

Combat High – A Sobering History of Drug Use in Wartime

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Germany wasn't the only power in World War Two to hand out amphetamines to its assault troops to make them fight harder. Military history often overlooks the role narcotics have played in wartime. (Image source: WikiCommons)

“Drugs and warfare have always gone hand in hand – from Homeric warriors drinking wine and taking opium to Wehrmacht troops popping methamphetamines.”

By Lukasz Kamienski

THE PHILOSOPHER [Friedrich Nietzsche](#) once wrote that the history of narcotics is a study of culture itself. He may very well have been speaking about military culture.

Although largely neglected by military history scholarship, intoxicants have been an integral part of the culture of war for centuries.

Stimulants have long been known to enhance combat performance, keeping personnel awake, alert, and hence alive after prolonged periods of fatigue. Intoxicants also “take the edge off” war, enabling soldiers to cope with the traumas of the battlefield. Drinking and drugging rituals have even helped soldiers bond, which is crucial for group cohesion and morale. And since long periods of boredom are also a part of war, soldiers have often reached for intoxicants because they simply have had not much else to do.

Drugs and warfare have always gone hand in hand – from Homeric warriors drinking wine and taking opium to *Wehrmacht* troops popping methamphetamines. The truth is, soldiers have been fighting while high for much of history. Consider the following examples.



During the Age of Sail, Royal Navy sailors were issued a full gallon of beer a day. That’s eight pints. (Image source: WikiCommons)

Fortification

Alcohol is the oldest and most popular pharmacological motivator of fighting men. For centuries, rations of spirits inspired “Dutch courage” that propelled troops into battle. Different nations had different drinks of choice. For the British [it was rum](#). The Russians turned to vodka. Ancient Greeks, Romans and the modern French preferred wine. The Germans issued beer. Americans initially doled out rum but since the Civil War, it was whiskey. The fact is that until the mid-20th century, wars were rarely fought sober.



Zulus fought like demons, thanks in part to a veritable drug store of natural herbs, plants and mushrooms they consumed before battle. (Image source: WikiCommons)

Zulu Courage

The experience of fighting with fierce and alien enemy pumped up on drugs is hardly new. When the British decided to subdue the Zulu tribes in 1879, they faced the ferocious foe who was seemingly immune to the modern rifle fire. What made the Zulus truly fearless warriors was not just their traditional belligerence but also their pharmacopoeia. Shamans provided spearmen with various herbs, such as *intelezi* (a traditional plant taken in purifying rites to boost morale), medicated beer, *dagga* (the South African variety of cannabis which had a stimulating effect), a potent painkiller and hallucinogen produced from the “bushman poison bulb,” and probably also toadstool known as *Amanita muscaria* or “fly agaric.” Had the British been familiar with the idea of zombies, they would have likely used the term to describe the Zulus.



Soviet troops from Siberia consumed a centuries-old mushroom concoction that made them fight with greater ferocity. (Image source: WikiCommons)

Mushrooms

While it's unclear if Zulus had access to *Amanita*, the mushroom was certainly used regularly by warriors in Eurasia, particularly in the Siberian tribes of [Chukchi](#), [Kamchadals](#), and [Koryaks](#). The main psychoactive component of the toadstool is [muscimol](#), which significantly enhances a soldier's combat performance. Interestingly, because the urine of its eater retains strong psychoactive properties, drinking it was also popular among the Siberian warriors. Legends say that the tribes that consumed *Amanita muscaria* produced fierce "mushroom warriors." Strikingly, Soviet soldiers – probably from Siberia – were reportedly stoned on the mushroom at the [Battle of Székesfehérvár](#) in Hungary in 1945. They performed equally fearlessly.



Cocaine was a popular tonic for troops in the trenches of the Western Front in World War One. Many ordered it from home. (Image source: WikiCommons)

Blown Away

The First World War brought cocaine to the frontline. The drug, which was first developed in the 1960s, was used by German and French pilots as well as Canadian infantrymen. The British army issued a medicine containing cocaine and an extract from cola nuts known as [“Tabloid”](#) or [“Forced March.”](#) It was said to encourage fearlessness and offset combat fatigue. Self-prescribed consumption was also widespread as cocaine proved an effective boosting aid in the trenches. London pharmacists sold medical kits containing cocaine and heroin. Girls happily bought the boxes, advertised as “useful presents for friends at the front” and eagerly sent them to their boys, fiancés, and husbands on the lines.



The armies of World War Two ran on speed. (Image source: WikiCommons)

Getting Blitzed

If cocaine was the drug of choice between 1914 and 1918, amphetamines would become the favoured stimulant during the Second World War. In fact, the conflict was largely fought on speed and from 1939 to 1945, soldiers were the greatest consumers of amphetamines.

It was the Nazis who pioneered wholesale and systematic military doping. Their pill of choice was [Pervitin](#), an early version of crystal meth. It energized the body, increased alertness, combated fatigue and created strong feelings of confidence. In his book [The Art of War](#) the ancient Chinese philosopher [Sun Tzu](#) writes that “Speed is the essence of war.” Such was the essence of [Blitzkrieg](#), for which German forces were primed by chemical speed.

