2. WHEN HOME COMES TO WAR. AND VICE VERSA.

Jesse Connuck

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The first Meals, Ready to Eat (MREs) in the 1980s were little different from the Meals, Combat, Individual (MCI) that preceded them. While the technological shift from tin cans to soft plastic packaging was dramatic, the potential of that technology had yet to be realized, and though easier to carry, soldiers were left eating pretty much the same food that they had for decades.

Big changes didn't arrive until the First Gulf War, and they were not just the product of new food preservation techniques. In previous wars, the struggle to get enough food to the front unspoiled meant that dietary problems were often attributed to either rotten food or the shortage of it. With the ease of transporting MREs, it soon became apparent that delivery was not the issue. The food itself, though, was inadequate to keep soldiers in the peak physical condition that was necessary– not because the food wasn't nutritious, but because the soldiers simply had no interest in eating it.

Some quick fixes were soon made: a palatable and heat resistant chocolate bar was invented, and flameless ration heaters were added to every meal[1]. But it still wasn't enough. After the completion of Operation Desert Storm, Colin Powell, who was then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, summoned the director of combat feeding to his office, held up an MRE, and offered a simple directive: "Fix it."[2]

Here are some basic technical details: An MRE contains a single meal, with a main course, dessert, a variety of sides, beverage powder and eating utensils, all in a 1.5 lb durable, tan-coloured plastic bag. After the First Gulf War, flameless ration heaters were made a permanent addition, ensuring that soldiers always had the option of hot food. Each meal contains approximately 1300 calories, with a particular distribution of micronutrients and macronutrients especially tailored to suit the nutritional demands of a soldier. Each item is individually wrapped in special lightweight packaging and has a minimum shelf life of three years at 80°F (27°C) and six months at 100°F (38°C). Additionally, the packages

are capable of surviving 100 feet free drops and extreme temperature swings, all without any alteration to content or quality.[3] On top of all that, the soldiers actually have to want to eat them.

The nutritional value of an MRE is calibrated to maximize the average soldier's physical and cognitive abilities. The problem is that they actually have to eat the MRE to receive that nutrition, which means the less appealing the meals are, the less fit the soldiers are. The trick is to coerce soldiers into eating the whole thing, and thus receive whatever vitamins, minerals and macronutrients are necessary to consistently perform at their highest capacity.

Palatability was central to the massive changes that the MREs underwent throughout the 1990s. In addition to making permanent the changes enacted during Operation Desert Storm, a Joint Services MRE Forum was established to conduct an annual review with soldier feedback, and a policy of "continuous product improvement" was officially put in place.[4] New guidelines replaced the two least popular main courses each year, in addition to the re-evaluation of side dishes and meal supplements to introduce more options and remove unpopular ones at the same time.

Options began to expand as well. The military began producing vegetarian, kosher, and halal MREs in 1994 to support an increasingly diverse range of recruits. In 1996, the number of menu options expanded from twelve to sixteen, with the range increasing to twenty in 1997 and twenty-four in 1998. The sum total of these efforts made the military's food service more responsive to the desires of soldiers, out of the belief that it would increase food consumption, and thus, increase capacity and enhance performance on the field.

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While the quantitative changes make clear the military's initiative, the qualitative changes show a more interesting picture. The initial menu options for MREs were exactly what you imagine American army food to be like. Choices were all of the meat and potatoes variety: ham and chicken loaf, diced turkey with gravy, ham slice, and beef stew, each generally paired with crackers and either peanut butter, cheese spread, or jelly.

Once the military began taking soldiers' preferences into account, menus rapidly expanded to include options like cheese tortellini, chicken pesto pasta, sloppy joes and beef chili. Supplementary items diversified to toaster pastries, trail mix, potato cheddar soup and cheese-filled pretzels. As 3900 calories are more than what most soldiers actually need to perform at maximum capacity, they're free to skip certain items without losing the nutrition – but in any case, they are encouraged to trade amongst themselves to make sure everyone gets what they want.

