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RAYMOND A. BARNARD/JRTC PHOTOGRAPHER

Kosher dining

Two soldiers from Warrior Brigade's 142nd Corps Support Battalion sample new kosher Meals-Ready-To-Eat during a field training exercise Saturday. A research and development team visited here to talk with them and get soldiers' reactions to the new products. Among the new items are "Hooah" bars, garlic bagel chips, beef steaks, pork chops, cheese tortellini and more. For the story and more photos, please see pages 10-11 of today's Guardian.

Field cookin'

Army seeks reactions of 142nd CSB soldiers to new MRE 'flavors'

By Spec. KIMBERLY POOLE

11th Public Affairs Detachment

Twelve food-industry executives visited the Warrior Brigade's 142nd Corps Support Battalion field site Saturday to see soldiers' reactions to a new generation of ready-to-eat meals.

The men and women are assisting the Army research and development team that is refining MREs and T-rations. Chow time in the field will take on some different flavors if their plans pass soldiers' taste tests and other criteria.

"The selection [of entrees] has increased from 16 to 18 entrees and is projected to be 24 next year," according to Keith Schroeder, the science advisor assigned to Fort Polk from Army Materiel Command.

Some flavors to look for include pork chops, beef steaks, cheese tortellini (vegetarian), pasta with vegetables, chicken with noodles, florentine lasagna, chicken and black beans, vegetable stew and deli-style sandwiches.

The team is also studying transportation requirements, packaging, nutrition and commercial marketability in deciding which meals become part of a soldier's diet.

Ease in transporting and disposing of MREs and T-rations are important considerations. Packaging must be lightweight, so the team is researching the benefits of plastic to replace metal T-ration containers.

The new MRE package is easier to open, yet can sustain pressure during transport and delivery.

Plastic is also more disposable. Further lab tests will show whether or not it is durable under combat conditions and if it will lengthen the shelf life of the meals.

If the packaging is "combat appropriate," according to Lonnie Thompson, president of So-Pak-Co and a member of the R and D team, the polymetric "P-tray" has ideal qualities for commercial use as well.

One possibility is the "home replacement meal," which would simplify meal preparation much like the frozen food industry. This potential commercial use would enable the manufacturer to make products for industrial and Department of Defense use simultaneously.

The products are currently undergoing lab testing for nutritional content, freshness and safety. These factors are important in determining their "combat appropriateness."

Nutritional requirements are rigid, in fact. Thompson was surprised to find soldiers trading the contents of their MREs.

"This throws off the nutritional content considerably," he said.

Freshness is another issue, because the Army must store quantities of the meals for extended periods.

"The current shelf life of MREs is 18 months ...

the target is 36 months," said Thompson. The introduction of P-trays and results from lab testing will determine whether or not that target can be met.

Packaging is an essential safety issue. The team is tasked with reducing both day- and night-time visibility of the packaging materials.

Finally, the new MREs will be tested in field

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Pvt. 2 Hakeem Shipley, 142nd Corps Support Battalion administration clerk, spoons in some cheese tortellini. The tortellini meal is one of several proposed new MRE selections.

MRE

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environments, much like they were tested here Saturday.

"The entire process will take about one year," said Thompson. "It's like building a rocket ship ... first you crawl, then you walk, then you run ..." he said.

The process has been going on for about six months and is nearing the get-up-and-go stage, he said.

Getting feedback from soldiers was the reason for the team's visit last weekend.

"The fastest way to learn is straight from the horse's mouth. This reduces 'sugar-coating' as opinions get passed up through the chain," Thompson said. "The troops were open and sincere about their comments and suggestions. We have some things to take back to the committee."

Team members heard comments on everything from soldiers' favorite candy to what condiments are used most. During their visit with the 142nd CSB, two of the R&D scientists got into a discussion with several soldiers about the need for extra salt to be packaged in MREs. These soldiers said MRE food is salty enough, and that most of the little salt packs are thrown out.

The scientists took note of this issue, along with several others. For instance, the corned beef hash entree is one of the meals scheduled to be discontinued. But given the input from the 142nd CSB, the team may suggest that it stay "on the menu."

"This is what we are here for," Thompson said, "to find out what the soldiers think."

Soldiers can look forward to new items like granola bars, raisins and peanuts in some meals, but may want to consider trading the entire meal rather than bits and pieces to assure they are getting the proper intake of vitamins and minerals, especially when they will be eating MREs for an extended period of time.

Appropriately enough for the Army, a "Hooah Bar" may be included in the new MREs. The nutritious booster bar comes in four flavors — apple cinnamon, chocolate, peanut butter and raspberry. At any rate, the 142nd CSB soldiers are "hooah!" over it.

Soldiers say their piece ...

Soldiers of 142nd Corps Support Battalion were among the first to try the Army's new MRE entrees. Here's what some of them had to say...

"The pasta with vegetables is excellent. I like the iced-tea mix and the peanuts that came with the meal."

