

FEEDING NELSON'S NAVY

*The True Story of Food at Sea
in the Georgian Era*

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Chapter 6

WHAT OTHER NAVIES ATE

TWO OF THE QUESTIONS which senior academics in the fields of military and naval history ask their students are 'How did the other side do it?' and 'Did the difference in the way we did it and the way they did it have an effect on the outcome?' On the subject of victualling it has proved extremely difficult to obtain information in any depth for any of the navies the British faced at sea. A combination of bureaucratic tidiness, an inclination to dispose of documentation relating to loss of face, enemy action during various wars and other accidental losses seems to have conspired to hide the detail one would hope to find. We are extremely fortunate in Britain to have so much naval documentation going back so far and in so much detail. One of the fortuities relating to victualling documentation is that the Victualling Office was in a different building to the Admiralty, the Navy Board and the Sick and Hurt Board, which meant that instead of popping down the corridor to obtain agreement and a signature, they had to write a letter to the other body, who had to write a reply. If only someone had thought to write a detailed report on the food supplied on enemy ships; we can only hope, as with the missing details on British naval victualling, that some contemporary documentation will turn up, or that a modern student of those countries will turn their attention to delving in what archives remain. In the meantime, here is what has been found.

THE AMERICAN NAVY

The US Navy did not come into being until the mid-1790s and remained quite small during the Napoleonic Wars and the War of 1812. A slim set of naval regulations was issued in 1802, which appears to have been modelled on (but is much less detailed than) the 1790 British *Regulations*.¹

As far as victualling is concerned, under the duties of the captain or commander these regulations merely state that no-one is to sell liquor to the ship's company; under the duties of the master they state only that he is to inspect

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the provisions when they come on board and report to the captain any items which 'appear not good'. For the cook, the same three clauses appear as in the British *Regulations*: he is responsible for the steep tubs and the meat in them, is to see it duly watered, to see that the provisions are properly cleaned and cooked and delivered to the men according to the practices of the navy'. For the purser there are a total of twelve clauses, some of which appear in other sections in the British *Regulations*. Several deal with the purser's responsibility for ordering and issuing food, the expenditure on fresh food purchased in port, how to report losses and prepare his accounts. Damaged or spoiled provisions are to be surveyed and condemned by a committee of three officers, one of whom must be the commanding officer. If food has to be rationed by the commanding officer's order, the men are to be paid for the balance, but if there is a shortage of one type of meat, the other should be substituted. Officers are not to receive full rations when the men are on short rations. The two differences between American and British regulations are the sizes of meat pieces (ten pounds for beef, eight pounds for pork), and the statement that each man is to have at least half a gallon of water a day unless the captain decides to ration it (British *Regulations* make no statement about water quantities). Finally, each ship is to carry a seine net and use it to fish whenever convenient.

There is no printed table of the daily food and drink allowances, but we can construct one from the diet laid down by the Secretary of War in 1798:

	Beef (lbs)	Pork (lbs)	Potatoes (lbs)	Salt fish (lbs)	Bread (oz)	Cheese (oz)	Butter (oz)	Peas or beans (pts)	Rice (pts)	Spirits (pts)
Sun	1½				16				½	½
Mon		1			16	4		½		½
Tue	1½		1		16					½
Wed					16	4	2		½	½
Thur		1			16			½		½
Fri			1	1	16		2			½
Sat		1			16	4		½		½
Total	3	3	2	1	112	12	4	1½	1	3½

Potatoes may be replaced by an equal weight of turnips, butter may be replaced by two ounces of molasses or six ounces of oil, and half a pint of spirits may be replaced by two quarts of beer. The liquid measures are the American version, so half a pint of spirits is 240ml, a little less than the British wine measure of 250ml. The average daily calorific value of this ration is about 4340;

however, if the spirits are changed for beer, it becomes 4030.