The meals also began to incorporate a much wider cultural spectrum: while the choices previously available catered mostly to the cuisine of the American Northeast and Midwest, new meal components were more representative of the American South and Southwest, as well as ethnic cuisines common to immigrant populations. Additions like beef teriyaki, Thai chicken, Jamaican-spiced pork, and Cajun rice with beans and sausage also reflected the growing diversity of the American armed forces—while mirroring the growing diversity of cuisine consumed by people across the country.

Part of the change was technological. While in the early 1980s few foods could be adequately preserved in the plastic packaging, new techniques have dramatically widened and continue to widen the range of food items that can be preserved up to standard. Soldier requests not only drive the menu selection, but also military research. Pizza has been the top requested item since the surveys began, and after years of research the first prototypes for a shelf-stable pizza began field-testing in August 2014.

Rather than sitting in a trench eating cold chicken loaf out of a can, soldiers can now be sitting in a combat zone,

thousands of miles from home, digging into a steaming plate of chicken fajitas. While food historically provided a clear reminder to soldiers that they were at war, and not at home, meals now provide continuity between the two. Whether sitting at the dining room table or a theater of war, lasagna is never very far away.

It would be easy to exaggerate the similarity here, after all, most MREs are still consumed out of the plastic bags that they come in, but the rhetoric around them shows that the comparison isn't so far-fetched. One solider described the meals as "trying to bring a piece of home to you," and another saw them as "a way for the upper echelons to relieve some stress for the lower guys, for the grunts, saying, here's a bit of home, all of you guys are away from home."

Technology has enabled the U.S. military to package the taste of home and ship it to wherever the war may be. It certainly helps that packaged food has become a more commonplace part of the American diet. While the military is reluctant to provide exact numbers, approximately 40% of MRE components are now off-the-shelf items readily available at grocery stores across America. While it might be shocking to realize that so many of these foods are shelf stable for three years, it is certainly not surprising. Even for soldiers on the front lines, a meal from the supermarket is just waiting to be heated up. In addition to soldiers and

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weapons, the military now also deploys chicken with dumplings and creole rice.

While the question of why is probably impossible to answer without a very high level of security clearance, the implications are much easier to consider. Though the effort is to make war more like home, the result is also making home more like the battlefield. The blending of the two is certainly uncanny. In what kind of world do war and peace look the same? They are certainly not yet identical; very few civilians in the U.S. live with the daily fear of landmines and ambush, but the image of a group of soldiers sitting down for pizza and lasagna doesn't make war seem quite as exotic as an image of soldiers cooking slabs of unidentified meat in their helmets over a campfire.

In *Domesticity at War* Beatriz Colomina explores the many ways that advances in military technology shaped the home front in World War II. But while the efficiency of military systems may provide certain immediate benefits in the civilian sphere (a fact uncanny in itself), the virtues the domestic world can offer to life at war are less obvious. It can bring comfort, but is a comfortable war a more desirable one? Is it wrong to provide solace to soldiers who have put their lives on the line? Either way, as a commander stationed in Afghanistan said of the food on his tour in 2009 – 2010, "It's really gotten to an extreme, where sometimes I… scratched my head, thinking that people are forgetting that they're in the war zone."

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NOTES:

1. Gerald A. Darsch and Philip Brandler, "Evolution of Rations: The Pursuit of Universal Acceptance," in Bernadette M. Marriott, ed, Not Eating Enough: Overcoming Underconsumption of Military Operational Rations (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 1995), 113-114.

2. Donna Miles, "Combat Rations Change to Reflect Troops' Palates," *Department of Defense News*, January 24, 2012.

3. U.S. Army RDECOM, *Operational Rations of the Department of Defense*, 9th Edition. (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, August 2012), 5, 15.

4. U.S. Army, *Operational Rations Manual*,8.

Jesse *Connuck* is a researcher living and working in London, United Kingdom.

[1] Combat Feeding Directorate, Natick Soldier Research Development and Engineering Center
[2 -3] Photograph by Jesse Connuck