

MREs:

Not just for breakfast anymore!

The pocket barbecue chicken sandwich is now available in Meals Ready to Eat. Jerry Darsch, from the Sustainability Directorate of the Army Natick Research, Development and Engineering Center, said with a laugh, "MREs are not just for breakfast anymore."

Adding, "It's a lot different from what we sent to Desert Storm" when there were 12 menus available. "Letters from the field were not flattering" when soldiers were given a chance to express themselves on the food they ate in the field back then.

Now, in addition to the pocket barbecue sandwich developed by Natick with food giants, Sara Lee and Nabisco, there are 23 offerings. This includes two vegetarian meals, as well as kosher and halal meals, in the 26 million MREs produced annually. The Army receives 85 percent of that.

The vegetarian, kosher and halal offerings have drawn wide interest because they have been used in various humanitarian relief operations. But they were primarily designed for members of the United States armed forces.

"Soldiers are more nutritionally conscious and they also like ethnic food," Darsch added in explaining why the Army is constantly experimenting with its food. The kosher and halal menus are more expensive and have less shelf life than others. MREs are usually have shelf lives of

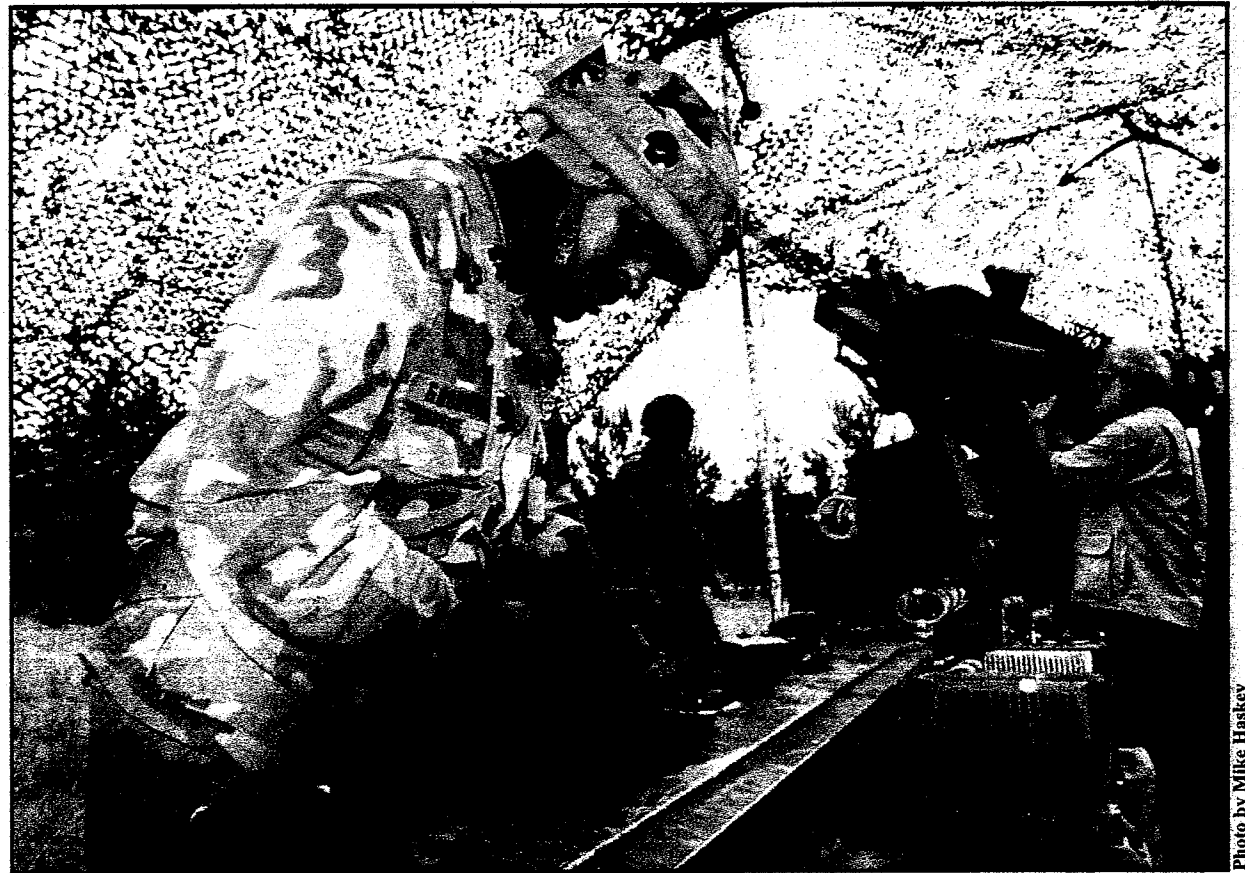


Photo by Mike Haskey

Computerizing artillery. Sgt. Maurice Goodwin uses digital technology to increase rapidity and accuracy of his unit's 155mm howitzer in the Rapid Force Projection Initiative at Fort Benning.

from three to five years; the specially-prepared MREs have shelf lives of about a year.

"But our customers told us they needed this and so we worked on... Demographics have become the driving force." An MRE is designed to meet one-third of the daily military nutritional allowance. That means it is high calorie. "For more sedentary troops or civilians, they wouldn't need as many calories. But a soldier in the field, in combat wouldn't need a supplement."

Darsch said the Army is extremely interested in partnering with the food industry in developing new products. In addition to Nabisco and Sara Lee, who see this

kind of pocket sandwich as something for vending machines, Natick is working with McDonalds in special packaging to prevent outbreaks of e-coli bacteria.

Maj. Gen. Norman E. Williams, deputy chief of staff for operations and logistics for the Army Materiel Command, said packaging is extremely important now – to handle such things as air drops of MREs in Bosnia to civilians and in the future. The Army practices a policy of "what you go in with you go out with."

The Army is particularly interested in food packaging that is biodegradable

and/or it can be used for fuel. Darsch was particularly proud of the awards the Army has received from industry associations in its food packaging. As for new menu items, Darsch said, "We're not going to spend money to develop a Frito-Lay chip, but we are interested in leveraging with industry where we can to develop new offerings." The Army buys from industry corn chips, peanut bars, etc., and packages them in the MRE.

In research and development right now are country captain chicken, turkey tetrazzini and raspberry applesauce. What will be leaving in 2000 will be chicken stew and ham slice meals.