

Soldiers ... Addicted To "The Bean"

By John M. Wedeward

Whatever words of condemnation or criticism may have been bestowed on other government rations such as hardtack and salt pork, there was but one opinion of the coffee which was served out, and that was of unqualified approval. What a Godsend it seemed to us at times! After completely jaded by a night march - and this was an experience common to thousands - often a pint or so of coffee felt as fresh and invigorating as if just arisen from a night's sound sleep! At such times it could seem to have had no substitute.

When the army was in active service the coffee was usually served out by being brought to camp in an oatmeal sack, where a regimental quartermaster received and apportioned it among his ten companies with the orderly (1st) sergeant of the company dividing it. One method of accomplishing this purpose was to spread a rubber blanket on the ground and upon it were put as many piles of the coffee as there were men to receive rations; and much care was taken to make the piles of the same size to the eye to keep the men from growling. The sugar which accompanied the coffee was spooned out at the same time on another blanket.

The manner in which each man disposed of his coffee and sugar after receiving it is worth noting. The old veteran used an oblong plain cloth bag, which looked as immaculate as the everyday shirt of a coal-heaver, and scooped both his sugar and coffee in together and stirred thoroughly together.

When the soldiers were first thrown upon their own resources to prepare food, they almost invariably cooked their coffee in the tin dipper with which all were provided, holding from a pint to a quart, perhaps. But it was an unfortunate dish for the purpose, forever tipping over and spilling the coffee into the fire, because the coals burned away beneath, or because the Jonah upset it. Then if the fire was new and blazing, it sometimes needed a hand that could stand heat like a steam safe to get it when it was wanted, with the chance in favor of more than half of the coffee boiling out before it was rescued, all of which was conducive to ill-temper, so that such utensils would disappear, and a recruit

would afterwards be seen with a pint or quart preserve can with an improvised wire bail held on the end of a stick, boiling his coffee at the camp-fire happy in the security of his ration from Jonahs and other casualties. His

can soon became as black as the blackest, inside and out. This was the typical coffee-boiler of the private soldier, and had the advantage of being easily replaced when lost, as canned goods were in general use by commissioned officers and hospitals. Besides this, each man was generally supplied with a small tin cup as a drinking-cup for his coffee and water.

The coffee ration was most heartily appreciated by the soldier. When tired and foot-sore, he would drop out of the marching column, build his little camp-fire, cook his mess of coffee, take a nap behind the nearest shelter, and, when he awoke, hurry on to overtake his company. Such men were sometimes called stragglers; but it could, obviously, have no offensive meaning when applied to them.

One of the most interesting scenes presented in army life took place at night when the army was on the point of bivouacking. As soon as this fact became known along the column, each man would seize a rail from the nearest fence, and with this additional arm on the shoulder would enter the proposed camp ground. In no time, the little camp-fires, rapidly increasing to hundreds in number, would shoot up along the hills and plains, and as if by magic acres of territory would be luminous with them. Soon they would be surrounded by the soldiers, who made it an almost invariable rule to cook their coffee first. If a march was ordered at midnight, unless a surprise was intended, it must be preceded by a pot of coffee; if a halt was ordered in mid-forenoon or afternoon, the same dish was inevitable. **It was coffee at meals and between meals and all hours of the day and night.** The old soldiers ended up the hardest coffee-drinkers in the community, through the schooling which they received in the service of their country.

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