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**Alan Bennett**, a food technologist in Natick, Mass., prepares samples of Meals Ready to Eat for his co-workers to sample and rate.

## GIs dine above and beyond era of chipped beef on toast

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CHICAGO TRIBUNE

NATICK, Mass. — The greatest advances to come out of the U.S. Army Soldier Systems Center over the past few years may not be in the area of uniforms, equipment or technology.

It may very well be what people at Natick Labs term “mobility-enhancing ration components.”

To civilians, pocket sandwiches.

Among the items researched and developed at Natick is food, everything from MREs (Meals Ready to Eat) to nutrition bars and energy drinks. In the past 10 years, Natick has come up with more than 150 new menu items — a selection of pocket sandwiches, among them — to the delight of soldiers in the field.

U.S. troops in Iraq reportedly said they enjoyed the expanded menu. There’s no formal data yet, said Julie Edwards, a food technologist for the Individual Combat Ration Team at Natick. But anecdotally, they’re getting high grades, and with good reason.

No longer do troops have to deal with entrees such as the smoky-franks meal — dubbed “the four fingers of death” by those who had to eat them — or the dreaded ham slice. They’ve been replaced with things such as pot roast with vegetables, Oriental chicken with Thai sauce, beef steak with mushroom gravy, jambalaya, pork chow mein and vegetable manicotti.

There’s more cheese and less peanut butter, a response to what soldiers are requesting. There are two dozen meals, double what was offered just eight years ago.

The entrees are the centerpiece of the MREs, which have a three-year shelf life, offer roughly 1,300 calories and weigh a pound and a half. In addition, each MRE includes a starch, side items (peanut butter, candy, cookies, applesauce, jalapeño cheese spread, etc.), an accessory packet (some combination of coffee, tea, gum, matches, sugar, salt, cayenne, hot sauce, toilet tissues/towelettes, etc.), a plastic utensil and a high-carb drink mix.

Dietary preferences are taken into consideration in menu planning. Vegetarian meals were introduced in 1998 and include pasta and vegetable, cheese tortellini and bean-and-rice burrito entrees.

There are also 10 kosher (Chicken Mediterranean, beef stew) and 10 halal (Old World Stew, Florentine lasagna) entrees as well.

And the meals are hot. The MREs, which cost \$6.50 each, include a plastic bag with a small amount of iron and magnesium oxide at the bottom. A soldier adds a little water to start a chemical reaction, then slides the sealed entree into the plastic bag. After a 10-minute wait and a lot of bubbling and hissing, breakfast, lunch or dinner is served.