

World War Two Rations



As **Mark Khan** reveals, the collecting of militaria items can cover fields far more wide-ranging than uniforms, medals and weaponry. In this month's feature on militaria collecting he takes a look at collecting the various ration packs issued to the combatants of the Second World War.

The phrase 'An army marches on its stomach' has been attributed to both Napoleon Bonaparte and Frederick the Great. Whoever the originator, the importance of feeding an army is paramount. It is vital that both food and water are provided to maintain an army's operational capability. Rations not only sustain, but they are an important factor in building morale.

The ordinary British soldier's rations during the Napoleonic War of 1815 comprised: 'Two pounds, of a mark's weight, of bread of maslin (a mixture of wheat and rye), or one and two-thirds of (wheat) flour, or one and one-sixth of biscuit — A quarter pound of gruel, or three-sixteenths of rice, or half a pound of fine wheat flour, or of peas or lentils; or half a pound of potatoes, carrots or turnips and other fresh vegetables. — A half pound of fresh meat, or a quarter pound of lard. — A tenth of a litre of spirits, or half a litre of wine, or a litre of beer. — A thirtieth of a pound of salt.'

Traditionally, food would need to be cooked either by the soldiers themselves or by a field kitchen supporting their unit. This method of cooking basic foodstuffs requires a reasonable time to allow preparation and cooking to take place. Prior to the Second World War, set-piece battles or fighting often took place in or around static positions. During the Second World War, fast moving mobile warfare became prevalent. To cater for this mobile warfare, and to become less reliant on cooking food using field kitchens in static locations, some combatant powers developed pre-packed or pre-prepared field rations that could be issued to those soldiers whose units were likely to be constantly on the move. These rations took different forms and were mostly utilised by the British and American armies, less so by the armies of other nations.

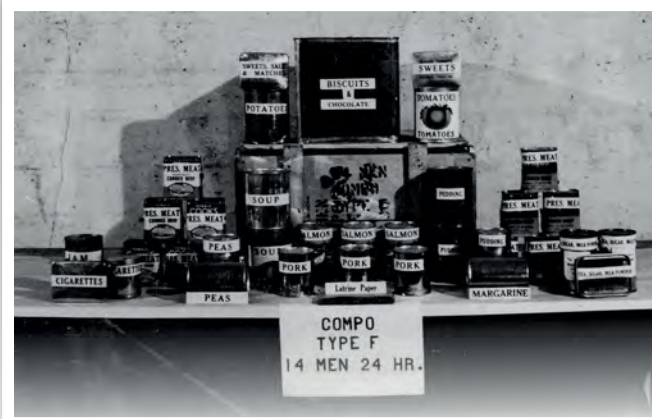
BRITISH 'COMPO' RATIONS

Being of a very ephemeral nature, produced to only to last a relatively short period of time and of obvious practical use, surviving



ABOVE The 24-hour ration pack displayed with contents (including folding cooker).

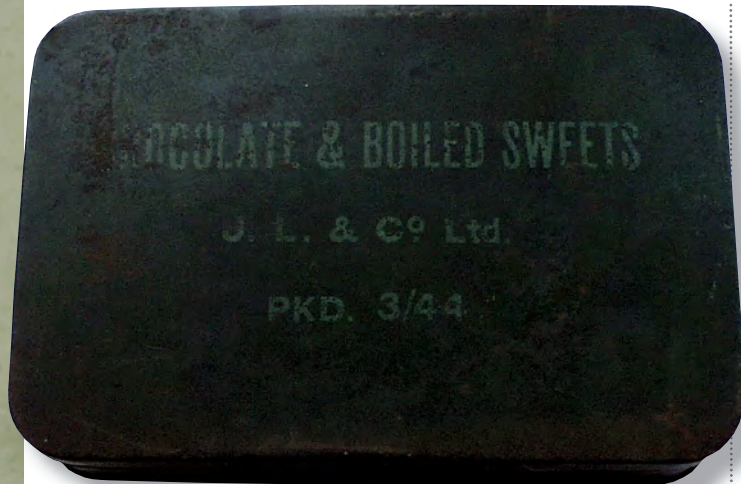
LEFT The British 14 man one day ration. Designed to last 14 men for 24 hours. This could be divided accordingly (i.e. 7 men for 2 days).



examples Second World War military rations are not common. It is still possible to find examples and adds an interesting dimension to collecting WW2 memorabilia.

Here we look at some examples of Second World War military rations and provide some insights into collecting them.

