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# The Composition of Army Rum, 1917

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## ABSTRACT

*The composition of Royal Navy rum is not only a subject of commercial importance but has been the subject of serious examination both online and in a monograph dealing with the history of rum in that service. The composition of British Army rum, on the other hand, has not been seriously examined due to a lack of suitable source material. Using lists drawn up by the Port of London Authority in 1917, a detailed breakdown of the component rums, by place of origin, of the Army's blend is now possible, confirming the impressions of contemporaries that it was not the same as that of the Navy.*

The exact composition of the Royal Navy's former rum is considered commercial in confidence, having been acquired by a firm responsible for a well-known brand of 'British Navy' rum in 1979.<sup>1</sup> That said, it is no secret that in 1966, four years before the end of the Navy's daily rum issue, the blend was reported to be 60% from Demerara (British Guiana), 30% from Trinidad, and the remaining 10% from Barbados and Australia.<sup>2</sup> Conspicuously absent from the blend was rum from Jamaica. The reasons given in Parliament in 1933 for its exclusion were cost – it would only be

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<sup>1</sup>James Pack, *Nelson's Blood: The Story of Naval Rum* (Homewell: Kenneth Mason, 1982), p. 128; Matt Pietrek, 'A (Non-)History of Jamaica in British Navy Rum', Cocktail Wonk, 19 May 2020 <https://cocktailwonk.com/2020/05/non-history-of-jamaica-in-british-navy-rum.html>. Accessed 5 August 2024.

<sup>2</sup>On the composition of the Navy's rum, see Pietrek, '(Non-)History', citing *The Royal William Victualling Yard in Plymouth*, 1966, news film, 8 min., <https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-the-royal-william-victualling-yard-in-plymouth-1966-online?play-film>. Accessed 20 January 2025. (not viewable outside of the United Kingdom). Pack, understandably chary, provides an older, somewhat different blend (*Nelson's Blood*, p. 86). On the cessation of the rum issue, see Pack, *Nelson's Blood*, pp. 110-120; Richard Moore, "'We Are a Modern Navy': Abolishing the Royal Navy's Rum Ration', *Mariner's Mirror*, 103, 1 (February 2017), pp. 67-79.

considered ‘when price permits’ – as well as ‘owing to its not being liked by men in the Navy’.<sup>3</sup>

The statement about the prohibitive cost of Jamaican rum relative to that from Demerara had also been true during much of the First World War. Market summaries published in the fortnightly *West India Committee Circular*, a trade journal for British West Indian planters that followed the rum trade closely throughout the war, demonstrate that up to 1917 the price of Jamaican was consistently higher than that of Demerara, sometimes fetching as much as double, or even more.<sup>4</sup> Given that the cost of the Jamaican product was cited as a factor in its exclusion from the Navy’s rum blend, all the more should it have been kept out of the Army’s supply in view of the much greater personnel strength of the latter service.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, indications of a Jamaican origin for Army rum are not hard to find. It was widely believed in Canadian veterans’ circles that the rum was Jamaican, so much so, in fact, that the Jamaican firm of Myers’s advertised its product to them on precisely that basis.<sup>6</sup> A particularly

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<sup>3</sup>Hansard, HC vol. 274, cols 983-984 (15 February 1933); Pietrek, ‘(Non-)History’. It may be suspected that cost was the real reason, with the notion that Royal Navy personnel disliked Jamaican rum – but that one only! – a rationalisation post facto.

<sup>4</sup>The *Circular* is available for free download, although not all years are represented, at <https://westindiacommittee.org/historyheritageculture/archive/west-india-committee-circulars/>. Accessed 20 January 2025. On the price differential between Demerara and Jamaican, see, for example, the following from 27 July 1915, which was typical, although no two summaries were exactly alike: ‘RUM – Market for Demerara steady, with sales at full previous rates. Quotations are 1s. 4d. for ordinary and 1s. 5d. for special marks per proof gallon. Jamaicas are very firm with values for ordinary 3s. 9d. to 4s. per gallon’ (‘The Produce Markets’ Summary’, *The West India Committee Circular* 30, 439 (27 July 1915), p. 348), <https://westindiacommittee.org/historyheritageculture/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Circular-1915.pdf>. Accessed 20 January 2025.

