



Hardtack

Long-life biscuit for explorers 15th to 19th centuries

The Ancient Romans had them. Nelson's troops kept barrels of them in their naval vessels. And these cracker-like squares were a staple ration for American soldiers on both sides of the Civil War.

Though they're called different things in different cultures, this basic recipe has been a staple for militaries around the world for centuries. Made of flour and water, and sometimes a bit of salt or sugar, they are sturdy, filling and will last a long time if kept dry. Indeed, some soldiers kept a few as souvenirs after the war, and they are commonly on display in Civil War museums over 150 years later.



A naval blockade kept wheat imports from reaching Confederate states, and so much of the hardtack rationed to soldiers earlier in the war was leftover from the Mexican-American War (1846-1848). Meanwhile, government bakeries in the north were supplying hardtacks to Union troops, who were rationed nine to ten each, per day.

Eating one will make it difficult to imagine how any human being could consume that many hardtacks each day. The dryness sucks out any moisture from your mouth. The heavy wafer in your hand feels just as heavy in the stomach. They are so dense, soldiers used to use them as small plates. And, of course, the flavor is incredibly uninteresting – you're basically just eating flour.

The holes in crackers are made by a process called "docking." These help the cracker to bake evenly and prevent them from rising like a bread. Historically, this was accomplished using ominous looking hand-held tools, but by the Civil War, there were mechanical tools that accomplished the task.

If you ever decide to make them, do watch your teeth.



Voyagers have been creating biscuits that can be preserved since ancient times, but long-life rations really came into their own during the 15th century, when they were the primary foodstuff of explorers – although they often became contaminated with mould and insects! Hardtack remained popular until steam power superseded the age of sail.

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