Alcohol and the Soldier in the First World War

Yes, soldiers were allowed to drink alcohol in the trenches during World War I, but the type and availability of beer or other drinks depended entirely on which country's army they served in.

German Army



German troops received official beer rations, particularly units from Bavaria where beer was a staple part of military provisioning. Servicemen in the German trenches were often issued allowances that included about half a litre of light beer per day, alongside alternatives like wine or schnapps depending on supply and regional origin.

Left German officers drinking beer.

British and Commonwealth Armies



British soldiers were not officially issued beer in the front-line trenches; instead, they received a daily ration of **rum** (about 70ml or a quarter-gill) distributed by officers to boost morale and cope with the cold and wet conditions. While beer was not part of the standard trench ration, soldiers frequently consumed beer when resting behind the lines in local French and Belgian cafes, or occasionally found it in abandoned commissaries and captured positions. *Left* British soldiers lining up for the rum ration.

French Army



French troops relied on a daily wine ration (*pinard*) rather than beer, which scaled up to nearly three-quarters of a litre per man daily by 1916.

Left French soldiers sharing out the wine.

American Expeditionary Forces (AEF)



American soldiers were strictly **not** issued alcohol in the trenches due to strong temperance movements back home, though many still found ways to buy light beers or wines in nearby villages during rest periods.

Left US Soldiers drinking beer

Rules on Drunkenness

- While moderate drinking and rations were used to steady nerves and improve morale, being drunk on duty or in the trenches was a serious offence, theoretically punishable by death or severe field punishments (such as being tied to a post).

Both the **British rum ration** and **temperance laws** shaped how soldiers experienced the war. Here is a breakdown of how both operated on and behind the front lines.

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1. The British Daily Rum Ration

The **British Army** relied on a strict, measured distribution of rum to keep soldiers "existentially fit" and psychologically shielded from the horrors of the Western Front.

- **The Allowance:** Soldiers received **2.5 fluid ounces** (about 70ml, or a quarter-gill) of thick, overproof rum.
- **The Timing:** It was traditionally served by an officer or non-commissioned officer during morning and dusk **"stand-to"** (the highly vulnerable hours just before dawn and after sunset when enemy attacks were most likely). It was also frequently issued right before an infantry charge over the top.
- **The Infamous "S.R.D." Jars** *right*: Rum was transported to the trenches in heavy stoneware jugs. Each jar was stamped with the letters **"S.R.D."** (Supply Reserve Depot). Troops quickly invented satirical acronyms for it, such as *"Seldom Reaches Destination"* or *"Service Rum Diluted."*
- **The Purpose:** It served as medicine and comfort. In freezing, waterlogged trenches, the burn of overproof alcohol gave men a temporary burst of warmth and vital morale.



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2. Temperance Movements and War Laws

Back on the home fronts, powerful temperance movements viewed alcohol as a "national sin" that threatened military efficiency and weapon manufacturing. This created a direct clash between wartime realities and political pressure at home.

- **The American Restriction:** The **American Expeditionary Forces (AEF)** suffered the strictest anti-alcohol rules due to the rising momentum of Prohibition in the US. The **Selective Service Act** strictly forbade selling liquor to men in uniform. To satisfy the temperance movement, organizations like the YMCA set up dry recreation huts near camps to offer alcohol-free entertainment. Despite these rules, many American soldiers bought local beer and wine in French villages during their rest periods.

- **The British Home Front Crackdown:** Under pressure from temperance advocates, the British government passed strict laws to limit drinking. They introduced the **"No Treating Order" in 1915**, making it illegal to buy a round of drinks for someone else at a pub (to discourage heavy drinking). Opening hours for pubs were heavily slashed, and breweries were forced to water down their beer. Even **King George V** publicly took an abstinence pledge to encourage the nation.

- **The Class Divide:** Enlisted soldiers on the front lines faced heavy scrutiny regarding their consumption to prevent drunkenness. Conversely, British leadership took a more lenient approach toward the aristocracy, allowing **officers** to purchase and store their own private supplies of wine and spirits in the trenches.

French troops were sustained by a massive, industrialized daily wine ration, creating a stark contrast to the small, intense bursts of alcohol favoured by the British.

The comparison between the French *pinard* and the British rum ration reveals two entirely different military philosophies on how to keep men fighting, alongside a glimpse into how daily life functioned beyond alcohol.

The French 'Pinard' vs. The British Rum Ration

While the British treated alcohol like a tactical medicine, France treated it as a basic, non-negotiable right—essentially replacing drinking water, which was heavily contaminated at the front lines.

Feature	**French *Pinard* Ration**	**British Rum Ration**
Alcohol Type	Low-quality, highly acidic blended red wine ("plonk").	Heavy, overproof dark navy rum.
Daily Amount	Started at 250ml (1914), escalating to **750ml** by 1916.	Strictly **70ml** (2.5 fluid ounces).
Strategic Intent	Continuous hydration, caloric intake, and casual morale maintenance.	Sudden warmth, shock dampening, and courage right before attacks.

Cultural Status	"Father Pinard" was romanticized as a symbol of the French soil and republican duty.	Seen as a strict emergency medication strictly controlled by officers.

The sheer volume of wine consumed by the French *poilus* (infantrymen) was astronomical; the military distributed an estimated **265 to 320 million gallons of wine per year** to the trenches. The wine was often terrible, with soldiers nicknamed it *brutal*. To make it drinkable, troops frequently mixed it with a splash of brandy or even black coffee inside their metal *bidon* canteens.

Daily Life in the Trenches Beyond Drinking

When soldiers weren't fighting or drinking their rations, daily trench life on the Western Front was defined by intense physical labour, crushing boredom, and constant battles with the environment.

- **The Constant Chores:** Front-line service was exhausting. Soldiers spent hours filling sandbags, rebuilding trench walls collapsed by shellfire, pumping out knee-deep mud, and repairing tangled thickets of barbed wire in No Man's Land under the cover of darkness.
- **The Fight Against Pests:** Trenches were heavily infested. Millions of "corpse rats" grew to the size of cats by feeding on the dead, frequently biting sleeping soldiers. Men also suffered from body lice (which caused "trench fever") and spend hours using candle flames to burn the bugs out of the seams of their uniforms.
- **Trench Foot:** Standing for days in waterlogged mud caused a painful fungal infection known as trench foot, which could turn gangrenous and require amputation. The only remedy was for soldiers to vigorously rub whale oil onto each other's feet and change into dry socks daily.
- **The Monotonous Diet:** Food was rarely hot by the time it reached the front. British troops survived largely on biscuit-hard crackers and "bully beef" (canned corned beef). French soldiers fared slightly better with standard-issue rounds of bread, vegetable soup, and wheels of Camembert cheese that travelled reasonably well.
- **Coping with Boredom:** To pass the endless hours of waiting, troops wrote millions of letters home, gambled, and carved "trench art" out of discarded brass artillery shell casings and bullets.

Is it any wonder they drank?

Sources

- National WWI Museum and Memorial
- Western Front Association
- International Encyclopaedia of the First World War
- National Army Museum