During the Second World War, the British Army developed a special composite ration. These were developed into two types; an individual ration and a 14 man for 1 day ration (designed to cater for 14 men for one day, i.e. 24 hours). Colloquially known as 'Compo' ration, this ration still endures today but in a much modified and improved form. >>



The boxed ration contained tinned and sometimes dried goods, plus sundries. George C. Blackburn a Canadian artillery officer describes these rations and how they were used during the fighting in Normandy in July 1944:

'There are various types of Compo boxes, each identified by a letter of the alphabet (from A to E at least), each type containing a variety of tinned food. The various types of boxes have been shuffled and mixed up at some supply base to ensure variety even within units. For a while there will be a certain excitement in receiving a Compo box. Finding you've been given one with the can of peaches is like winning a lottery. A great deal of time is spent reading directions and experimenting with methods of heating the contents of "M & V" (meat and vegetable stew), "Steak & kidney pudding" (a can lined with a thick dough and filled with chopped beef and kidney), "Sultana pudding" (resembling a dried-out fruit cake that can be sliced and eaten cold with slices of canned cheddar), and "Treacle pudding" (a caramel-coated creation that is specially pleasant when warmed up).'

An important component of the British 'Compo' ration was the tea making element. This came as loose tea, or as special pre-mixed ingredients (tea/powdered milk/sugar) in a tin. Serving in the Royal Army Service Corps in the Western Desert as a driver, Private Maurice Meritt describes its morale boosting qualities and how it was 'brewed up':

'Our brew can was acquired from the cook, originally containing marmalade or margarine, large in size and with a capacity of approximately seven pints of liquid. After filling the tin within two inches of the top, the brew can was placed on the stove or petrol fire and boiled. Directly the water bubbled, a handful of tea was dropped into it and allowed to stew and boiled for a few minutes. That smoked begrimed, battered, black and dented teapot produced the most lovely refreshing dark brown drink, with lashings of sugar, not in short supply. We always had a lovely mug of tea in the desert, and though it invariably made us sweat like a bull for a spell, it still was a favourite for all.'

David Kenyon Webster, an American who served with the US 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment described the tinned tea ration as: 'popular with both British and Americans (who would never admit to liking anything English), the tea was an ingenious mixture



TOP A confectionery tin. Such items often survive due to being useful storage.
ABOVE Vital to any British soldier was the tea contained within a ration pack. Initially issued as loose tea, later it was issued pre-mixed. Here, Monty enjoys a brew in the desert.
BELOW Special ration tins, the emergency tin on the left contained chocolate and was often issued to troops taking part in major operations.



of dried leaves, concentrated sugar and powdered milk. A heaping spoonful in a half canteen of boiling water made a sweet, hearty beverage.'

British rations are very rare, and whilst they are still possible to obtain they do command very high prices.

AMERICAN RATIONS

The US Army, in 1942, defined that 3,750 calories were required for those engaged 'in active hard work'. This figure was very similar to that of the British Army, but American rations were provided in great quantity and comprised many different types, including:

K Rations - comprising three separately boxed meals (Breakfast, Dinner and Supper), consisting of tinned food, beverage making elements, crackers, candy, cigarettes and sundries.

C Rations - Tinned rations, comprising contents designed to provide a balanced diet.

10-in-1 - Ration packs similar to the British '14 men for one day' pack.

Emergency Rations & Special Ration Packs - Created for use in emergencies (e.g. for pilots or life rafts) and as rations for mountain troops.

US rations were produced in large numbers and widely used by all the Allied forces. Whilst rations are designed to offer palatability, and to provide nutrition and sustainability, cultural differences in menus sometimes occur. Captain Anthony Irwin, serving with V Force in Burma, was issued US "C" Rations and related his impressions of them: *'We took an ample supply of American rations and set-off. The "C" ration, which is the normal American field issue, is all in tins. These rations were at first a great joy to us, but they soon palled. Two tins, three times a day, three of the tins being a basic mess of potages, well-oiled and with a red fluid which they like to call "tomato puree" and three tins of biscuit, confection and beverage". The first is always the same, being five hard round biscuits; the confection is always three hard-boiled sweets, with a piece of Dentice chewing-gum for breakfast tooth-cleaning, and the beverage is excellent coffee powder in a small tin for breakfast. Pretty mediocre lemon powder for lunch, and superb cocoa powder for supper. Personally, I never managed the potage, but always relied on rice and bully and chillies.'* >>



FIRST CLASS FOOD

for a FIRST CLASS FIGHTING MAN

OUR MEN OVERSEAS, brought up on good American home cooking, are getting the kind of food they need and deserve.

Even when miles away from Company mess, they eat rugged, good-tasting meals—food well balanced, well cooked the way an American likes it.

