

Globe West

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NATICK

Marching new meals into service

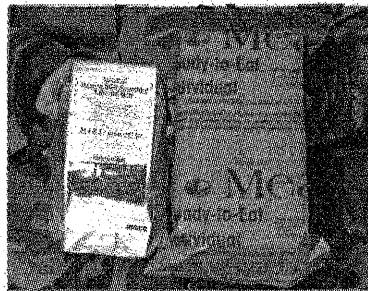
By Erica Noonan

GLOBE STAFF

It may be the world's most challenging cooking project: Feeding millions of servicemen and women (and sometimes their prisoners) with vastly different tastes and religious requirements, and scattered in outposts across the globe.

The meals created at the US Army Soldier Systems Center in Natick must withstand three years of storage at 80 degrees, but be light enough to be hauled across deserts and rain forests. Since the meals are the only food troops may get for weeks at a time, they have to be nutritionally complete. And the hard part? They have

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A Compressed Meal (left), a lighter upgrade from the Meal Ready-to-Eat, is among the changes being cooked up by the Combat Feeding Directorate in Natick.

IN

Jalapeno cheese spread
Brownie with Butterfinger chips
Mexican macaroni and cheese
Marshmallow treats
Cappuccino, hot cocoa, coffee filter bags

OUT

Corned beef hash
Chocolate pudding
Instant mashed potatoes
Smoky franks
Oatmeal cookies
Ground coffee

The next generation of military meals

► RATIONS

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to taste good.

The center's Combat Feeding Directorate has been designing war food since 1963. Virtually all of the field rations eaten by members of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Coast Guard were created in labs and test kitchens in blue-paneled Building 36 off Kansas Street in Natick.

It's a heady time for the program with several innovations in the works, including meals with more ethnic components; spice mixtures devised by New Orleans celebrity chef Paul Prudhomme; and more use of brand-name snacks such as M&M'S, Tootsie Rolls, and Skittles.

Also under development is a tastier dehydrated Compressed Meal that is more than one-third smaller than the traditional, 3-pound, brown-foil encased Meal Ready-to-Eat consumed by fighters since the early 1980s.

MREs were considered a major culinary step up from the canned and powdered C-rations used in World War II and Vietnam. But the chow — which can be eaten straight from its pouches and usually come with crackers, dried fruit, and a dessert — quickly earned the unflattering nickname Meals Rejected by Everybody.

The compressed meal concept is being developed in concert with a lightweight, breadbox-size unit that can simultaneously heat and cool 16-ounce jugs of water. This means troops will have a lot less equipment to haul on their backs, or pack into their armored vehicle or their submarine.

"Weight is a major issue for soldiers. They don't want to carry an ounce more than they have to," said center spokesman Jerry Whittaker. Volume also matters, he said. Soldiers patrolling in cramped trucks and tanks must often field strip their bulky MREs, choosing which parts of the meal to keep in their backpacks and what gets stored on the roof of the vehicle. It's not uncommon for MREs to be stolen by hungry civilians in war-torn neighborhoods, Whittaker said.



Religious food preferences are getting new priority in the Army. A private company prepares kosher (such as the meal above) and halal rations by following strict guidelines.

The Natick researchers also are focusing on flavor, religious preferences, and packaging. The latest trend in combat food is familiarity and comfort, they said.

For decades, the Army inserted popular brands of cookies and crackers in ugly vinyl sleeves to keep them preserved. Now the military is figuring out ways to keep the commercial packaging intact because the familiarity boosts morale, Whittaker said. "Before, when we covered them up, it was an 'Oh, just more Army food' reaction."

A demand for more spices and flavors also has driven the program's research and development. A tiny bottle of McIlhenny Tabasco sauce now comes standard in many meals.

But a taste for hot sauce has to be weighed against regional preferences for blandness, said Joel McCassie, a scientist with the di-

rectorate's Group Ration Team.

Natick scientists took a version of shrimp jambalaya for a taste test among Marines at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. "The ones from Louisiana said 'Not hot enough for me,' and the ones from Maine said 'Too hot for me,'" McCassie said.

Researchers also know that the name of a dish can be a deal-breaker for soldiers.

For example, Natick food scientists had high hopes for a prototype of "dirty rice and beans," which troops had clamored for and local testers rated as quite tasty. But when it was offered to a panel of soldiers a few years ago, it got low marks. So scientists tried again, serving it up with a new name, Cajun rice and beans. The second time around it got rave reviews and is scheduled for release within a year, Whittaker said.

Religious food preferences are

also getting new priority. For the past several years the Army has been contracting with a private company to manufacture Jewish kosher and Muslim halal rations, which are prepared following strict religious guidelines. The meals were designed for US troops, but are also served to Muslim prisoners held at Guantanamo Bay and in Afghanistan and Iraq.

McCassie said he'd like to see the combat program bring even more brand-name foods into field rations, and find more innovative ways to manufacture healthy, delicious food for men and women at war.

"If I could do anything for the soldiers, a good, charbroiled steak would be nice," he said. "Or maybe if everyone could get a taste of their mom's homemade food."

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