

## Time for the Tot



» [Military News](#)

*This year is the 40th Anniversary of the demise of the daily issue of "The Tot" and the fateful day slips by unmarked by the most ex-sailors,. (How easy we forget.) However, this year there was a rum issue re-enactment alongside H.M.S. Victory on the Anniversary day—31 July.*

### What did they do with the drunken sailor?

For hundreds of years, Royal Navy seamen queued up in galleys from the poles to the tropics to receive their regulation lunchtime tot of rum.

But 40 years ago, the tradition was ended. On 31 July 1970, known in the navy as Black Tot Day, the sun passed over the yardarm for the final time and free rum was retired from navy life.

Black arm-bands were worn as the Queen was toasted. Tots were buried at sea and in one navy training camp, sailors paraded a black coffin flanked by drummers and a piper.

"It was a sea change. It was one hell of a change," says Commander David Allsop, who enjoyed the tot as a junior rating after joining the navy in 1955.

"It was badly received. There was a lot of muttering below the decks."

The Admiralty took away the tot because they were concerned that a lunchtime slug of rum would hinder sailors' ability to operate increasingly complex weapons systems and navigational tools.

But by 1970 the rum bosun's daily doling out of the rum at midday – diluted with water for junior ratings, neat for senior - was a reasonably gentlemanly affair. "In my era it was a social occasion," says Commander Allsop. "You paid for favours quietly, you had friends come round to share the tot." "It was just the same as going to the bar and having a pre-lunch drink. That's all it was, at the end

of the day, a strong aperitif."

## On the lash

Sailors from the early 18th Century might have scoffed at the innocence of the 1970s tot. Beer had been the staple beverage of the Royal Navy until the 17th Century, used as a self-preserving replacement for water, which became undrinkable when kept in casks for long periods.

But as the horizons of the British Empire expanded, the sheer bulk of beer – the ration for which was a gallon (eight pints or 4.5 litres) per day per seaman – and its liability to go sour in warmer climates, made it impractical to take on long voyages.

Wine and spirits started to take its place and when in 1655, with the capture of Jamaica from Spain, the navy was introduced to rum.

Staggeringly, until 1740 the daily ration was half a pint of neat rum, twice a day, at a time before there were accurate methods for measuring the alcoholic content.

Sailors would check their rum had not been watered down by pouring it onto gunpowder and setting light to it, from where the term "proof" originates. By volume, 57.15% alcohol has been calculated as the minimum required for it to pass the test.

## Even keel

The onboard problems caused by a massive intake of incredibly strong rum had to be remedied, and in 1740 Admiral Edward Vernon, known as Old Grogam, from his preference for cloaks made from a fabric of the same name, issued his notorious order.

"The pernicious custom of the seamen drinking their allowance of rum in drams and often at once is attended with many fatal consequences to their morals as well as their health," it states. "Many of their lives shortened thereby... Besides stupefying their

rational qualities which makes them heedlessly slaves to every brutish passion."

Rum was henceforth mixed with water, at first at a ratio of a quart (two pints or 1.1 litres) of water to each half pint ration, and "grog" was invented.

It is not surprising that seamen through the ages had grown attached to their rum ration, even though the punishment for drunkenness until the late 19th Century was a public flogging, says naval historian Dr Pieter van der Merwe.

"They lived in conditions that nowadays would be considered intolerable," he says. "It was the one thing that made life bearable.

"You cannot imagine how tough these people were. Seamen were a race apart. They walked differently, they talked differently, they dressed differently. They were built like oxen. "They could take punishment, and they expected it. They knew if they got drunk they would be flogged, and they still got drunk."

It would be wrong, however, to draw conclusions about naval sea worthiness from the fact that for hundreds of years, navy sailors imbibed a huge daily dose of rum.

"You mustn't imagine that naval ships were sailed by crews of drunken sailors," says Dr van der Merwe, general editor at the National Maritime Museum. "Everybody drowns if sailors are drunk all the time." (*I was fortunate enough to draw my tot for seven years, and powerful*

*stuff it was, especially on birthdays! You could even eat pusser's scran (Naval Food) without complaint and world politics were sorted in a very short time. The parrot in the messdeck on H.M.S. Lynx liked it too—it was great fun watching it trying to stagger on a formica table!)*

10.10.10