

French Drinks at the Front

by John Bracken

151 RLI

Water

At the start of the war, the only drink distributed to the soldier was water, sometimes mixed with coffee or tea. Water, usually referred to as *flotte*, became a major issue for the army following the 1914 epidemics which broke out as a result of the sources often being contaminated. With the stabilization of the front, the engineers set up a network of foraging and distribution of potable water which often didn't make it up to the first line. 'Bleached' water, which was purified chemically by a solution of hypochloride and sodium chlorate, was occasionally used. Needless to say, the taste was not very appealing and more than not, the men simply went without. Thus, accounts reporting on the *poilus'* thirst at the front are numerous.

Wine



One of the *poilu's* most cherished and heavily relied upon drinks was *pinard*. This was simply cheap red wine that varied slightly in quality. Lovingly called the "Supreme Consoler," in September 1914 it was rationed out at only 1/4 liter per day. This was increased in 1915 to 1/2 liter and in 1916 to 3/4 liter per day. The amount fluctuated throughout the rest of the war, with dips in 1917 and 1918 leading to corresponding dips in morale. Soldiers often accused the *cuistots* ("cooks"), though unsubstantially, of watering it down in order to increase their own share. When certain men had been killed, wounded or detached on a separate assignment, their ration was then distributed out equally to his squad. This small additional bit came to be known as a *rabiot* or simply a *rab*, meaning "extra." It became a widely used term amongst the *poilus* who always hoped yet rarely received it. In total, the army provisioned roughly 265-320 million gallons of wine per year. While the majority of wine came from within France's own borders, the nation also turned to Algeria, Spain and

Portugal to help supplement their supplies.

Additionally, French soldiers often supplemented their ration by purchasing extra amounts of wine directly from the quartermaster that could be reimbursed at a later time. When at the front, bottles of wine could be bought in the rear by using the cyclist battalion as an intermediary, which was often done. When at the rear themselves, soldiers could get their wine from local business or civilians. Some accounts say that the average *poilu* drank several liters of *pinard* a day. Some soldiers mixed liquor with their wine to make it more potent. Later there were reports of them lacing it with ether as well, a mixture referred to as *agnol*. In the colder seasons, *vin chaud* (mulled wine or hot spiced wine) was very popular.

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1 of 2 Updated: 3/30/2010

Pinard was the source of numerous discussions and the inspiration for many songs, poems and writings.



Pinard's Influence on the Poilu's Morale

Coffee and Liquor

Coffee was the other main drink of the army and was considered so vital that it was usually referred to as *jus* ("juice"). Often it was too clear or too sweet. Soldiers sometimes decided to form pairs, where one carried coffee in his canteen and the other carried wine. Alternately, a man might have two canteens, each holding a different liquid. This was particularly common when the soldier was marching to the front or going into the assault. Milk was not common and if the soldiers had any form of creamer at all, it came from cans of condensed milk.

Beer and cider (in 1/2 liter amounts) were also issued though much less often compared to wine. *Eau-de-vie* ("spirits") was rationed to the *poilus* but only in very small amounts or on selected occasions. Usually this was brandy, made from apples or grapes. One common brandy distributed to the ranks was called *'tafia* (short for *ratafia*, which was fermented from grape skins or raisins. Rum was also issued to a lesser degree. A common habit was to mix the alcohol ration with coffee or wine in the canteen. However, the men could also either purchase additional alcohol or produced their own in small batches. It went by many nicknames including *gnôle/gniôle* or *cric*, which mean "hooch" or "booze".

It could also be purchased in the rear, as when the soldier went of furlough. Vermouths, liqueurs and brandies were the most popular among the men, and brand names like Pernod (Ricard) and Cointreau could be easily acquired. Cognac was more popular among the officers. Finally, though it had been banned in May 1915, absinthe could still be had and enjoyed the great popularity among the ranks as it had in the civilian world.