

30 March 1972 - On this Day in History

# YO-HO-HO AND NO BOTTLE OF RUM:<sup>1</sup> The last ‘Tot Time’ for the Canadian Navy

*The daily rum issue was a tradition inherited from the Royal Navy when the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) was founded in the year 1910. The tradition continued until 30 March 1972 - a sad day for many sailors, as that was the day it was abolished. William Hawke, a former Navy man and now our managing editor, looks back on the ‘days of the daily tot’ with fond memories.*

By William Hawke

**U**p Spirits! That was the announcement over the ship’s main broadcast system every morning at precisely 1100 (that’s 11am for you landlubbers). The announcement reminded the ship’s duty storesman that it was time to bring up the required number of bottles from the rum locker and start preparing for the daily issue.

**Secure! Hands to Muster for Grog!** And that was the announcement at 1150 telling the ship’s company (the crew) that it was time to stop working, grab their tot mugs and line up for the daily rum ration. This time of day was fondly referred to as ‘tot time’.

Tot time was usually held in the main flats (passageway) in front of the office of the Coxswain (Cox’n - Naval equivalent of the Army Master of Arms), although in southern climes it was often held up top on the quarterdeck. The Officer of the Watch, the duty storesman and the Cox’n were the issuing party: The officer oversaw the issue; the storesman dipped a scoop into a big container and deposited 2.5 oz of rum into each of the sailors’ mugs; and the Cox’n checked off the names of the recipient-sailors, thus ensuring that they didn’t ‘down’ their tot and go to the back of the line (which several ‘old salts’ would have done if not prevented!).

We sailors were required to mix our rum with Coke (or water) in front of the officer; this prevented us from saving it for a rainy day. Once issued and mixed, we were then allowed to proceed go to our messdecks (living quarters) to consume the rum. Those that preferred to drink their rum neat (straight) had to

ask permission to do so from the officer and once granted, down their tot in front of him before departing.

The above was an overview of the procedure of the daily rum issue; now let’s get on to tradition and whatnot.

## An Old Tradition

For well over 300 years, the Royal Navy issued a daily ‘tot’ of Pusser’s Rum to the crews of their ships - and always a double issue before battle and after victory! First introduced into the Navy in 1655 as a substitute for beer, by 1731, it was in general use.

The name Pusser’s was nothing more than a corruption of the word ‘purser’. On board ship, the purser was responsible for ship’s stores - including the rum. Everything that came from the purser was called Pusser’s and still is to this day. Hence the name Pusser’s Rum!

The history of rum in the Royal Navy was largely that of social change, both in England and the Royal Navy. From 1650 throughout the 18th century, shipboard life was incredibly difficult. The daily issue of Pusser’s rum was the highlight of

the day. In those days, battles were fought ‘eyeball-to-eyeball’. The mental alertness and courage required to pack a cannonball into a muzzle loader were far more different from what is required to operate the modern weapon systems of today. Thus in 1970, the Admiralty Board decreed that there was no place for the daily issue of rum in a modern navy, and so ended the daily issue of Pusser’s Rum in the Royal Navy on July 31st, 1970. This date since then is referred to ‘Black Tot Day’. The rum issue, one of the longest and unbroken traditions in seafaring history, ended as the last tot of Pusser’s rum was drunk onboard Her Majesty’s Ships. Around the world in every ship of the Navy, tot mugs were raised in their final salute, ‘The Queen’! It’s no exaggeration to say that at that moment many a strong man shed a tear at the passing of a tradition so old and fine that was to be no more.<sup>2</sup>



## Rum in the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN)

The Canadian Navy came into existence on 04 May 1910 when the Naval Service Act became law. Permission to add the prefix 'Royal' was granted by King George V in 1911. In 1968, the Canadian Navy was merged with Canada's army and air force to form the Canadian Armed Forces, and later the Canadian Forces. The maritime component was named Maritime Command replacing the title Royal Canadian Navy. This year being the centennial year, celebrations are being held in Canada to mark the anniversary.