The nation's food canners have cooperated with the Army Quartermaster Corps in the development of these U. S. Army field rations. From Campbell's kitchens, for instance, come a hearty meat-and-vegetable stew and other army field rations—food cooked the American way, then sealed into cans, to be eaten later, thousands of miles away.

The making of army field rations is the Number One job in Campbell's kitchens these days. Millions upon millions of cans are being

produced... prepared and cooked with precision so that each can of food measures up to the high standard that has been set by the Army Quartermaster experts.

Food for our fighting men comes first. But hearty, fortifying food for folks on the home front is vitally important, too. Campbell's Soups, deep and rich in flavor, give just the good, sound nourishment that war-busy families need these days. That is why so many

homemakers are building stoves frequently around hearty Campbell's Soups.

The makers of Campbell's Soups are proud to play a part in feeding a nation at war—making food for men on the fighting fronts as well as for the families at home.

Army field rations, cooked in the U.S.A., go to our fighting men packed in cans. So if the cans are marked as your locality, always buy your own. Remove labels, wash, hold in both ends and flatten. Tin is used in the next!



CAMPBELL SOUP COMPANY
MAKERS OF FOODS FOR VICTORY



TOP The breakfast pack box for the K Ration.

ABOVE A contemporary advertisement from the Campbell Soup Company, who manufactured C Rations.

LEFT The '10 in 1' ration pack boxes, comprising a first and second half package. These items are now very rare and command high prices.

BELOW RAF aircrew emergency ration packs.



LEFT Often used by German troops for cooking in the field was the Esbit folding cooker. This used small blocks of combustible fuel to heat what was being cooked.

BELOW LEFT Vital for keeping up morale were cigarettes. These Spanish manufactured cigarettes are marked for Wehrmacht issue.

BELOW Another special issue item was a tin of chocolate. This well-known brand was later issued in a cardboard packing.

Unfortunately, despite best efforts, one cannot please everybody and the more traditional British Tommy's fare of bully beef seems to have endured with Captain Irwin!

American rations were once the most commonly available to the collector, but they are now becoming rarer and now command high prices.

GERMAN RATIONS

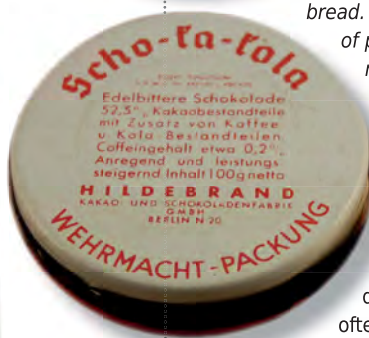
The German Army adhered more to the use of field kitchens rather than devising special individual rations. Henry Metelmann served in the Wehrmacht in Russia during the Second World War, and describes the contrasts in rations that could occur in this theatre for a German soldier. At the front, supply could be very difficult and he describes the situation when fighting in the Crimea: *'Our food supply was not the best. With the land route from Germany to the Crimea very long and vulnerable, and the sea passage from Romania, due to the Soviets still holding on to Sevastopol, not being open yet, we often felt quite hungry. Usually, we had only one warm meal a day with the nutritional quality seldom rising above a thin cabbage soup, with the odd piece of tomato; every second day, each of us received half a loaf of bread, some fat, a bit of cheese and some hard honey'*

German rations often included foodstuffs taken from occupied countries. This could include French wine and cheeses, as well as consumables taken locally. When in a static position, however, the food situation could change to a dramatically more favourable one.

Henry Metelmann describes how he and his colleagues fared when billeted in a Russian village behind the lines: *'We had a midday meal consisting mainly of nourishing bortsch (vegetable soup) and bread. Each evening we had a lovely big meal consisting of potatoes, other vegetables, eggs and meat - mostly out of a large frying pan from which we ate together with everyone dipping in their forks'*

Due to the lack of specialist military rations utilised by the Germans, surviving examples are extremely rare and can command very high prices. Interestingly, with the increase in the relic-hunting digging of Second World War battlefields by enthusiasts looking for buried or discarded militaria, examples of German rations often are being found today.

Military rations provide a fascinating if not 'niche' area of collecting. They provided vital sustenance during the Second World War, but varied in popularity. Whatever their availability and quality, there was one thing the troops always looked forward to; a traditional solid meal, made from fresh ingredients! ☺



WHERE TO BUY

As previously stated, ration items are all quite rare and command high prices. They can still be obtained via online auctions or from specialist militaria dealers. Good quality reproductions produced for the re-enactor market are also available and provide a good substitute as components of a generic militaria collection.