

Making the Civil War Hardtack

By Joseph Parish

Hardtack is actually a variety of biscuits, composed of flour, salt, and water. It exemplifies an inexpensive resource towards creating a long-lasting food. The name is derived from the British slang word "tack", suggesting food, although, it has been described by a host of diverse names over the years, and in assorted locations.

I am not going to venture into the historical development of this survival food at this time, suffice is to say this sustenance staple has benefitted the Ancient Egyptian sailors, the early Romans soldiers, King Richard I of England, and with the early settlers as they crossed the American prairies. Since hardtack is a hard, dry cake, the bread is durable and is able to withstand rough handling and extremes of temperature. It is cooked to a hard consistency, thus the hardtack will last for a considerable number of years, if kept dry. Early sailors would bake their hardtack four times to ensure that it was hard and would last for their six-month voyage.

Once you have made your hardtack, in order to soften it up, dunk it in some brine, coffee, or some other liquid, or alternatively, you could cook it in a skillet. Hardtack can be crumbled into a fine texture and used as a soup thickener, in fact, that is exactly how New England seafood chowders were made in the 1700s. With hardtack's ability to last for a long time it was a popular troop food during the American Civil War. The same company who manufactured it during the Civil War, still makes it today for Civil War re-enactments. On into the late 20th century, hardtack continued to be a staple of our military during the Japanese and Korea conflicts. The food is still sold to the locals in those countries today. It is not unusual to find hardtack supplied with Russian and German military rations.

Keep in mind, it isn't just the ingredients that fashions a successful hardtack, but also how you make it, which contributes to its ability to last unrefrigerated. Even today, in some areas of the south, this staple is still popular and made in many homes. The following hardtack recipe works well, and is deserving of a try.

Start off the process by preheating your oven to 350 degrees. Take two cups of flour along with a cup of water. If you wish to include salt in your hardtack, you should do so now. Place the flour in a mixing bowl, while slowly adding the water, a little at a time until the flour can be shaped into a ball. You may need to use more water, or less to achieve the consistency. Remember, it is not necessary to use the complete cup of water as you are making the dough.

Now, with a roller, press the dough out into a 1/4-inch-thick sheet. Historically, the Civil War versions were made 1/2-inch-thick, however the bulkier it is, the more difficult it is on your teeth. After rolling it out to the proper thickness, cut the dough into squares, approximately, slightly larger than the modern saltine crackers. Using a fork, prick three

rows of holes on the top of the squares permitting the steam to escape. Carefully, place the squares on a cookie sheet.

Bake the squares in the 350-degree oven for 15 minutes, then turn the oven temperature down to 250, while continuing to bake for another 30 minutes. Follow that by dropping the oven temperature again to 200 degrees for another 30 minutes. It's now time to flip them over with a spatula. Continue to bake the hardtack, until they become hard, the color should turn, however, don't let it burn. Use your eyes to watch it as it bakes, instead of setting the timer on the oven.

On the following day, with a lower temperature of 225 degrees, give the hardtack a second baking for approximately 30-45 minutes. The second baking will finish drying the hardtack out. A single baking is not enough, as it will burn the food if continued. When you complete the first baking procedure, if it was packaged at that time, the process of "sweating" as it cools down can contribute to mold development. It is not recommended to package your final product in plastic unless it is completed with the additional baking. The big advantage to baking twice is that the hardtack can safely be stored in a gallon Ziploc bag and last for at least six months.

We are at our closing remarks and all I can say is, before you badmouth this old food standard take a taste adventure and try it.