<sup>5</sup>On the British Army’s rum ration, issued to troops of the Dominions and colonies as well, see Brian Bertosa, ‘Rum for the Army: Miscellaneous Notes on the Provision of Rum During the First World War’, *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, 102, 409 (2024), pp. 150-159; Tim Cook, “‘More a Medicine than a Beverage’: “Demon Rum” and the Canadian Trench Soldier of the First World War’, *Canadian Military History*, 9, 1 (2000), pp. 6-22, <https://scholars.wlu.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1083&context=cmh>. Accessed 6 August 2024.

<sup>6</sup>Edwin Pye, ‘S. R. D.’, *The Legionary* 13, 8 (March 1938), p. 7; Cook, “‘Demon Rum””, p. 8; Bertosa, ‘Rum’, pp. 157-158; Jonathan F. Vance, “‘When Wartime Friends Meet”’: Great War Veteran Culture and the (Ab)Use of Alcohol’, *Canadian Military History*, 32, 1 (2023), pp. 23-24,

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interesting example comes from the Australian Imperial Force during the war, some of whose members disliked the issue rum so much that they sent off a 165cc sample of it to be tested for the presence of methylated spirits.<sup>7</sup> In reply, the officer commanding No. 12 Mobile Laboratory gave it as his opinion that the sample received consisted of 'Jamaica rum of about 3 years-4 yrs old' and noted that 'for analysis of wines, Rum &c at least one litre should be sent'.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to these more or less indirect examples, evidence much more direct and immediate of the composition of Army rum exists in the Port of London Authority Archive. The context is the little-known announcement by the Admiralty in October 1917 of their intention to requisition all stocks of rum in the United Kingdom under the Defence of the Realm Regulations.<sup>9</sup> At first, a stop was put on transactions involving any rum within the bonded warehouses of the Port of London Authority, including that for the War Office.<sup>10</sup> There was never any question of the Navy confiscating the Army's rum, of course, but the matter was not resolved until 1 November.<sup>11</sup> As part of that process, detailed lists were drawn up of the rum held by the Authority for account of the War Office, including, crucially, the places of origin. This information is summarised in Table I. The last column, giving percentages of War Office rum by place of origin, is of course by no means synonymous with a documentary source explicitly providing the intended composition of Army rum. On

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<https://scholars.wlu.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2122&context=cmh>. Accessed 20 January 2025, includes a reproduction of the advertisement. Accessed 6 August 2024.

<sup>7</sup>Australian War Memorial (hereinafter AWM), AWM25 865/2, Correspondence and orders regarding rum issue to troops on active service. Quantity ordered by medical staff and reasons. Ration for men in the trenches, J. Nicholas, Major for Colonel, A.A.M.C., A.D. of M.S., 1 Australian Division to O.C., 12 Mobile Laboratory, Amiens, 13 January 1917.

<sup>8</sup>AWM AWM25, 865/2, Captain M. MacMahon, RAMC (TC), O. i/c Laboratory, Laboratory Report. Rum, 17 January 1917. Underlining in original.

<sup>9</sup>G.R. Rubin, *Private Property, Government Requisition and the Constitution, 1914-1927*, (London: Hambledon Press, 1994), pp. 113-114;

*The London Gazette*, no. 30328 (9 October 1917), p. 10406, <https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/30328/page/10406>. Accessed 20 January 2025.

<sup>10</sup>Port of London Authority Archive (PLA), PLA/PLA/CEN/1/2/7/1, The Traffic Superintendent to The Director of Contracts, Admiralty, 11 October 1917.

