

ALCOHOL AND THE MILITARY

A Working Bibliography of MHI Sources

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ALCOHOL PROHIBITION

In 1890 Congress imposed limited prohibition on the Army by banning intoxicating beverages to enlisted men at military posts located in states, territories, or counties with local prohibition laws. However, the Army considered beer and light wines to be non-intoxicating and thus allowed their sale and consumption in post canteens at the discretion of post commanders.

Congress then expanded Army prohibition with the so-called Canteen Act of 1901, which forbade "the sale of, or dealing in, beer, wine or any intoxicating liquors by any person in any post exchange or canteen or army transport or upon any premises used for military purposes by the United States." The Secretary of War duly reported that the force and effect of this law had been carried out, and Army Regulations contained this particular prohibition statement for the next fifty years. In practice, however, the Army defined "intoxicating" beverages, as those containing "an appreciative quantity of alcohol."

When America entered World War I, Congress extended alcoholic prohibition beyond the Army's post boundaries. Section 12 of the Selective Service Act of 18 May 1917 prohibited intoxicating beverages "in or near military camps," which the War Department implemented by establishing a prohibition zone five miles wide around each post. Meanwhile, the same law made it illegal anywhere to sell intoxicating beverages to a member of the armed forces in uniform. Incidentally, the Judge Advocate General's Office in 1918--for the first time, perhaps--specifically defined intoxicants, as containing 1.4 percent or more alcohol.

Interestingly, even after the 21st Constitutional Amendment ended national prohibition in 1933, the Army continued to abide by the 1901 prohibition and the World War I standard of 1.4 percent on military posts. Not until midway through World War II did the Army raise its intoxication standard to 3.2 percent alcohol, a standard set by Congress a decade earlier. The Army's intoxication standard and its prohibition for military posts continued in force until 1953, when it was determined that the Canteen Act of 1901 had been repealed, in effect, by 1951 amendments to the Universal Military Training and Selective Service Act. Since then, post commanders have controlled the sale and use of intoxicating beverages.

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