

The Cocoa Unit

of the

United States Army Medical Department

by

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Many living historians and collectors actively seek out the correct items to build a collection of equipment representative of the prescribed contents of the Battalion Aid Station. In compiling the requisite equipment most of the items are fairly straight forward and common in their use, description and are known to those in our hobby. There are the occasional items that are elusive, uncommon or little known of, the Cocoa Unit is just such an item. I personally began my collection of Medical Equipment about 15 years ago, at that time items were still generally plentiful, but not highly desirable as most interests seemed to lie in other areas. I decided that I would begin to amass these items for use in large scale living history displays. In doing so it was determined what equipment would be required for the Battalion Aid Station and I set about obtaining these items. I was always baffled, as are many still about one item on the list, the "Cocoa Unit". I have researched many period texts, catalogs and photographs of BAS set ups and have still been unable to definitively answer the question of: "what is a cocoa unit and what did it look like?" What I can do however is offer a theory built of period materials, procedure and interviews with veterans.

Some History and information on my Cocoa Unit:

About 15 years ago I was attending a Militaria Show in Houston, Texas and located what a reputable vendor had identified as a hot "Cocoa Dispenser". The vendor told me it was to keep hot cocoa at U.S. "field hospitals". Years later I decided to compile the complete BAS and remembered I had the item when I saw the list of equipment required. Having never actually seen a clear photo of the "Cocoa Unit" deployed in the field, nor a catalog or other type depiction of the item; I have not been able to 100% verify this is in fact the much heard of little seen unit! I do feel confident that the dispenser in my collection is what is known as the Cocoa Unit. In preparation for it's use the unit was sanded and repainted a period shade of Olive Drab. The wooden handle was sanded and repainted gloss black. No unit markings were added to it as it was unknown if this was correct for the medical battalion I represent or not. Some illegible unit marks were present when the container was originally purchased. Curiously the dispenser is devoid of any engraved "MD-USA" markings, stock numbers or any other nomenclature markings that are common to US Military equipment.

The Use of the Cocoa Unit:

From period texts we can infer certain things about the probable use of the item. The Battalion Aid Station had many very important focuses to its mission. Being close to the action with skilled care available to start life saving actions, triage, rapid first aid treatment and return to duty of light wound cases and identification and treatment of

shock being just a few of the capital charges. The area of treatment of shock is what the unit must be looked at with great focus. In period texts there were several treatment priorities for patients who were in shock. Keeping the patient warm with blankets, external heat measures, and warm liquids were some important actions. Another important point to shock treatment was administering caffeine to the patient, and coffee, tea and cocoa fit this bill as read in texts of the times. It must also be inferred that oral dehydration of patients in shock was a consideration as was ensuring the caloric uptake was happening to assist the body with the fight to starve off irreversible shock. Though some of this seems counterintuitive in today's world, recall at the time this was considered sound advice we must recognize shock was not well known about and its treatment in its infancy. Another significant role the aid station played was that of morale provider. Troops who saw fellow soldiers being wounded on the battlefield were often spirited to see that their wounded comrades were receiving expert and prompt medical attention, and that that attention was close at hand in the event of wounding. The aid station was seen as a place of refuge by many and thus a morale boosting effect. Couple that with the fact the aid station was a place usually of safety (real or imagined) warmth, a kind word and a hot drink when it was cold and you have another reason that cocoa or any other hot beverage was an important item to have on hand there. Soldiers who were mildly wounded, very cold or otherwise demoralized might end up at the BAS for a short treatment of warmth, minor wounds tended too, a hot drink, a kind word and then a ticket to return to duty. That 30 minute to an hour reprieve may be just the thing to save that soldiers life and should not be overlooked.

What Veterans Say:

Anecdotal information is often an excellent source of information when there is a lack of documentation. I have talked with many WW2 ETO vets who were both assigned to aid station as technicians / medical officers and were patients at aid stations and have learned that cocoa; at least early in the war was served. The drink was served to offer warmth, be filling in lieu of a meal and the fact that it was very sweet and palatable has obvious advantages over coffee, tea and surely over lukewarm water from a Lister Bag! One vet said that "D" Rations were melted and used in the cocoa to add additional sweetness to the powdered mix. Most veterans that were asked about this did not recall too much about the beverage or its purpose other than for warmth, but most recall it being there and that it was usually quite hot and very sweet. Many vets related that the BAS always had a hot drink available "morning, noon or night".

Description:

The unit in my collection is constructed in a typical period fashion for insulated drinking containers. It is constructed of galvanized metal; it features a brass spigot that is operated with a simple on / off thumb twist valve. The spigot features a finely externally threaded spout; this assembly is original to the item. The dispenser is filled by means of a friction fit lid that has a riveted handle; there is no securing feature to the lid to retain it to the container. The unit may be lifted by means of a plain heavy gauge wire bale handle fitted with a wooden hand grip that is painted gloss black. The

overall color of the container is flat olive drab; the spigot is a natural metal color. The internal reservoir is natural galvanized metal with no painting or coatings.

Measurements are as follows:

Height: 16" Tall (not including lid handle)
Circumference: 33 1/2" Circumference
Capacity: Approx. 2 US Gallons

Photos:



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Conclusions:

The Cocoa Unit deployed by the United States Army in WW2 was very likely an item that was utilized to provide injured troops with a means for palatable, supplemental fluid, caloric and caffeine intake. It provided warmth which is essential in the treatment of shock and other environmental related illness (hypothermia) and in general cheered morale. The units deployed appear to have been possibly "off the shelf" type galvanized metal insulated water containers common in the period and not specifically manufactured for the Army Medical Department. The units may have been rendered obsolete by the appearance of the Quarter Master Corps Aid Station Beverage Pack that appeared around 1944. This pack contained Coffee, Tea, Cocoa and Evaporated Milk.