essay.

Soldiers on campaign and in garrison occasionally supplemented their army fare with rations obtained, or "**foraged**", from the local populace. Foraging was difficult on campaign and generally reenactors should not rely too much on tasty treats; this writer has heard the excuse, "I foraged this!"—often accompanied by a wave of decidedly modern victuals—more times than can be counted. However, if you are determined to consume "foraged" rations at an event, make them correct.

At one time or another, most Federal soldiers probably foraged to some extent; bartering or paying locals for food was much more common than stealing. To successfully forage, a soldier required both opportunity and a farmhouse with excess food available. As the war progressed, well-fought over places like Virginia became "cleaned out" of food that could support an army.

Further, the locals often did not take kindly to Yankee foragers, as recalled by a private in the 116th Pennsylvania in the northern Shenandoah Valley in October, 1862:

"I...had picked up an apple from the ground, a fine, big, juicy fellow, and commend to eating it... A lady suddenly appeared at an open window in the house some 15 yards distant.... She addressed me in the following language, leaning out of the window, 'I say, you damned infernal Yank, don't touch one of my

apples.'... I, however, heeded not the order. Continuing to feast on the delicious fruit, I eyed her ladyship with silent scorn and contempt.... After indulging for fully ten minutes in the most abusive, obscene, and blasphemous language that I ever heard, she added, 'Go home, you damned thieving Yankees to your whoring mothers in the North.'... I hauled off with all my force, driving the fruit through the window, and smashing the glass into a thousand pieces. This caused her ladyship to beat a hasty retreat."³¹

Almost all farms in Virginia and elsewhere in the South kept many pigs, and foraged pork was common, as described by a member of the Irish Brigade in November, 1862:

"We approached the pen cautiously, relying upon the bayonet and butt end of the musket as the instruments for the slaughter, for we dare not shoot... We pulled open the small door of the pen. Immediately out bounced four or five large hogs, followed by an innumerable family of youngsters, squeaking and grunting at every step, terribly frightened and running pell-mell between our legs... We...soon commenced the chase... [I] at last succeeded in cornering a fine young pig. It weighed about 40 pounds. One plunge of the bayonet fastened the pig to the ground... We allowed it to bleed freely; after which it was carefully wrapped up in a gum blanket."³²

How did a soldier prepare a whole pig for eating? The unlucky porker described above was carried to the soldiers' picket outpost, where,

"We built a scorching fire of pine logs... The cook was a certain officer of my own company... The officer first prepared a paste of moist earth and clay. This paste was placed two or three inches thick all around the hog in its natural state. The whole was then laid in the middle of the fire. The mud covered pig was blanketed over in hot ashes and burning wood. About an hour after, it was drawn out. The coating of clay, then burnt to a crisp, fell in pieces. It revealed the roast pork. In flavor and whiteness, I never tasted anything as good.... I often afterward saw chicken cooked in the same way. I heard several months after leaving the army that the style of cooking

meats which I have just described had become very general among all the troops and their officers."³³

A man in the Fifth Corps prepared his pork foraged during the Peninsula campaign differently:

"We went out in quest of something to eat and meeting with a drove of pigs we killed one with our saber bayonets, dressed him and soon he was in a secesh camp kettle boiling. After boiling him an hour...we demolished the biggest part of him and carried the rest home. We also had some roasted corn which I got from an old nigger for a hdkf [*sic*]."³⁴

Another common ration obtained by foraging was poultry, which was as abundant in the South as were pigs. Federals obtained chickens from both white and black Southerners alike. A Rhode Islander serving in Virginia wrote in 1861:

"I...took an old rooster and had a lively time catching him... We killed him and took off his feathers in great haste. At night I put him in a kettle and agreed to watch him while he cooked. As I had no salt I could only add hard bread to the mess and some time late in the night I awoke my chum Fred A. Arnold and a few others and we tried to eat him. But he was tough, and we had to give it up. And I lay down near a fence for a little sleep, satisfied that I knew very little about boiling roosters."³⁵

Once in a while flour was issued to the troops, often obtained from grist mills encountered on the march. A man in Stoneman's Third Corps of the Army of the Potomac near Warrenton, Virginia in November, 1862 recalled the following:

"In the old mill we found some flour and it was soon doing duty as something resembling griddle cakes. We disposed of them all and would have licked the platter if there had been one"³⁶

A man in the Second Corps echoed this sentiment:

"when we have a chance to get any flour or indian meal we make flap jacks. ... when the corn was standing in the fields we used to pull the ears and grind them to meal by punching holes in a piece of tin and rubbing the ear of corn on the rough side of it. thus by a goodeal [*sic*] of labour one could get a good mess of

meal and it is quite a treat when one has been a long time on hard bread."³⁷

A soldiers' handbook expounded on the merits of corn meal: "*Corn meal*...requires no ferment, and requires no cooking-utensils,—a plain board placed before the fire is all the oven absolutely necessary. With a frying-pan, thin cakes can be rapidly baked, and are an excellent diet."³⁸

Farmers stored victuals for their own use throughout the year. However, foraged rations in a living history encampment should generally be limited to foods that are in season for the scenario portrayed. For example, apples—which ripen from late August through September—are inappropriate for a spring campaign impression, as are white potatoes, which are typically harvested in August. Corn was eaten by many a Yankee with great relish and, as stated above, many ground the foraged corn into meal to make flapjacks. Corn generally does not ripen until at least August and, therefore, it is inappropriate for spring and early summer scenarios.

