That the Admiralty regarded the free issue of rum as a worthwhile social benefit was evident in 1937 when it granted a lower deck request that ‘grog would be more acceptable with less water in the mix’. A year later two – instead of three – water rum became the daily tot, a ration that continued until its abolition in 1970. One million gallons of rum per year were supplied to the fleet throughout the Second World War and some 75 per cent of ships’ companies drank it; in certain conditions the tot undoubtedly helped to sustain morale. Even so rum was responsible for recurrent crime and punishment and its abuse became far too prevalent, such as in 1945 when a pair of eighteen-year-old twins died from an excess of ‘sippers’ on their birthday. There were similar fatalities in 1949 and 1960. When the free issue and sale of beer became fashionable in the Far East in 1944 – and to many, more acceptable than rum – the Admiralty were quick to realize that they had a possible substitute. Storage for beer was gradually introduced into all warships.

By the mid-1960s the abolition of rum and its replacement by beer was seriously considered for a Navy that was changing socially and technologically. Although only 30 per cent of personnel now opted for grog and the number was diminishing yearly, the performance of junior and senior ratings in handling complex equipment after a tot of rum washed down with a can of strong beer
gave rise to anxiety. As Admiral Twiss, Commander Far East Fleet in 1965, pointed out, the total equal to three or four pub gins – when added to beer put the sailor over the breathalyser limit. Furthermore, punishment returns showed that nearly all cases of serious indiscipline, such as contempt, striking and skulking occurred after rather than before the rum issue. It was also apparent that the number of cases in Netley (psychiatric hospital) attributed to alcohol was higher in proportion to numbers borne for the Navy than for the other services. Equally serious was that chief and petty officers were bottling much larger amounts of rum than were suspected and keeping it in their lockers.

In 1967 the abolition of rum came to a head and the Second Sea Lord, Vice-Admiral Hill-Norton, proposed a way in which it could be achieved. When Twiss succeeded Hill-Norton later in the year he decided that the rum issue would have to cease in one act for everybody entitled to draw it, and that a worthwhile *quid pro quo* compensation must be found.

As their status improved, chief petty officers and petty officers had been pressing for bar service in their messes, primarily to reciprocate hospitality in foreign ports in much the same way as the wardroom gave official cocktail parties. It seemed reasonable to trust senior ratings to act responsibly and run their bars under no less strict supervision and accountability than the wardroom bar. In accepting rum abolition they would gain considerable prestige – a fair exchange.

To compensate junior rates Twiss discovered that the abolition of rum would save the Navy Vote £300,000 a year in 1968; Sir Michael Carey, the Naval Permanent Secretary, considered this a
dangerous step as it would be subject to political pressure and inflation. So why not ask the Treasury to amortize the rum issue over ten years with a down payment of £3 million to put into a trust fund? Unexpectedly the Treasury agreed. In December 1969 the Admiralty was able to announce that as from August 1970 the rum issue would be abolished, bars under supervision would be available to chief and petty officers and the Sailor’s (or Tot) Fund of £2.7 million would be set up to provide amenities for the lower deck that could not be funded by Defence votes.

The First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Michael Le Fanu, and his Board took full responsibility for this measure, accomplished in a remarkably short but tense period. In January 1970 the abolition of rum was debated in the Commons and taken up by the media. But to little advantage. Admiral Sir Frank Twiss concluded: ‘With enormous dignity and plenty of good lower deck fun and poking charley the great issue went through. A naval tradition had been given up. Some said the decision was wrong but most realized it had to be. Splice the main brace was retained but for generations ‘Up Spirits’ will remain a happy memory of the Old Navy.’