

“Grog” by Gordon Howsden

Many interesting words have entered the English language over the years and one particularly familiar to Royal Naval men is grog. Its origin dates back to the mid-18th century when a certain Admiral Vernon decreed that rum issued to sailors in the British Navy should be watered down rather than served neat. Card No.12 of Lambert & Butler’s *Interesting Customs & Traditions of the Navy, Army & Air Force* describes the origin of the word particularly well. The Admiral was apparently nicknamed “Old Grog” because he invariably wore a cloak of a coarse material known as program and his nickname in time became used as a description of the diluted spirit.

Some additional information on the custom can be found by turning to card No.41 of Will’s *Life in the Royal Navy*. It would seem that in Tudor times sailors were entitled to a ration of a gallon of beer but great difficulty was found in keeping the beer from going sour at sea. In the 17th century ships in the Mediterranean changed the beer ration to wine whilst on other stations, particularly the West Indies, rum became the official beverage.

At some stage rum obviously became universal and the L&B card states that prior to 1740 sailors were entitled to half a pint of neat spirit. The rum served was particularly strong so it is not difficult to imagine that drinking this quantity might well have impaired efficiency. In the days of sail even a slight slip or mistake could easily cost a man his life. The card goes on to say that the diluted rum “is served at 11 o’clock every morning”.

Both the L&B and Wills’ sets were issued in 1939 but neither actually discloses what the daily allowance was at that time. Wills do state that “until recently the proportion was three parts of water to one of rum but it is now two to one.” The picture on the front of the L&B card is the more interesting as it shows a line of sailors holding rather large cans awaiting their turn at the rum barrel.



Gallaher also have a card featuring “The Rum Ration” in their series of *The Navy*. The picture is not dissimilar to Wills’ but the text adds more information on the system of distribution. Card 14 states that the “only alcohol permitted to Naval ratings is the rum ration. This is drawn neat from the spirit store each forenoon and is diluted with water in the time-honoured rum tub bearing the words “The King, God Bless Him”. One member of each mess attends the issue and draws rations for himself and his mess mates.” That, at least, explains the size of the cans shown on the L&B card.