<sup>11</sup>PLA, PLA/PLA/CEN/1/2/7/1, The Traffic Superintendent to The Superintendent, India & Millwall Docks, 11 October 1917; PLA, PLA/PLA/CEN/1/2/7/1, The Traffic Superintendent to The Superintendent, India & Millwall Docks, 1 November 1917; PLA, PLA/PLA/CEN/1/2/7/1, [signature illegible] for D. of C. [Director of Contracts], Admiralty to Port of London Authority, 1 November 1917.

the other hand, it must be assumed that the rum broker, E. D. & F. Man, knew their business, and it defies belief that they would have spent money unnecessarily on product whose quantities did not match what was intended to meet the War Office requirement.<sup>12</sup> Until or unless something approximating to an official specification should emerge, this is the closest we are likely to get to the composition of Army rum.

Place of origin	Puncheons <sup>a</sup>	Hogsheads <sup>b</sup>	Gallons	% of total
Demerara	2,397	2	235,020	53.8
Jamaica	1,302	0	127,596	29.2
Trinidad	197	865	68,611	15.7
Natal	43	0	4,214	1.0
Cuba	13	0	1,274	0.3
Totals	3,952	867	436,715 <sup>c</sup>	100.0

**Table 1:** Places of origin of War Office rum held by the Port of London Authority, October-November 1917.

**Note:** Places of origin, number of puncheons and number of hogsheads provided in sources. Number of imperial gallons and percentages calculated by author.

**Sources:** Port of London Authority Archive, (PLA), PLA/PLA/CEN/1/2/7/1, War Office. List of Rum on hand at Rum Department, West India Dock, sheets A, B, C, and D, no date [but discussed in documents as early as 11 October 1917] (first batch); PLA, PLA/PLA/CEN/1/2/7/1, Traffic Superintendent to H.W. Pillow Esq., Contracts Department, Admiralty, C. P. 18598, 30 November 1917 (second, smaller batch).

<sup>a</sup>A type of barrel. '1 Puncheon. 71-126 gals: say an average 98' (PLA, PLA/PLA/CEN/1/2/7/1, Rum [sheet of handwritten calculations], no date). 98 gallons used here.

<sup>b</sup>A type of barrel. '1 Hogshead. 45-70 gals : say an average 57' (ibid.). 57 gallons used here.

<sup>c</sup>In addition to this total, a further 145 puncheons and 14 hogsheads (15,008 gallons) were made over to the War Office by the Admiralty in December 1917, but no places

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<sup>12</sup>Well-known to those familiar with the lore of Navy rum as broker to the Admiralty (Pack, *Nelson's Blood*, p. 128 & p. 189), numerous documents in the Port of London Authority file demonstrate that E. D. & F. Man were the sole rum broker to the War Office as well: see, *inter alia*, PLA, PLA/PLA/CEN/1/2/7/1, H.J. Barlow for Director of Army Contracts to The Chief Superintendent, Docks and Warehouses, Port of London Authority, 2 February 1917.

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of origin are provided (PLA, PLA/PLA/CEN/1/2/7/1, [signature illegible], Memorandum, quoting Letter from War Office (Contracts Dept) (Contracts R/5321 (D.C.2)), dated 27.12.1917, 28 December 1917).

Like its naval counterpart, Army rum was majority Demerara, although the proportion was less. Figures for 1916 from the British West Indies show that British Guiana exported 4,386,854 gallons of rum while the next-biggest exporter, Jamaica, exported 1,471,897 gallons, which gives an idea of the preponderant importance of the Demerara distillers to the British rum trade at the time.<sup>13</sup>

