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Ready To Eat! Thirty Years of the MRE – Part Three

Field-stripping, First Strike Rations, and the Humanitarian Daily Ration



Written by: [Jan Tegler](#) on December 15, 2011
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Specialists with the DoD Combat Feeding Program and with the Military Nutrition Division at the

U.S. Army Institute of Environmental Medicine developed a special light-weight, nutritional field ration known as a First Strike ration that warfighters can take into the field instead of MREs. U.S. Navy photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Jesse B. Awalt



Thirty years of history, including employment in at least five conflicts, are behind the “Meal, Ready-to-Eat.” So far we’ve outlined a few of the many challenges that the Combat Feeding Directorate (CFD) has faced in fielding this well-known combat ration.

“From the application of food processing and packaging science to ensure safe, shelf-stable rations that appeal to the varying tastes of warfighters, to engineering durable, flexible, lightweight packaging to lighten their load, the task of fielding a continuously viable MRE is a complicated one.”

Though the CFD has tackled most combat feeding obstacles successfully, one hurdle it has yet to fully overcome is a phenomenon known as “field stripping.”

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“That’s a problem we’ve been working for a long time and we’re still trying to overcome it,” CFD technology integration analyst Jeremy Whittsit acknowledges. “We understand why they do it. Basically soldiers will open up their MRE and take out items that they like or which are easy to carry and put them in their cargo pockets or wherever they have room on their person.”

“Sometimes they’re carrying 80 pounds on their backs already between ammo, body armor, devices and batteries,” he continues. “Often they just don’t have extra room or wish to carry the extra weight.”

Field stripping creates waste of course, costing the military and ultimately the taxpayer considerable money. But there’s a more critical problem. If warfighters field strip their MREs consistently they may experience nutritional deficiencies that can harm their performance on the battlefield.



The First Strike ration's shelf-stable pocket sandwich gives soldiers a portable ration that they can eat on the go. The sandwiches always score well in field-testing. DoD photo

“Troops going outside the wire at FOBs for extended periods or deploying to areas with no logistical support have only the rations they carry with them for sustenance. In areas with rugged terrain, stiff enemy opposition and unpredictable conditions like Afghanistan, dismounted warfighters burn calories by the thousands on a daily basis. Field stripping can shortchange a warfighter who needs every ounce of energy he can muster.”



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“Through education, we’re trying to help them understand that everything in the MRE is provided for a reason,” Whitsitt emphasizes. “But how do you overcome that field stripping so that troops are actually getting the proper nutrition but still make a ration that’s lightweight and easily portable with items that support an eat-on-the-move type environment? The only other course we have is to provide an alternative, and that’s the [First Strike ration](#).”



Engineman 1st Class Robert Chapman, assigned to the amphibious assault ship USS Nassau (LHA 4), gives Meals Ready-to-Eat (MREs) to a Galveston resident during a food convoy to various neighborhoods to supply people affected by Hurricane Ike with basic items. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, there were complaints that refugees gained weight while being fed with MREs. U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Kenneth R. Hendrix

The First Strike ration, first fielded in 2008, was developed to meet warfighters’ needs (particularly those of elite or special operations forces) head-on, providing them with a lightweight, low volume ration easy to carry and eat out of hand to support dismounted patrol type operations. It’s packaged as a one-per-day ration, according to Whitsitt.

“Everything one soldier needs for one day’s rations is in the packet,” he explains. “It provides about 3,000 calories in all the proper percentages of fats, proteins and carbohydrates. Many of the items in it are similar to those in the MRE, but the First Strike ration is separate. It reduces the weight and volume by about 50 percent. It’s been on the battlefield since 2008 and has been a tremendous hit.”

“An MRE item that wasn’t a hit is the source of a myth no one seems to be able to get to the bottom of – “the Charms curse.” It stems from the inclusion of Charms candies in the MRE in the 1980s. Speculation is that the “curse” arose in the 1990s, perhaps during Operations Desert Storm/Desert Shield. It’s one of the bizarre, often ridiculous side effects of military life and combat.

“From what we’ve been able to learn it’s simply one of those urban legends,” Jeremy Whitsitt says. “The myth goes that if you eat the Charms you’ll have bad luck with whatever kind of operations you’re taking on. No one seems to know the origin of it. It just seems to have been repeated over the years by leaders to their troops. I can tell you that the Charms were actually removed from the MRE in 2007.”

Though the era of the Charms curse may have passed, that doesn’t mean that new myths about the ubiquitous MRE don’t pop up with regularity.

“Just the other day a guy from [Stars & Stripes Magazine](#) wrote in asking us if it was true that Tabasco sauce is only included in the MREs to kill germs on the entrees,” Whitsitt laughs. “That was a new one to me. But those are the types of things that propagate out there in the field.”

Criticism of the MRE also propagates, occasionally reaching beyond the battlefield. In the wake of Hurricanes



A Marine assigned to Battalion Landing Team, 3rd Battalion, 2nd Marine regiment hands Humanitarian Daily Rations, designed specifically for disaster relief, at an aid distribution site in Leogane, Haiti. U.S. Marine Corps photo by Cpl. Bobbie A. Curtis

Katrina (2005) and Ike (2008) the National Guard provided MREs to refugees for the storms as an emergency ration. Never meant to be consumed by civilians, the MRE was figuratively roasted.

“There were a lot of reports at the time of the refugees gaining weight from eating the ration and the MRE got some bad press,” Whitsitt recalls. “But everything was taken out of context. The people who had been displaced didn’t have much to do but wait in the aftermath of the hurricane and if they were eating three MREs a day – that’s 3,600 calories. They weren’t expending anywhere near the energy to burn that many calories, so they gained weight. A warfighter in Afghanistan will burn that many calories daily and often more.”

“*Experience with the MRE in disaster relief operations such as these led directly to the creation of the MRE’s cousin, the Humanitarian Daily Ration (HDR). Designed specifically for disaster relief, the HDR was used following the 2010 Haitian earthquake. However, the entire supply of HDRs was exhausted within the first three or four days after the quake. So the MRE was called upon to take its place to support the victims of the disaster.*

Though it may not always have been popular with American warfighters, the MRE continues to be essential to our armed forces’ operations. And as Jeremy Whitsitt reports, it can’t be all bad if folks in other militaries have a hankering for it.

“We operate in coalition and joint environments these days and I know that there’s a lot of sharing of rations between militaries,” he says. “We’ve heard stories of American troops eating German rations and French rations and vice versa. They’re just trying something different. We can certainly learn from other countries and they can learn from us.”

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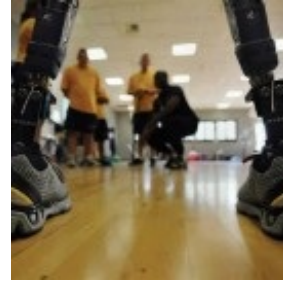
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