There were several minor changes both to the ration and to its component items in 1801, 1805 and 1806, until in 1813 it looked like this:

	Beef (lb)	Pork (lb)	Flour (lb)	Suet (lb)	Bread (oz)	Cheese (oz)	Butter (oz)	Peas (ps)	Rice (ps)	Molasses (ps)	Vinegar (pts)	Spirits (ps)
Sun	1¼		½	¼	14							½
Mon		1			14			½				½
Tue	1				14	2						½
Wed		1			14				½			½
Thur	1¼		½	¼	14							½
Fri					14	4	2		½	½		½
Sat		1			14			½			½	½
Total	3½	3	1	½	98	6	2	1	1	½	½	3½

No substitutes for peas or spirits are shown.²

To summarise these changes, the beef ration had increased by half a pound per week, the bread ration had reduced by two ounces per day, the peas to one pound a week, the cheese and butter rations had halved and the potatoes or turnips, salt fish and beer had disappeared, and a standard ration of molasses, vinegar, and flour and suet for pudding had arrived. The average daily caloric value had reduced a little, at 4240 with spirits, or 3930 with beer replacing the spirits.

The US Navy's spirit ration was originally rum, served watered as grog, but the new Secretary of the Navy, Robert Smith, changed this to the American sour-mash corn (maize) whisky called bourbon. It was served in two parts, after dinner and after supper; any man who tried to get an extra serving was likely to find himself on the flogging list the following day.

Soon after 1798, during the quasi-war with France, American ships began to find themselves far from friendly ports where they could replenish their provisions from the local Navy Agent. When operating off Hispaniola in 1799, *Constitution* had to replenish her stocks at sea from merchant ships. She did this at approximately monthly intervals, taking two days each time to transfer everything from one ship to another by the boats. When she finally returned to Boston in August 1800, she had been at sea continuously for 349 days. The norm for ships leaving port for a long cruise was to stock them with provisions for six months and water for three months.

Like the British, the US Navy employed older or disabled men as cooks in

their warships. They dealt with steeping the salt meat and had charge of the boilers in which the men's food was cooked. It is suggested that the meat and vegetables were all cooked together, but as discussed previously, this would create some difficulties of serving and allocation. It is more likely – especially considering that quite a lot of the men serving on US ships had previously served on British ships and could have pointed out the advantages – that a 'mess net' system was used. The men ate in messes of eight to ten members, with one member serving by rotation as mess cook and everyone having the option of changing messes at the beginning of the month if they wished. They ate picnic-style on the deck, each mess having its own space and using a piece of old canvas as a 'table' cloth. They ate and drank from metal dishes and cups, both probably tin or pewter. There were three meals a day: breakfast at 8am, dinner at noon and supper at 4pm, one hour being allowed for each meal. As always, the men were free to buy extra food from shops in port or from bumboats.

Officers ate in their own messes, either eating ration food or buying their own through an elected mess caterer. The captain was entitled to six rations (or the money for them), the wardroom officers two rations each and both captain and wardroom had their own cook and mess attendants. The midshipmen and other warrant officers only drew a single ration, and had only a boy to look after them.

THE DUTCH NAVY

Strictly speaking, it is incorrect to refer to a 'Dutch navy' before 1815 and the beginning of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Before that there was a Dutch republic made up of seven provinces (each a sovereign state) of which three in Holland, one in Zeeland and one in Friesland had an Admiralty, each of which might provide ships in wartime. Victualling arrangements and other logistical and command arrangements were decided (and subsequently decreed) at that point and applied to that war or campaign only. Once decreed at that level, the actual responsibility for provisioning each ship devolved to its captain, who often delegated the actual purchasing to his wife. The provisions themselves varied little over time, variations being more in the line of quantities of various items rather than changes in the items themselves, although there were certain items which were traditional substitutes, such as salt or fresh fish, soft bread or biscuit.

Dutch sailors ate in a group of six men called a 'bak'. Although this translates literally to 'tray' or 'trough', it can also be taken to mean 'mess', as in

'bak-mates' or 'mess-mates'. Some care was taken to ensure that each bak was made up of men who could get along with each other, putting trades and ranks together; one of these was known as the 'fodder' bak, consisting of the men who worked in the galley. They ate on a shift system, with the first shift being the essential watch-keepers, the third was for the fodder bak and the officers who had been on watch with the first shift, and the second was for everyone else. They were summoned to eat by a bell. Even now, the bak is used as a basic organisational unit in the Royal Netherlands Navy, with the morning roll call 'bakgewijs' meaning 'fall in by bak'.