The second-largest component of Army rum, confirming the intuitions of so many contemporaries, was Jamaican, known for its strong, distinctive flavour which they were no doubt able to recognise easily.<sup>14</sup> Given the premium normally paid for this attribute relative to Demerara on the open market, it appears entirely counterintuitive that, with respect to the adoption of Jamaican rum, the War Office would go where the Admiralty could not afford to tread. Nevertheless, after the complete cessation of rum imports imposed by the government in February 1917, prices for all varieties of rum skyrocketed, such that by September 1917 'the price per proof gallon of Demerara was between 16s. and 17s. 6d. and that of Jamaica was 16s. 6d.', while the following December saw 'Demerara realising from 44s. to 47s. and the Jamaica between 36s. and 53s. per proof gallon according to age'.<sup>15</sup> It is clear from this that the price advantage of Demerara rum over Jamaican was largely eliminated over the course of 1917, and it is thus suggested that this fact, combined with the wide availability of Jamaican, is likely to be the sole plausible factor that can account for the presence of a normally premium product in the Army's rum.

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<sup>13</sup>'Exports from the British West Indies' [table], *The West India Committee Circular*, 32, 480 (22 February 1917), p. 80,

<https://westindiacommittee.org/historyheritageculture/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Circular-1917.pdf>. Accessed 9 August 2024.

<sup>14</sup>On the distinctive flavour of Jamaican rum, see, among numerous sources on this, Matt Pietrek, 'Days of Dunder: Jamaican Rum's Mystery Ingredient', Cocktail Wonk, 11 March 2016, <https://cocktailwonk.com/2016/03/days-of-dunder-setting-the-record-straight-on-jamaican-rums-mystery-ingredient.html>. Accessed 9 August 2024. Among the Jamaican rums requisitioned for the War Office were two parcels, one of five puncheons and one of forty-five puncheons, bearing the distiller's mark 'Myers', proving that the company's advertisement (see above, note 6) was no idle boast (PLA, PLA/PLA/CEN/1/2/7/1, War Office. List of Rum on hand at Rum Department, West India Dock, sheet D, no date).

<sup>15</sup>Hansard, HC vol. 90, col. 1634 (23 February 1917); Rubin, *Private Property*, pp. 114-115.

Rum from Trinidad, the third-place British exporter at 554,175 gallons, essentially completed the War Office blend, save for a very small remainder.<sup>16</sup> It is perhaps not surprising that the order of importance of the three West Indian colonies in the blend should happen to match their relative positions in terms of rum exports. Looked at this way, the complete absence of Jamaican rum from the Admiralty's blend is all the more striking.

Natal rum is said to have been strongly disliked by the Navy during the Second World War; assuming it had not changed much since the First, there is little reason to expect that soldiers in 1917 would have held a higher opinion of it, which may explain why it comprised only 1% of the blend.<sup>17</sup> The presence of rum from Cuba, which was of course outside the British Empire, was the subject of considerable controversy. The West India Committee, a London-based lobby group representing British planters in the region, sent a letter to the Colonial Office in August 1917 complaining of what they viewed as excessive Cuban rum imports, noting also in this connection that 'the Admiralty still purchases British rum exclusively, while the War Office usually shows a preference for the product of our Colonies', which was a polite way of pointing out that sometimes the War Office did not.<sup>18</sup> In reply, the Colonial Office informed the Committee, in part, that

it appears that endeavours have always been made to meet the requirements of the Army and Navy by purchasing rum manufactured within the Empire, and that it has never been the custom to take Cuban or other non-British rum, though occasionally the War Office has been compelled to do so. Of the total quantity of rum purchased by that Department in the twelve months ending June last, the proportion of foreign spirit was only 15 per cent. It is intended that future requirements should be met, as far as possible, from the stocks held in the United Kingdom.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>'Exports from the British West Indies'.

<sup>17</sup>See the amusing anecdote related in Pack, *Nelson's Blood*, p. 107, who informs us, moreover, that Natal rum was dropped from the Navy's blend after the withdrawal of South Africa from the Commonwealth in 1961.

<sup>18</sup>'Rum for the Navy and Army', *The West India Committee Circular*, 32, 493 (23 August 1917), p. 324 quoting *in extenso* R. Rutherford and Algernon E. Aspinall, The West India Committee to The Right Hon. Walter Long, M.P., Secretary of State for the Colonies, 2 August 1917; 'Rum for the Navy and Army', p. 325.

