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## Ready To Eat! Thirty Years of the MRE – Part Four

*MRE entrees – the favorites and the failures*



Written by: [Jan Tegler](#) on December 21, 2011

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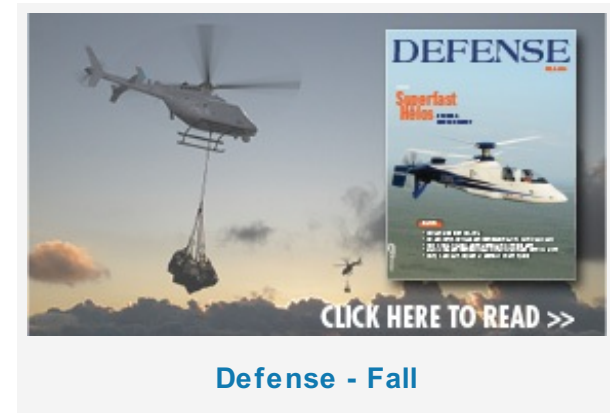
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Seabees attached to Naval Mobile Construction Battalion (NMCB) 3 sit in a fighting pit as they

Seabees attached to Naval Mobile Construction Battalion (NMCB) 3, sit in a fighting pit as they take a break to eat Meals, Ready-to-Eat (MREs). U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Carmichael Yepez



It turns out that the [three previous installments](#) in our series on the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the “Meal, Ready To Eat” were not enough to get our arms around this intriguing subject. Several questions remained, including queries about new and future developments for this critical ration, the relative popularity of different MRE meals and the fascinating practice of ration-swapping between U.S. armed forces and foreign militaries. In this installment, we examine some notable hits and misses for the MRE over its three-decade run.

*“Like any military ration, the MRE must cater to a wide range of palates. The task is a daunting one. As we’ve already detailed, the original eight MRE menus were not terribly well received, but one of the main entrées stood out as a favorite – spaghetti and meatballs. Widely acknowledged as perhaps the best entrée ever to grace the MRE menu roster, this classic is still a part of the ration today.”*

Other entrees have made the grade over time too, says Jeanneatte Kennedy, the [Combat Feeding Directorate’s \(CFD\)](#) senior food technologist.

“The spaghetti and meatballs is a well-known hit, but the chili, macaroni and ravioli have been popular too,” she says.


These entrees didn’t appear until after the CFD’s continuous product improvement program got under way in



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the mid-1990s. The chili and macaroni (said by some service members to be “better than mom’s mac and cheese”) debuted in 1996 in MRE XVI, followed the next year by the inclusion of beef ravioli in MRE XVII.

Not surprisingly, there have been some notoriously unpopular dishes in the menu selections as well. Among the early options, Chicken a la King, seems to have drawn considerable negative comment. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, no item seems to have been more uniformly reviled than the “Cheese and Vegetable Omelet.”

“One of the more recent misses would be the veggie omelet,” Kennedy admits. “We field tested it and it did well, but afterwards it just wasn’t popular.”

Asked how long this dish was on the menu, she laughs, “not long!” In fact, the veggie omelet seems to have worn out its welcome in less than four years, between 2005 and 2008. But how could it be that a dish that fared well in testing was a bust in the real world? It comes down to produceability, Kennedy explains.

“Say you’re producing 200 veggie omelet MRE meal samples for a field test,” she offers. What you get with 200 samples may differ from what you get when you go to full-scale production. You may not always get the same quality. Some of that has to do with the fact that we don’t have military specifications. We have performance requirements. The CFD doesn’t tell producers exactly how to make spaghetti and meatballs for instance.”



**A Soldier adds water to his Meal, Ready-to-Eat (MRE). More than 6,000 warfighters have contributed to the MRE improvement program since 1992. U.S. Army photo**

approximately 120 acres in Mobile, Alabama, on the Mobile River approximately...

“Basically we require that the spaghetti is a certain length, that it’s fortified, that the protein level is a certain amount and that the salt and fat levels are a certain amount,” Kennedy continues. “The sauce would be required to be red, of course, but other than that, producers create their own recipes. So perhaps one of the vendors might have a higher oregano flavor in their sauce. Another producer might have a slightly higher garlic flavor. That could account for it.”

As mentioned previously, feedback on current MREs gets to the CFD in a variety of ways, from field tests to installation visits by CFD personnel. Warfighters just returned from deployment also have a chance to interact directly with the CFD.



**Kathy-Lynn Evangelos, with the Combat Food Directorate, prepares her booth for soldiers. Here, soldiers could taste-test new Meal, Ready-to-Eat (MRE) menu items and take an interactive test. U.S. Army photo by Erika Wonn**

“We’ll have units come to visit Natick ([Soldier Research, Development & Engineering Center](#)),” Kennedy affirms. “They will visit all of the different functional areas we look at here – food, ballistics, helmets, uniforms, etc. When they’re here, they’re fresh from deployment. They haven’t even made it home yet. So we get immediate feedback on what’s working and what’s not working.”

But the CFD isn’t always the first stop for warfighters wishing to comment on the MRE. Today’s troops aren’t just specialists in the military arts, they’re savvy consumers. And when they have a complaint they

occasionally go right to the source,  
according to Kennedy.

“We do have a website, but they also tend to get in touch with the vendors because the vendor’s name and address is on each item,” says Kennedy. “They’ll send an email or a letter back to the manufacturer and then the manufacturer shares that information with us.”

“*In this age of social media, there are even more ways for those who presently consume MREs or who’ve experienced them in the past to share their thoughts about the ubiquitous ration. Apparently the MRE has been a topic of discussion on the U.S. Army’s own Facebook page. The service recently asked its followers to comment on their favorite and least liked MRE menu options.*

“A wide range of people replied,” Kennedy reveals. “You had active duty, family members and retired service people.”

She says two-thirds of the responses featured people's favorite MREs, while only a third included their dislikes. We took a look at the U.S. Army Facebook page and found over 600 replies to the question put this way – “What’s the worst thing you ever ate in an MRE?”

Some of the responses, taken from the Facebook page, were indeed positive, including these below.

“When I first joined in '99 they were all pretty equally ranked as my ‘least favorite.’ However, with the improvements over the years and changes to the menu they are all relatively palatable.” – Eric Baker

“Today’s MREs, it feels like they’re trying to make them taste good.” – Juan A. Castillo

But many more were less than enthusiastic. And so it goes.

..

“Chicken a la King back in the early '80s, you talk about runnin' to the bathroom! And this is when combat engineer units lived in the field for 30 days at a time, so no running water, yuk hahahaha” – Lance E. Pruitt

“The turkey in gravy MRE was one if the worst for me. Found bone fragments and a bit of feather in one. Same with the chicken loaf.” – Tom McGee



**A Soldier takes a moment to fill out a field evaluation form after eating a meal developed at Natick Soldier Systems Center. Soldier evaluation is crucial to the development of any new Meal, Ready-to-Eat item. U.S. Army photo by Dave Kamm, NSRDEC Photographer**

“*That Country Captain Chix (chicken) was horrible!!! At one point it was all we had left, so I went to open another box, my CO said, ‘So you’re not gonna bite the bullet’ ... I said, ‘Sir I’d rather take a bullet, LOL!’*” – Bruno Saraiva

“The worst MRE is the cheese and veggie omelet, thing has nasty texture, taste, and smell. I’ve met very few people who actually like it. It’s become more of a dare to try, rather than a meal in my unit.” – Kody Comtois

“Veggie cheese omelet! WTF were they thinking?...” – Tom Elder

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