The bak itself was a wooden or tin serving dish (and was sometimes used to eat from), with the food fetched by the 'zeunje'. This word translates literally as 'sonny' but means the same as the British 'mess-cook': a member of the bak who serves on a rotating basis. The bak was rectangular, roughly four feet by one foot by one foot, and marked with an individual name or motto by which the bak was known. When the meat was distributed, it was this name which was called out in reply to the question 'Who shall have this?' Each man was issued with a wooden, bone or tin spoon, a small wooden butter saucer, and usually (but not always) two plates, one deep and one shallow; these plates were either wood or coarse earthenware. Each man would also have his own personal general-purpose knife.

The precise amount of food is not known with any accuracy, as the cooked food tended to be issued as a bakful rather than a specified amount. Breakfast every day was a bakful of groats per bak plus one pickled herring for each man. On Sundays and Thursdays one pound of meat was issued for each man at noon, but intended to serve for both dinner and supper. This meat could be either beef or pork, but because beef cost more (and the captain was paying) it was more likely to be pork. On every other day, one stockfish or hake was issued for each man at noon, with a spicy dip. The dip, made by the ship's cook, consisted of a butter and mustard base with other spices or herbs as available. In addition, every day, once at noon and once for the evening meal, a bakful of cooked pease was issued, and on Mondays (but intended to last for the whole week) each man received five pounds of bread or biscuit, eight ounces of salted butter and one pound of hard Dutch cheese. The modern equivalent to this cheese would be Gouda; now these cheeses are kept fresh by a thin layer of paraffin wax, but then it would have been tar. To drink there was beer, in

unlimited quantities until it ran out. Some captains provided wine or brandy; many, especially those in the Mediterranean, also provided lime or orange juice and sometimes raisins. All of this gave about 4700 calories daily.

Some variations to the diet included pickled cabbage and onions, or sometimes there was a thick broth made of groats or peas and meat or fish. Outside the English Channel and North Sea there would be regional variations such as pasta or rice, seal meat, poultry and eggs, and whatever fish they could catch or buy from fishing boats. Plus, of course, whatever the men chose to buy for themselves; since the traditional way to eat a pickled herring is to dip it in chopped onions, they probably made sure they had a stock of onions.

Apart from eating in the grand cabin, there were no special arrangements for the officers. The captain was paid a fixed sum per head for food, and to him the officers were just heads. They could draw the official ration or lay in their own stocks of something better; most of them probably did. Admirals received a sum of table money for official dinners; de Ruyter, the famous admiral who blockaded the Thames and the Medway for two months in 1667, received 1000 guilders a month (at that time an able seaman's annual wage was 150 guilders).³

THE FRENCH NAVY

The French naval ration was set in 1689 and remained unchanged through several 'Ordonnances' in 1747, 1765 and 1786. The daily ration was laid down as one and a half pounds of biscuit, a midday dinner of bacon, salt beef, fish or cheese and a supper of dried pease or beans, cooked and dressed with oil and vinegar.⁴ There was also a monthly issue of mustard seed; at the beginning of the eighteenth century, Shelvocke reported sailing on a French ship which had two cannons but only one cannon ball: '...this round could not be fired as it was used to crush the mustard seed we used with our cochon boucanné'.⁵

Jean Boudriot provides a little more detail, stating that the provisions were provided by contractors on a six-yearly contract; these contractors also provided the purser and his assistants, a cook, a butcher, a baker and a cooper.⁶ Flour was provided and the baker made bread, mainly for the sick and the officers but also some for the men. The beef for the crew arrived in salted form and although some came from the west-coast ports of Nantes and Bordeaux, the best came from Ireland or Denmark. The salt fish included herrings and sardines as well as cod.

There were two cooked meals each day, dinner at around 11.30am and supper at 5pm in winter, 6pm in summer for the crew, 1pm and 9pm for the officers. The meat was tied to large skewers which bore the mess's number and were put in the copper at random, the number of each skewer being called out when they were removed.

