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## Ready to Eat! Thirty Years of the MRE – Part Five

*Wondering what the other guys eat*



Written by: [Jan Tegler](#) on December 28, 2011

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U.S. Navy Corpsman HM3 Christian Mewes with 2nd Pltn., Charlie Company, Battalion Landing Team 1/1, 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) shows an American Meal, Ready-to-Eat (MRE) to German soldiers in Djibouti, Africa July 11, 2011. U.S. Marine Corps photo by Lance Cpl Massimo

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In part five of our series on the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the MRE we come to one of the most intriguing aspects of this very American ration – how it fits into the tapestry of international military combat rations.

*“Food speaks volumes about societies. Inextricably linked to national identity, it’s a fundamental cultural marker. So when American warfighters or Australian, Italian or French troopers thousands of miles away from home open up an MRE, Combat Ration Pack, Razione Viveri Speciale da Combattimento or Ration de Combat Individuelle Rechauffable, they are connecting, however briefly, directly with their homeland.*”

That’s just one of the morale-boosting effects of food during periods of conflict, but it’s an important psychological ingredient in the MRE, says Joe Zanchi, a Logistics Management Specialist with the Combat Rations Team at the [Combat Feeding Directorate \(CFD\)](#).

“It’s an extremely important aspect of combat feeding that is sometimes overlooked,” he says. “Certain foods can be a taste of home. For instance, we have a lot of commercial items that are over-wrapped that find their way into the MRE. There’s value in that, in the branding and recognition of a suitable item in a combat ration. Oftentimes these



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items have to be further protected in special packaging, but they can be very meaningful.”

That “taste of home” is also a tempting part of foreign militaries’ individual combat rations. It’s well acknowledged that American and coalition warfighters serving in Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom have indulged their interest in trying something different.



**Name-brand products that are included in Meals, Ready-to-Eat (MREs) provide a taste of home that's highly valued by deployed warfighters. U.S. Army photo by Todd Lopez**



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“*When you put troops together there’s going to be trading of various rations,” Zanchi observes. “There is that natural curiosity about what’s contained in other nation’s rations. If you’ve been eating the same thing over and over, even if you think of it favorably, something new or different is generally attractive. You hear things anecdotally about positive reactions to some of the things that are in other rations.”*

Various sources have also reported that there is an exchange rate for MREs and other rations based on their desirability. Among those sources is [Ashley Gilbertson](#), a photojournalist renowned for his work in Iraq from 2002 to 2008.



**A German Army recruit warming up his Einmannpackung (EPA) during a training mission. German Army photo**

In a recent photo-series, “[Military Rations of Troops in Afghanistan](#)” wherein Gilbertson visually documents the MRE and many other contemporary military rations, the war photographer claims: “Early in the war in Afghanistan, among the international troops who mingle at Bagram Air Base, a single French combat ration (cassoulet, perhaps, with deer pâté and nougat) could be traded for at least five American Meals Ready to Eat, better known as M.R.E.’s.

“Recently though, the barter values have changed.

“A fellow journalist who just got back from an embed with the French told me that today they look forward to visiting the Americans for a meal. American rations — hamburgers, chili, peanut butter, candy — they say, are ‘fun.’”

Joe Zanchi and the CFD are aware of the “horse-trading” that goes on, but he doesn’t think there is any formalized exchange rate.

“I think it depends on what people have been eating, how long they’ve been eating it, what their deployment is and what’s available,” he says. “I think people kind of come to

an exchange rate depending on all of that. There is definitely interest in trying something different.”

*“Items included in the ration packs of foreign militaries have frequently been the source of speculation. It’s hard to confirm just what is included in the latest combat rations for some nations because of their security policies, but rumors of French wine and German beer being integral to the MRE-equivalents for those nations appear outdated.”*

However, Zanchi believes the Italians still cling to one spirit. “I think one of the Italian rations actually has a liqueur in it.”

Based on research, we can confirm that at least as recently as 2007 the Razione Viveri Speciale da Combattimento incorporated a “Cordiale/bevanda alcolica” described as a “brandy-like” liqueur. Australian combat ration packs continue to feature “Vegemite,” the vegetable/spice sandwich spread so popular with Aussie’s and so inexplicable to the rest of us. Meanwhile the German Einmannpackung or EPa offers (as recently as we can tell) “Cevapcicci,” basically Yugoslavian sausages.

“All of the rations internationally are designed around specific mission profiles and operational requirements for the type of operations and or environmental conditions under which they’re working,” Zanchi notes. “And they’re designed for the national composition of those troops and



**An Italian Army corporal distributes rations to the members of Task Force Elephant, Italian Heavy Engineers who were part of the NATO Disaster Relief Team in Pakistan, after the convoy passed the halfway mark to Arja in the Himalayan Mountains on Dec. 12, 2005. Task Force Elephant was part of NATO Disaster Relief Team in Pakistan. Italian military rations have long been rumored to contain a liqueur that is highly valued. NATO photo**

their tastes.”

“This brings up two important points regarding the MRE and its foreign counterparts. First, given the comparative resources of the U.S. military, the MRE is perhaps the most advanced individual combat ration but, as Zanchi observes, that is partially due to the wide range of challenges our armed forces take on.

“I would say that the U.S. is probably at the forefront of combat feeding,” he agrees. “In my experiences with some of the NATO countries we are certainly advanced. But in fairness to those countries, they all don’t necessarily have the same commitments or share the same missions that the U.S. does. Nor do they have the same requirements for shelf stability, for example. The countries that share similar operational capabilities as the U.S. – the Canadians, the U.K., the Australians – they’ve done a good job in advancing their programs.”

Zanchi says that these countries are now, like the U.S., much more responsive to the tastes and preferences of their warfighters and that they vary their menus and incorporate the latest food processing and packaging technologies. He also adds that one of the strengths of the MRE is its suitability for our diverse population.

“You can imagine the challenges. That illustrates how interesting the American MRE is. We’ve got a diverse ethnic population and that’s apparent in our armed forces. The CFD has taken a challenge and made it into a very successful strength. It’s a considerable feat.”

The challenge of standardizing an international ration was the focus of a series of meetings conducted by NATO from 2007 through 2010. Combat feeding experts came together from the NATO nations to discuss the feasibility of developing a standardized individual combat ration to support the quick-reaction coalition known as the NATO Response Force. Conclusions resulting from the meetings and some small scale studies were mixed.

“I wouldn’t say it’s beyond the realm of possibility,” Joe Zanchi opines. “It just crosses so many different areas, from national identity and preferences to technological and production

capabilities and more. We can always learn from other nations though, and include the best of what's out there in the MRE.”

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