

In WWI Trenches, Instant Coffee Gave Troops a Much-Needed Boost



American servicemen enjoy a hot cup of coffee at a Salvation Army hut in New York, circa 1918. During World War I, instant coffee was a key provision for soldiers on the front. They called it a "cup of George."

On April 6, 1917, the U.S. declared war on Germany and formally entered World War I. By late June, American infantry troops began arriving in Europe. One thing they couldn't do without? Coffee.

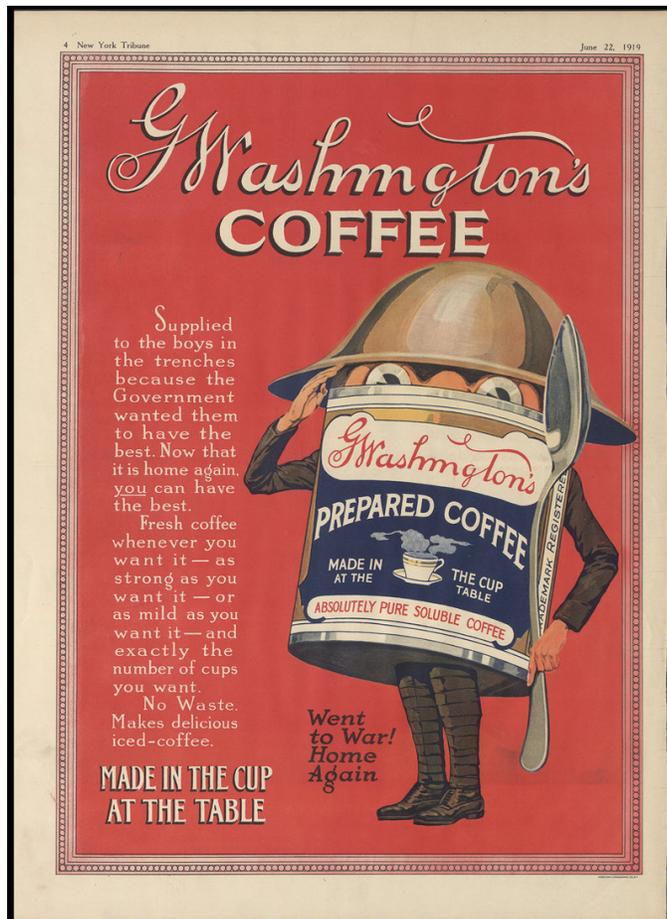
"Coffee was as important as beef and bread," a high-ranking Army official concluded after the war. A postwar review of the military's coffee supply concurred, stating that it "restored courage and strength" and "kept up the morale."

In fact, U.S. troops had long looked toward coffee as a small source of salvation amid the hell of war. During the Civil War, Union soldiers received around 36 pound of coffee a year, according to Jon Grinspan, a curator at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

Some Union soldiers got rifles with a mechanical grinder with a hand crank built into the buttstock. They'd fill a hollowed space within the carbine's stock with coffee beans, grind it up, dump it out and cook coffee that way.

In World War I, the U.S. War Department took things further, establishing local roasting and grinding plants in France to ensure fresh coffee for the troops. (Even if it was brewed in the worst possible of manners, with the grounds left in the pots for a number of successive meals.)

The military also began offering coffee of a different type: instant.



In 1901, a Japanese chemist working in Chicago named Satori Kato developed a successful way to make a soluble coffee powder, or dried coffee extract. At that year's Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, N.Y., the Kato Coffee Co. served hot samples in the Manufacturers Building, giving the brew its public. Two years later Sato received a patent for "Coffee concentrate and process of making same."

But it was another immigrant in America, an Anglo-Belgian inventor named George Washington, who first successfully mass-produced instant coffee. (Washington's presidential namesake was not only a coffee drinker but perhaps even an importer.) Established in 1910, the G. Washington Coffee Refining Co., with production facilities in Brooklyn, N.Y., initially sold as "Red E Coffee."