What kind of rations could Yankees expect to cross their palate while **not on an active campaign**? Garrison rations were had greater variety than campaign issues, but were still "army rations"—plain, frequently spoiled, and often unappetizing. A Zouave wrote from Harrison's Landing in July, 1862, "Here is yesterdays bill of fare: Breakfast, Coffee & Crackers, Dinner, Stew (made of fresh potatoes & desiccated vegetables), Supper, Coffee & Beans."³⁹

The treats issued in garrison often included **soft bread**, which was always welcome to men who normally subsisted on hardtack. Soft bread was made in bake-ovens operated at the brigade level. An exception to this was the Petersburg campaign, from June, 1864 through March, 1865. General Grant had enormous bakeries constructed at City Point—the supply depot of both the Army of the Potomac and the Army of the James—and soldiers in the trenches before Petersburg and Richmond often had soft bread.

The regimental sutler was also a source of food for the average soldier, if the paymaster had been in camp recently. Sutters offered pricey foodstuffs, such as pies, canned goods, concentrated milk, and other delights. His prices were usually so high that he earned the enmity of the men but, because the sutler had a monopoly—each regiment had only one—the men had little choice. The price of a can of peaches or tomatoes could be as high as \$0.75 to \$1.00, which was roughly equal to two days' pay for a Federal private or corporal. In the spring of 1863, a Yankee

soldier wrote from Falmouth, Virginia, "the sutlers charge sixty cents a dozen for eggs here and seventy five cents per pound of butter. i have tasted butter but twice since last October."⁴⁰ Sometimes the sutler's high prices cause the anger of the men to bubble over, as recalled by one old veteran years after the war, "Company 'K' made their famous raid on Reynolds the Sutler. All that were there remember the details, so we will not dwell on them any more than necessary, except to say that it was one of those things that sometimes happen."⁴¹

"The most enjoyable dish that fell to the lot of the common soldier" was **baked beans**. While not historically correct for a campaign impression, making baked beans in a "fixed camp" scenario is both educational and quite tasty. To make the soldiers' delight in your living history camp, obtain a camp kettle or mess basin with a lid, one pound of navy beans, one-half day's ration (almost a half-pound) of salt pork, 8 to 12 ounces of molasses, and salt.

Cover the beans in water and soak them overnight. Dig a hole in the ground deep enough for the kettle and at least twice as wide as the kettle. If one can be obtained, place a flat stone in the bottom of the hole, and then build a fire in the hole several hours before the kettle is added; add enough wood to make a lot of coals. Remove the water from the kettle and replace it with about one cup of fresh water to the beans. Add the molasses, salt pork, and salt; a chopped onion can be added if one is available. Shovel the coals out of the hole, add the kettle, and shovel the coals into the hole around and over the kettle. Cover the top with boards and a burlap bag, shovel earth over the top, and bake overnight. If the beans are simply cooked in a regular campfire, check and stir them occasionally, because the hotter, concentrated heat of a direct flame will cause the beans to stick and burn.⁴²

Not to be forgotten in the garrison bill of fare is soup. Company cooks frequently made soup of beans, salt pork, rice, and any other item that fell under their eye that could be served to the men. At mealtime, the company would line up and pass by the mess kettles filled with soup, and each man dipped his tin cup into the kettle for his ration.

Another type of meat ration, sometimes issued during an active campaign but more often seen when in garrison, was **salt beef**, often referred to as "salt horse" by the soldiers, who universally hated it. "Salt horse" was beef that had been pickled in a heavy saline brine. Billings recalled,

"It sometimes happened that the men would extract a good deal of amusement out of [salt beef]...by arranging a funeral, making the appointments as complete as possible, with bearers, a bier improved of boards or a hardtack box, on which was the beef accompanied by scraps of old harness to indicate the origin of the remains, and then, attended by solemn music and a mournful procession, it would be carried to the company sink and dumped, after a solemn mummery of words had been spoken, and a volley fired over the unhallowed grave."⁴³

Salt beef was too salty, and it was not uncommon for soldiers issued this culinary horror and camped near a creek to wash the salt out by tying a string around the beef, securing the other end to a tree, and tossing the meat into the creek overnight.

To make salt beef at home, you will need a porcelain, stoneware, or plastic container with a lid; do not use a metallic container. Pickling salt is required, together with at least a couple pounds of beef with the fat still on; any cut of beef will do and, for increased accuracy, avoid using prime cuts.

To make the brine, pour enough water into the container so that the meat will be completely covered by the brine; the container should be at least three-quarters full when the beef is placed inside. Add enough pickling salt to float a potato; or, add salt until it no longer dissolves—and then add some more. Rinse the beef and place it into the container. Weigh the meat down with a plate or clean rock to keep it submerged. Seal the container and store in a cool (38 to 40 degrees Fahrenheit; this is the typical temperature inside a refrigerator), dark place. Allow the beef to cure for at least two weeks, preferably four or even six, per inch of thickness. Longer soaking time in the brine will not affect the meat other than making it hard.

Agitate the container twice a week to keep the brine mixed, and open the container once in a while and check the condition of the brine. If a large amount of scum—a little is normal and acceptable—has formed on top and/or the mixture is gelatinous and stringy, remove the meat and scrub and rinse it under cold water. Clean the container and place the meat into fresh brine to complete its curing.

After the curing, remove the meat and place it in the open air to dry; if the meat is placed in a refrigerator it will not dry completely. The meat should be almost rock hard when dry—you now have "salt horse". The salt will protect the meat from

spoiling almost indefinitely.

Once you are at the event, remember to soak your salt beef overnight in cold water to reconstitute it and wash out some of the salt. You may also want to consider boiling it in a couple of changes of water to remove more of the salt before eating.⁴⁴

This article is a very brief introduction to the typical grub of the Federal soldier, with an emphasis on campaign rations. Keeping your victuals simple and limited to common, issued foodstuffs, together with historically correct preparation, is a great way to learn more about the average soldier of the Civil War, educate others, and enhance your living history impression.

Bon appetit!



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