<sup>19</sup>'Rum for the Forces', *The West India Committee Circular*, 32, 497 (18 October 1917), p. 394 quoting *in extenso* H.J. Read to The Secretary, The West India Committee, 12 October 1917.

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The reference to 'the stocks held in the United Kingdom', clearly intended here to suggest a future preference for British Empire rum, is more than a little disingenuous. Both correspondents were well aware of the complete stoppage of rum imports to Britain as of 23 February 1917, there being, in the words of Prime Minister David Lloyd George, 'sufficient stores in the country for the Army', such that 'it is absolutely unnecessary to import any more for that purpose'.<sup>20</sup> With no more product coming into the country, the War Office had no choice but to buy henceforward from the stocks remaining on hand in the United Kingdom.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, among those stocks were rums from Cuba, Martinique, Pernambuco (Brazil), Paramaribo (Surinam), Costa Rica, St. John and St. Croix (U.S. Virgin Islands), and even 'imitation rum from Boston', so that the War Office could still have chosen to purchase foreign rum if they had so desired.<sup>22</sup> But it seems they did not.

The figure given in the Colonial Office letter of 15% 'foreign spirit' purchased by the War Office as of June 1917 is in sharp contrast to the inventory of that same department's rum drawn up by the Port of London Authority in October showing only 0.3% non-British rum. Exact percentages at any given time will of course have varied slightly as consignments shipped to the United Kingdom in puncheons and hogsheads were emptied into one of the many large vats belonging to the Authority.<sup>23</sup> For there to have been only 13 puncheons of foreign rum remaining for account of the War Office in October, that department must have completely stopped the purchase of non-British rum sometime prior to this, possibly even in response to the complaint of the West India Committee. In the meantime, normal vatting removed (almost) all of the foreign rum from the stock on hand in puncheons and hogsheads. If this scenario is correct, then the composition of Army rum shown in Table 1 was valid only as of October 1917, but then likely held good to the end of the war, with the exception, of course, of the Cuban contribution. It is speculated that the minuscule component of the blend not covered by the 'big three' British West Indian rum producers may not even have been formally specified, allowing the broker to round out the order with whatever was available.

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<sup>20</sup>Hansard HC vol. 90, cols. 1623 and 1634 (23 February 1917); 'Rum for the Navy and Army', p. 324: the embargo had the grudging support, 'in consequence of the then gravity of the situation', of the West India Committee.

<sup>21</sup>These were considerable, amounting to 12,162,000 gallons as of 6 June 1917: 'The Produce Markets Summary. Rum', *The West India Committee Circular*, 32, 491 (26 July 1917), p. 296.

<sup>22</sup>PLA, PLA/PLA/CEN/1/2/7/1, List of Rum on Hand at Rum Department, West India Dock [104 sheets], no date.

<sup>23</sup>On which, see 'Rum for Troops', *Daily Record and Mail*, 9 October 1914, p. 2, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>. Accessed 20 January 2025. Giving a combined capacity at that time of 58,500 gallons.



Beyond the unexceptionable expectation that the War Office purchase as little rum as possible from non-British sources, it is not known if there ever was, in fact, a specification for Army rum analogous to the one carefully crafted and scrupulously observed by the Navy. Prior to the unprecedented demands of the First World War, 'Army rum', understood in the sense of the standardised, systematised commodity known to the Navy, may not have existed per se, taking the form rather of whatever could be acquired locally on the civilian market by those responsible for supplies at the level of the battalion, regiment, or depot. Only with the requirement to process millions of gallons for continual shipment across the Channel did the need arise for some form of guidance to those involved in work that for the first time involved the blending of a product specifically for War Office account. Although they were, of necessity, determined in a roundabout manner, the data in Table 1 are offered to the reader as quite possibly the only glimpse we are likely to have of a specification followed by those responsible for blending Army rum.