Between April and December 1939, the [Temmler-Werke](#) company supplied the German military with 29 million Pervitin “attack pills,” many of which were used experimentally during the [campaign against Poland](#) in September 1939. As the drug proved exceptionally useful, at the peak of the *Blitzkrieg* in the spring of 1940, troops were issued some 35 million tablets. The *Wehrmacht*’s amazingly rapid advances appear less incredible given that in some units many soldiers took up to four Pervitin pills a day. Overall, it is estimated that from 1939 to 1945 the German military consumed some 200 million meth pills.

Britain, the U.S. and Japan followed suit, administering amphetamines to their troops. It’s estimated that British soldiers consumed around [72 million Benzedrine](#) amphetamine tablets in World War Two. The drug was distributed largely to pilots, but also to infantrymen. For example, on Oct. 23, 1942 [General Bernard Montgomery](#) gave away some 100,000 pills to his [Eighth Army](#) before the [Second Battle of El Alamein](#). The British high on speed managed to defeat the Germans, who were laced with meth. The role of uppers in the outcome of this battle remains, however, largely unexplored.

By 1942 Benzedrine tablets (popularly known as “bennies”) were added to emergency kits for American bomber crews and in 1943 the practice was extended to the infantry. About 15 percent of U.S. soldiers regularly took the stimulant. In fact, the Pentagon issued at least [250 million Benzedrine pills](#) to the troops, yet the total number might be as high as 500 million. This huge range in estimates results from the fact that while we know the value of government contracts with Smith, Kline & French company, the producer of Benzedrine, the procurement price is unknown.



Drug use was widespread by GIs in Vietnam. (Image source: WikiCommons)

Self-Medicating

The Americans continued to boost their troops with amphetamine in the Korean War where the administration of [dextroamphetamine](#) became commonplace. The conflict also saw American servicemen stationed in Korea and Japan concocting their own speed balls – an injectable mixture of amphetamine and heroin. But it was [the Vietnam War](#) where the consumption of psychoactive substances by servicemen both prescribed by the authorities and self-prescribed by individual soldiers assumed alarming proportions. Authorized speed-popping was rampant. Between 1966 and 1969 the military issued 225 million dextroamphetamine tablets. According to the Pentagon, while in 1968 some 50 percent of American soldiers in Vietnam took drugs, in 1973, the year of the U.S. withdrawal, this jumped to 70 percent. Half of the servicemen doing drugs smoked marijuana, and nearly 30 percent took heroin and opium.



U.S. Marines fighting in Iraq reported battling doped insurgents who fought like wild animals. (image source: WikiCommons)

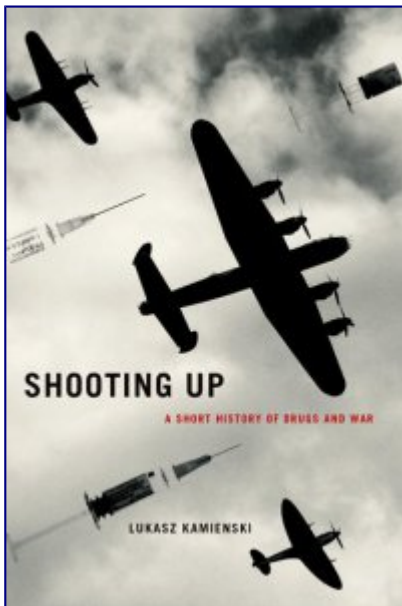
Modern-Day Meds

More recently, during [the 1991 Gulf War](#), 58 percent of American pilots flew with dextroamphetamine support and 17 percent regularly popped “go pills,” as legal uppers are commonly referred to by the pilots themselves. Even today, combat pilots embarking on missions longer than eight hours (one-manned flights) or exceeding 12 hours (two-person crews) can each time, if all required procedures are met, obtain [Dexedrine pills](#). Beginning in 2003, amphetamine uppers have been slowly replaced by a new generation psychostimulant, an eugoric called modafinil (Provigil). Officially, the U.S. military is the only armed force that allows for controlled pharmacology-assisted fatigue management. The policy is limited to pilots only.

However, the Chinese army is reported to introduce its own smart drug. The anti-sleep pill, referred to in the West as [“Night Eagle”](#), is said to enable soldiers to stay awake for up to 72 hours. And at Russian pharmacies there are plenty easily available medicines, which in the West are called nootropics and are banned in sports as doping. Some of these performance enhancers developed originally for astronauts were used by the Red Army during the Afghan War (1979–1989). Compounds such as [Phenotropil](#), [Metraprote](#), or [Mildronate](#) work similarly as dextroamphetamine and methamphetamine but without the same serotonin or dopamine side effects. Metraprote is probably still given to special forces or rapid response units in emergency situations.

[For ISIL the substance of choice is Captagon](#), a powerful stimulant known as fenethylline metabolized in the body to form amphetamine and fenethylline. Invented in 1961, it has become a major recreational drug in the Middle East and more recently a favored stimulant in the Syrian civil war. For fighters, it promotes alertness, enhances strength, numbs fear and induces bravado. Jihadists have been reported to consume it pervasively, while also taking powerful opioid

painkillers and hashish. “Some people take so much, if you shoot them, they won’t drop,” recalled one [Muslim Brotherhood militant in Syria](#). Intoxicated jihadists are often compared to zombies. Fueled by Captagon, they continue fighting even when gravely wounded.



A similar experience was shared by U.S. Marines during the 2004 [Battle of Fallujah](#). The Iraqi insurgents were so heavily doped up on amphetamines and cocaine that they continued fighting despite severe injuries. When the standard firing procedure to aim at the body failed, the Marines were ordered to refocus on head shots.

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