Live sheep and chickens were carried for the sick, the numbers being calculated at five sheep per month for each 100 men (or six if from Brest, where the local sheep were small) and one chicken per month for each seven men, but no more than a four-months supply being carried in total. Boudriot points out that on his archetypical 74, some 350 chickens were carried for the men plus 200 other assorted poultry for the officers, necessitating 6000 pounds of grain to be carried to feed them; and 100 sheep for the crew and 50 for the officers required almost 7000 pounds of hay. Other items for the sick included soft bread, rice that was boiled in the meat broth, and stewed prunes.

To drink, there was wine (always red), two types being carried, one a light young wine intended to be drunk early in the commission, the other a mature red to keep for later months. The ration was one-third of a quart per day. Brandy (Cognac) was carried, but intended only for exceptional circumstances. Ships operating from the Channel ports might use beer or cider, issued at twice the rate of wine.

The officers were fed by the captain, for which he received an allowance of table money to pay for the food, the cooks who prepared it (the number of these would depend on the size of the ship, but would probably include a pastry cook), the waiters and the tableware. Boudriot provides an impressive list of the private food stocks carried by officers, although to those who know the French attitude to food, this is not surprising. In addition to the usual hams, tongues and pickles, this list includes beef, duck and goose 'confit', four types of cheese including Roquefort, dried mushrooms and truffles, five types of prunes and plums, fruit preserved in brandy, and vintage wines.

Boudriot's 74-gun ship is of the pre-Revolutionary French Royal Navy and one wonders to what extent the previously high-living officer would have felt obliged to modify such a lifestyle after the Revolution in the interests of keeping his head on his shoulders lest his newly-republican crew might denounce him as one of the hated 'aristos'. Many royalist officers left the navy soon after the outbreak of war; they were replaced by a different class of men who may

not have chosen, or been able to afford, to buy luxurious foodstuffs.

As for the crew, although their official ration may not have changed, whether they actually got it, or what its quality was, is another matter. It was often very bad, due to dishonest supply officers whose practices included resupplying food which had been condemned and returned to stores. This is one of the reasons live animals and poultry were carried in such large numbers, and for an experiment in grinding flour on board ship with a windmill mounted on the stern. This mill had adjustable sails, but the whole thing was too fragile and was soon carried away in a gale.⁷

French crews who captured British ships during the wars of 1793 to 1815 were renowned for looting and one of the things they aimed for was the provisions, which indicates that the system which had been in operation previously had broken down. Proof of this comes from 1795, when the British squadron blockading Brest were landing French prisoners of war with scurvy, and even earlier, in the summer of 1793, after the French squadron from Brest had been sent to sea in the spring to dissuade the British from supplying the Vendée rebels, so many of them were suffering from food shortages and scurvy that they mutinied and demanded to return home, doing so in September.⁸

As the war progressed, the general food situation in France grew worse. As early as 1794 the convoy of grain ships which evaded Admiral Howe at the end of May was eagerly awaited to stave off bread shortages in Paris. At the end of 1800 an intelligence report received from Phillip d'Auvergne included a comment on the scarcity of provisions at Brest.⁹ France, like Britain, had suffered a series of poor harvests due to bad weather and once Napoleon was in power, his empire-building campaigns took more and more men for the army. Many of them were farm-workers and this had an inevitable effect on food production. The prolonged and successful British blockades of French ports, first those of the West and Channel coasts and then the Mediterranean coasts as well, cut France off not only from overseas supplies also from internal supplies, which were generally moved by sea. This would have been bad enough for the Brest fleet, as Brittany was nowhere as well developed agriculturally as it is now, but it must have been worse for the French fleet in Toulon. The hinterland immediately behind Toulon is not conducive to arable farming or market gardening on a grand scale, and it should be remembered that a high proportion of the crops grown there today are courtesy of the irrigation sup-

plied by the Durance canal, and, further west, from the Rhône. Cut off from supplies brought in by small coasters by sea, and given that the available road transport would have been both slow and restricted in bulk-carrying capacity, providing enough provisions for the fleet cannot have been easy.

