

## Food for the 18<sup>th</sup> century soldier

For regiments of the British Establishment, each mess (five or six men) was issued one bowl, one platter, one ladle, one cooking kettle, six trenchers (a plate on one side and a bowl on the other), and spoons. Using this equipment, the men were to prepare, cook, and eat their “seven rations” of food. Issued each week, this consisted of: seven pounds of bread or flour (seven pounds of flour makes about nine pounds of baked bread); seven pounds of beef or four pounds of salted pork; six ounces of butter; three pints of peas; and 1/2 pound of rice or oatmeal. In addition, when available, the men were issued spruce beer and rum, cabbage or sauerkraut (1/2 pound per man per week), and salt twice a week to preserve unsalted food.

The men were allowed to add to their diets, and seeds for gardening were issued to encourage them to do so. Popular additions or substitutions to the diet were turnips, greens, kidney beans, lettuce, milk and cheese, corn, and whatever else they could kill or forage. A mess could pool their money and buy eggs, tea, and other foods.

The men ate two meals each day. Breakfast was served (made) at first light and was usually oatmeal, bread, and beer. The big meal was at midday and had to hold the soldier over until the next morning. To most humanitarians, the “seven rations” were “irregular and unwholesome;” but the soldier was glad to be fed so generously.

There were many problems with spoiled food. As most of the rations were shipped from Britain, much of it did not fare well. Graft and corruption was rampant in the commissary office, and thus the food (if any) was not often of good quality in the first place. Food was often spoiled, adulterated, poorly packaged, and contaminated before it ever got to the men. Some of the food was indeed rejected if it was unsafe to eat. If it was just wormy, weevily, or musty with mold or mildew, it was issued and eaten. This may explain why mustard and other seasonings were popular.

Soldiers drank water only when beer was not available (and it usually was). They knew that if you drank much of the local water you got the “bloody flux” (dysentery). They also believed that military life was much more desirable than the poverty, lack of work, and starvation that Britain offered its masses of workers displaced by industrialization. A soldier counted on his pay and allowances and knew they were rarely interrupted, an assurance he did not have on the outside.

*Kim Stacy, Newsletter of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 84<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot (Royal Highland Emigrants)*