Several icons and traditions of the Royal Navy, such as the unique naval lingo and the white ensign, were carried over to the RCN.<sup>3</sup> The traditional rum issue was also one that survived. Looking back at my naval career (1963-1988) I remember two brands that were issued at different stages depending upon which company won the contract; one was Lamb's Navy Rum and the other was Captain Morgan's Navy Rum. Both were super strong; both were superb.

The tradition of 'Up Spirits' and 'Hands to Muster for Grog' ended on 30 March 1972, when the Canadian Admiralty followed suit of its Royal Navy counterpart and discontinued the practice. This too was a sad day for many 'Old Salts' (or perhaps I should say, 'Old Rummies') in the Canadian Navy. A lot of naval wives however heaved a sigh of relief.

## The Bad and the Good Sides of 'Tot Time'

The **Bad side** was that some sailors became addicted to the rum - became alcoholics in other words. It wasn't compulsory for sailors to draw their rum; of course everyone had the right to abstain. To abstain from drinking it was one thing that was accepted by all, but abstaining from drawing a tot was considered a crime by some. The alcoholics expected the teetotallers to at least draw their tot and give it to them. Some old guys had as many as 8 young abstainers (usually Ordinary Seamen - Privates in Army talk) on their list. They'd check the line up at tot time every day to ensure that their boys were in it. If not, they'd go and round them up and often issue threats if they refused. If in home port, many of these same fellows would stop at the tavern on the way home and re-charge their drunkenness. They'd arrive home in a terrible state to face the scorn of their wives and the

disappointment of their children. This was the dark side of the daily rum issue, and hence the term 'home wrecker' that it was often labelled with.

The **Good side** is that tot time was a time of camaraderie. We sailors would draw our tots and drink them while sitting on the settee in our mess decks. We'd share salty dips (sailor stories) about ports we'd visited and girls with whom we'd romanced. Sometimes one of the sailors would play his guitar (guitar) and we'd all sing (sometimes raunchy) songs.



*Tot time in 1 Mess, HMCS Kootenay, 1966*

Whenever one of the messmates had a birthday, everyone would pour a few drops of his own tot into the mug of the birthday boy. Most often the birthday

fellow's best friend would visit the other messdecks to get contributions from other shipmates. Many a birthday boy (myself once included) was excused from work in the afternoon due to over consumption. The officers were quite lenient on birthdays.

## Conclusion

'Tot time' is a thing of the past now, but that doesn't mean that there is no booze onboard the Canadian ships. When they discontinued the daily rum issue in 1972, they replaced it with a beer machine that was unlocked and thus operable during the lunch hour and in the evenings, and a bar the sold duty-free spirits, but only in the evenings from 1800 to 2300. The beer machines are operational in port and at sea, while the bars only opened while the ships are in port.

In my humble opinion, the beer machines and bars onboard Her Majesty's Canadian Ships didn't make up for the loss of tot time. While I'm not one of those who literally lived for Pusser's Rum, I too shed a silent tear along with my shipmates onboard HMCS Saguenay on that sad day when the tradition ended.



## Nelson's Blood

Admiral Lord Nelson was killed by a sniper's bullet onboard his flag ship HMS Victory on 21 October 1805 during the Battle of Trafalgar, a sea battle in which the Royal Navy defeated the combined fleets of the French and Spanish Navies, during the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815).

In order to preserve the remains of Britain's favourite son during the trip back to Portsmouth, his corps was sealed in a barrel of rum. Upon arrival however, it was discovered that there was no rum left in the keg. Two old sailors had drilled a small hole in the barrel and had drunk all of the rum. It was thought that while doing so these men had also consumed some of Nelson's blood. For this reason, pusser's rum is often referred to as 'Nelson's Blood'.

<sup>1</sup> We can't claim the innovative title. We borrowed it from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation website. View a video of the last rum issue in the Canadian Navy at: [http://archives.cbc.ca/on\\_this\\_day/03/30/](http://archives.cbc.ca/on_this_day/03/30/)

<sup>2</sup> Giving credit where credit is due: We lifted everything within the paragraphs under 'An Old Tradition' from the pusser's rum website: [www.pussers.com](http://www.pussers.com). Visit for further information on the subject.

<sup>3</sup> The White Ensign was replaced by the new Canadian Flag in 1965