One final thought on naval food in the French navy is that whatever the official Ordonnances said, there must have been the regional variations that can be seen today: butter, beef, leeks and apples in the north; olives and their oil, pork and dried fruit in the south.

THE SPANISH NAVY

Information on Spanish naval food has proved to be very sparse. After 1768, there seems to have been a basic daily ration of wholemeal biscuit, vegetables and wine with salt meat or pork with 'animal fat' provided every day except Friday. On Friday, and Thursday and Saturday during Lent, salt cod, olive oil and vinegar were served. Sometimes, but on an irregular basis, there was cheese instead of the meat or fish. For the sick there was chicken and biscuit made with white flour.

Some further possibilities can be found from the rations supplied to the navies of the new South American republics of Chile and Argentina, which were probably based on those of Spain, and that of Portugal, which had the same sort of terrain and thus agriculture as Spain itself. Created in 1818, the Chilean Navy gave a daily issue of one pound of dried or salt beef, one pound of biscuit, one ounce of animal fat, half a pound of lentils, quarter of a pint of spirits and quarter of an ounce of red peppers. Given such a small quantity of peppers, these were almost certainly hot (*ie* chilli) peppers in dried form rather than the sweet red capsicum which we eat raw in salads. When in port, they had fresh bread instead of biscuit, and potatoes and vegetables instead of lentils and peppers, and a double ration of spirits, which was mainly rum. For the sick, there was half a chicken, six ounces of chick peas, one pound of fine biscuit, one ounce of animal fat and a quarter of a pint of rum.

The Argentinean Navy, when they prepared for their first war against Brazil in 1826, loaded food for 1300 men for thirty days consisting of almost 40,000 kilos of dried meat (this works out to just over two pounds of meat per man per day), 30,000 kilos of biscuit (one and a half pounds per man per day) and 7500 kilos of rice (just under half a pound per man per day), 1900 gallons of

rum (just under half a pint per man per day) and a small amount of animal fat. This seems rather heavy on meat and completely lacks any element of vegetables, so perhaps it was intended to obtain other supplies in due course. It does however indicate the use of local methods of meat preservation: drying rather than salting, which would have the virtue of reducing the total weight carried.

A decree of 1797 set the basic ration for the Portuguese Navy at a daily ration of one pound of biscuit or one and a half pounds of flour, two-thirds of a pint of beans or onions, one pint of wine, one-thirtieth of a pint of oil, one-fifteenth of a pint of vinegar, coffee and sugar, and a meat ration of either one pound of salt beef or three-quarters of a pound of pork, or eight ounces of rice with two ounces of pork fat, or (on Fridays and fast days) half a pound of rice and salt fish. Some general comments on these rations: 'animal fat' could be interpreted as beef or mutton suet or pork fat (*ie* lard). 'Meat' presumably does not mean pork, as this is listed separately but, although it could mean sheep or goat meat, was probably beef. Fish would have been served rather more frequently than once a week, given that all of these countries were Catholic; the actual frequency would have depended on the incidence of Saints' and fast days, the piety of the captain, and/or the influence of any priests on board.

Sheep, goats and poultry were carried, probably belonging to the officers. One can surmise that these officers would have provided themselves with better food than the men enjoyed.¹⁰

CONCLUSIONS

Thinking of those two academic questions, it seems that there really was very little difference in the way different navies fed their men. Like the British navy, all were restricted by what was currently available and would keep in good condition for a long time, and with some regional variations, this came down to biscuit, salt or dried meat or fish, cereals, dried pulses and a little cheese and butter or oil with fresh food when in port. Quantities must have been adequate most of the time or there would have been more mutinies, especially in the French Republican navy where the men were less respectful of their officers; on the other hand, they did suffer from scurvy rather more than did the British and in some cases this affected them strategically.

Taking that second academic question ('Did the difference in the way we did it and the way they did it have an effect on the outcome?'), although there

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was a general opinion among British seamen that foreigners were not as good in a fight as 'an Englishman', there is no evidence that this, even if true, was related to the quality or quantity of food, other than those reports of hungry men raiding the British provision stocks. The real reason for French and Spanish inadequacies during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars were more likely to have stemmed from the fact that British blockades deprived them of sea time and practice.