While the name suggested convenience, marketing soon highlighted other benefits of the "perfectly digestible coffee." "Now you can drink all the COFFEE you wish!"

an early 1914 ad in the *New York Times* promised. "No more do you have to risk indigestion when you drink coffee," thanks to a "wonderful process that removes the disturbing acids and oils (always present in ordinary coffee)."

Competing products were hitting the market when demand for soluble coffee skyrocketed with the American entry into the Great War in 1917. The U.S. military snapped up all the instant coffee it could. By October 1918, just before the war's end, Uncle Sam was trying to get 37,000 pounds a day of the powder — far above the entire national daily output of 6,000 pounds, according to Mark Pendergrast's coffee history, *Uncommon Grounds*.

"After trying to put it up in sticks, tablets, capsules and other forms," noted William Ukers in his authoritative *All About Coffee*, "it was determined that the best method was to pack it in envelopes." Each held a quarter ounce.

Soluble coffee was notably used on the front lines. Soldiers stirred it into hot water, gulped from tin mugs, and called it "a cup of George," after the company's founder — whose name was apparently familiar to at least some of them. In a letter from the front that Pendergrast quotes, a soldier wrote: "There is one gentlemen I am going to look up first after I get through helping whip the Kaiser, and that is George Washington, of Brooklyn, the soldiers' friend."

The U.S. War Department's E.F. Holbrook, head of the coffee branch of the Subsistence Department, considered instant coffee instrumental in the face of chemical weapons: "The use of mustard gas by the Germans made it one of the most important articles of subsistence used by the army," he explained to the *Tea and Coffee Trade Journal* in 1919. The "extensive use of mustard gas made it impossible to brew coffee by the ordinary methods in the rolling kitchens," he said.

Equally important was coffee's effect on morale in the trenches. It was hot, familiar and offered a hint of home's comforts. And it had caffeine, which helped energize the troops.

For java addicts like Mexican-American doughboy [José de la Luz Sáenz](#), who served with the 360th Infantry Expeditionary Forces in France and Occupied Germany, that jolt also kept at bay "the headaches caused by the lack of coffee in the morning," he wrote in his journal on Sept. 26, 1918, after a sleepless night and gas attack on the Western Front.

Rather than using his "condiment can" to carry food, he filled one of its compartments with sugar and the other with instant coffee. Managing to get a small alcohol stove to heat water, he prepared cups in the trenches. "The hot coffee with our reliable 'hardtack' biscuits hit the spot and revived exhausted, hungry, and drowsy soldiers," noted Sáenz, a teacher (and future civil rights activist) from South Texas.

Sometimes Sáenz and his fellow soldiers had to do without heat — or even water — for their coffee. "On occasions when the morning finds us on our feet, I am glad to be able to chew on a spoonful of coffee with a bit of sugar."

After the First World War ended, Washington's company relaunched "prepared coffee" for the household. "Went to war! Home again," read an advertisement with a saluting coffee can. The focus this time was on convenience: "Fresh coffee whenever you want it — as strong as you want it."

While Washington's company continued to sell coffee, its Swiss competitor, Nestlé, managed to develop a better technique for producing instant coffee. In 1938 it launched [Nescafé](#), which soon dominated the global instant coffee market.

In 1943, just before his death, Washington sold the company. (In 1961, the George Washington coffee brand was discontinued.) By then, World War II was raging, and American GIs were calling their coffee by a different name: Joe.



GIs enjoy a cup of coffee during World War II. "The American soldier became so closely identified with his coffee that G.I. Joe gave his name to the brew," according to coffee historian Mark Pendergrast.

One legend behind the origins of the new moniker is that it referred to Josephus Daniels, secretary of the Navy from 1913 to 1921 under Woodrow Wilson, who banned alcohol onboard ships, making coffee the strongest drink in the mess. Snopes, though, fact-checked that claim and called it false.

Yet "Joe" very likely does originate in the military. "The American soldier became so closely identified with his coffee that G.I. Joe gave his name to the brew," according to Pendergrast.

"Nobody can soldier without coffee," a Union cavalryman wrote in his diary at the end of the Civil War. Many servicemen and women who have fought since then would agree. Even when the coffee was instant and called George.