

Ready To Eat! 30 Years of the MRE

Part 1: A new kind of ration



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Marines dine on Meals, Ready-to-Eat (MREs) during a break in training, 1988.

For the last three decades, and for at least as many generations of warfighters, the individual combat ration known as the “Meal, Ready-to-Eat” or MRE has been a staple of modern warfare and training.

“First produced in 1981, the MRE ushered in a new era of combat feeding. Gone were the cumbersome metal cans which enclosed the rations that preceded it – from the Vietnam-era “Meal, Combat Individual” stretching back to the “C” and “K” rations of the Korean conflict and World War II.

Food processing and packaging technologies first developed for NASA in the early 1960s to support manned space flight were incorporated into the new ration. The “space age” MRE offered increased portability and shelf life to late 20th century warfighters while reducing the weight and associated strain on their increasingly burdened backs.

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Alternately celebrated and derided – a butt of jokes and source of myths – the MRE has evolved significantly over the last 30 years, providing nutrition to warfighters in conflicts ranging from Operation Desert Shield /Desert Storm (ODS) to the decade-long actions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Today, the MRE is a continuously updated and improved combat ration, tailored to the ever-changing tastes and nutritional needs of the modern warfighter.

First fielded in 1983, the MRE was created to support dismounted warfighters conducting operations on the battlefield away from organized food service capability. Eight menus were available, each including a main entrée portion and side items like bread, peanut butter, different types of spreads and cheese. Accessory packets were included with items like salt, sugar and napkins. The first MREs were also fielded with cigarettes, which just goes to show how times have changed.



A U.S. Air Force officer eats a Meal Ready-to-Eat (MRE) during Operation Urgent Fury. Even though MREs were used during combat operations before Operation Desert Storm, their first real test came in that conflict. DoD photo

“Initial reviews weren’t overwhelmingly positive. Warfighters reported that many of the meals were bland, with little differentiation. Never intended for extended consumption, the ration was designed as a primary source of nutrition for approximately three weeks. By that time the military’s logistics chain was supposed to have caught up with those in the field, providing enough food service equipment for the transition to a “group ration.”

But as Jeremy Whitsitt, a technology integration analyst with the U.S. Army’s [Combat Feeding Directorate](#) (CFD) observes, reality doesn’t always jibe with doctrine in the fog of war.



“The MRE saw its first battlefield action in ODS, and many warfighters consumed it for extended periods, so we got a lot of feedback,” Whitsitt explains. “Basically, the MRE was not doing the job. People felt it was poor quality and the types of items that it included didn’t really reflect the tastes and preferences of the demographic that was consuming it.”

The feedback was warranted, Whitsitt admits. The Army had a kind of “father knows best” mentality when it came to the meals included in the MRE, he says. Much of it was American comfort food. But traditional meat-and-potatoes didn’t really resonate with the 18 to 24-year-olds, primarily from the south, who fought in ODS. Located at the [Natick Soldier Research, Development & Engineering Center](#), Mass., the CFD was a bit out of step with modern tastes.

During the conflict, warfighters came up with a litany of unflattering versions of the acronym M-R-E, including: “Meals, Rejected by Everyone,” “Meals, Refusing to Exit,” “Meals Rejected by Ethiopians,” and worse. The CFD knew it had to make significant changes. The turning point came, somewhat dramatically, in 1991.

“It sounds like a concocted story, but it’s true,” Whitsitt attests. “The director of the CFD was sitting in his office one Friday afternoon when he got a call from the Pentagon, informing him that Gen. Colin Powell, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of

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U.S. Army Pvt. Jason Link of C Company, 2nd Battalion, 12th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division eats a Meal, Ready-to-Eat (MRE) while on a break during construction of a new command post in Ghazaliya, Iraq Jan. 14, 2007. The quality of MREs has improved constantly over the years since their introduction. U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Martin K. Newton

Staff, would like to see him in his office on Monday morning.”

“So, the director of a relatively small joint-service program said to himself, ‘I’d better get down there!’ He showed up in Gen. Powell’s office that Monday and Gen. Powell held up an MRE. He said, ‘I have two words for you. Fix it!’ The director nodded and said, ‘Yes sir!’ He turned and walked out and that was it.”

That spurred the directorate’s continuous product improvement (CPI) program, a process that has transformed the MRE. By 1993 the ration’s menu base had been increased from 12 to 24 selections, and from that point forward the CFD has conducted annual field tests, sending a group of scientists, engineers, nutritionists and dieticians into the field with warfighters in their environment.

“We have a control group, consisting of current MRE offerings, and a test group with new items that the warfighters haven’t seen before,” Whitsitt explains. “There are new entrée items and side items including candy and bakery-type items, a range of new options. We collect a tremendous amount of data and come back and look at the items as they were rated in the tests. A lot of the highest rated test items will replace lowest rated control items.”

The result is that today’s MRE is updated annually. Typically there are two to three new main entrée items and a whole host of side items that are introduced each year. Another product of the CPI program is the “flameless ration heater,” a device that allows warfighters to have a hot meal anywhere.

“That’s been a part of every MRE since 1995,” Whitsitt reports. “Basically it’s a magnesium and iron compound incorporated in a fabric pad, over-wrapped in a little plastic pouch. The warfighter tears the top of the pouch open, slides their entrée in and adds an ounce of water. The water sets off a chemical reaction which heats up their entrée. In about ten minutes it raises the temperature about 100 degrees.”

With the new millennium came Operations Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan and Iraqi Freedom in Iraq, and an acknowledgement that the paternalistic style of combat feeding that marked most of the 20th century was gone for good.

“We’ve gone from the father-knows-best mentality to a very customer-focused, customer-driven improvement program,” Jeremy Whitsitt stresses. “Today’s MRE is 100 percent warfighter-recommended, warfighter-tested, and warfighter-approved.”

In part two of our feature on the 30th anniversary of the MRE we’ll explore the contemporary efforts being made by the Combat Feeding Directorate to keep this ubiquitous military ration current.



The flameless ration heater in action. U.S. military troops based at the Kandahar International Airport in Afghanistan are only served hot meals every four days. The rest of the time they prepare Meals, Ready-to-Eat (MREs), like this Chicken Teriyaki being prepared in the Air Force morale tent on Feb. 18, 2002. U.S. Air Force photo by SSgt. Derrick C. Goode

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How get you forget the bully beef



Chuck Oldham (Editor)

8:38 PM December 2, 2011

Later in this series, we'll look at modern day rations of other nations' militaries. Bully beef, I think, is long gone for the Commonwealth troops, but I'm sure not forgotten by any means.

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