Cpl. MARK J. CZECHOWSKI
Supply sergeant, Headquarters,
Headquarters Detachment

"The cheese tortellini was pretty good. There was no candy in there, but it was alright."

Pvt. JEFF TERRY
Supply specialist / armorer, HHD

"I also had the cheese tortellini. It was good...I rank it right up there with the ham slice."

Spec. FIDENCIO JACKSON
Mechanic, HHD

"I like the new meal. I had the cheese tortellini. It is better than some things I've bought in a can."

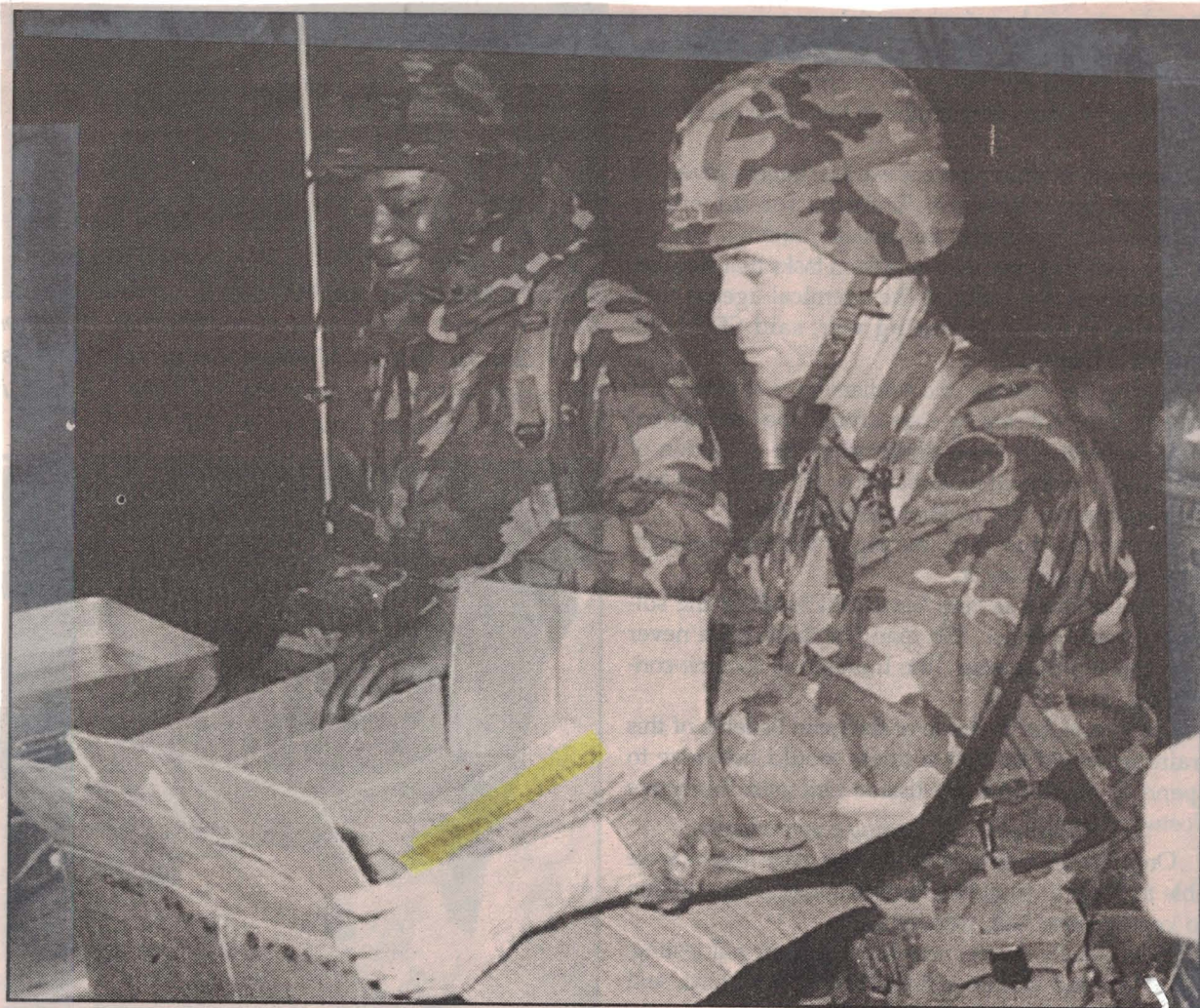
Sgt. TIM LAWSON
Nuclear-biological-chemical specialist
HHD



First lieutenants Ken Fregia (left), 142nd CSB adjutant, and Dave Connelly, battalion transportation office, discuss features of the new MREs with Mary Ann Jackson, president of the My Own Meal company. Jackson is part of the visiting group of executives getting soldiers' opinions of the meals.



MSgt. Timothy Starling, transportation NCOIC for the 142nd CSB, enjoys one of the new MRE entrees.



Spec. Gerald Townsend (right), food service specialist at the Guardian Dining Facility, and Spec. LaBell Finch, 229th Field Service Command, open a box of accessory packets. The packets contain cereal, bagel chips, drink mix, condiments and more.