

The Canteens of Royal Marine Divisional Barracks

The establishment of the Marines as a permanent force under the Admiralty in 1755, and the subsequent acquisition of Barrack Headquarters at Chatham, Portsmouth, Plymouth, and Woolwich, enabled the Corps to progress a system of feeding its' men ahead of developments in the Army. The construction of the Royal Marines Barracks at Woolwich in 1846 provided for "a kitchen or mess-room appropriated for every 40 men, apart from their sleeping room – an advantage which is not possessed by any other barracks in the kingdom". The 'Barrack Accommodation Report' of 1855 recommended this change for the Army, not least to discourage the rats and mice that tended to take up residence when men ate in their barrack rooms. New barrack buildings were rare however, and many soldiers and Royal Marines continued to eat in their block rooms. By 1862 Divisional standing orders stated that the "NCOs in charge of the Cook-houses were to see that the provisions were properly cooked, and that they were to also have charge of the lavatories and baths, and to see them cleaned by the fatigue men every morning". One Private or Gunner was to be employed permanently as a Baker, with another detailed to assist in each Cook-house daily up to dinner at 12.30pm. The daily ration per man had been set in 1833 at $\frac{3}{4}$ lb of meat and 1½ lbs of bread, augmented with any vegetables that could be grown or purchased. Spices and condiments also had to be contracted. With breakfast at 7.30 am the only other official paid meal in the day, (and these by way of deductions from pay) men were left some nineteen hours without food. This requirement led to the development of the 'Wet' (Beer) and 'Dry' (Grocery) Canteens; businesses run by private merchants under the direction of the Quartermaster, where men could purchase extras such as eggs, tea, bread, butter, milk, tobacco and of course Beer. The precedent for these merchants was the regimental Sutler, who from the 17th Century would follow a marching regiment, or be invited into camps or garrisons to pedal his wares. By the 1750s they had become licensed, but were generally mobile with the exception of those attached to regular headquarters such as the Guards, the Royal Artillery and Marines Divisions. Once in barracks these Canteen traders would be subject to rent; a system that would earn the Government £65,000 profit a year by the 1840s. Various regulations were developed to contain the consumption of beer and spirits to the Canteen, within specified hours, prohibit gambling, and to ensure quality and fair pricing. This was not always successful with profiteering, fraud and drunkenness resulting in the worse cases of the abuse of the system. Over pricing also drove the men into unregulated gin houses of the town or garrison, where any savings could be lost to prostitution. The Royal Marine Divisions had regulated the private tenants of the Canteens by placing them under the direction of the 1st Quartermaster and a Canteen Committee. A sergeant was also required to be present during the opening hours. In 1863 the Army introduced regulations that likewise removed Canteen responsibility to the regiment. The Marine Divisions all had Sutlers Canteens by the early 1800s and the next development was the encouragement of NCO messes during the 1820s

“as a means of supporting their consequence and respectability in the Corps”.(General Regulations 1822). Another source of food for the men developed from the setting up of NCO and men’s libraries in each of the divisions. Whether driven by a desire to educate or to save from debauchery, the Colonel Commandants instructed their Barrack-masters to set up libraries and recreational facilities in 1840. The recreation rooms, often adjacent to a seated reading room area, contained billiards, Bagatelles, dominoes and later skittle alleys. Accompanying both areas was a refreshment bar that eventually was stocked with coffee, soup, ginger beer, bread, ham, cheese, pork pies and Saveloys. Of greater significance was the opening hours up to 10.30 pm, which enabled men to purchase a small supper at least. Profits from this enterprise, separate from the Canteen arrangements, went into sports activities such as the purchase of boots and shirts for the RMA tug-o-war team in the 1890s. The Royal Marines Divisional Canteens remained the responsibility of the Corps until 1929 when the Admiralty transferred their administration to the Navy, Army and Airforce Institute (NAAFI)