

## Feeding the Troops



Almost 40 years ago I was sent to Viet Nam to fight a war that somebody decided needed to be fought.

No matter where you are or what conditions are around you, you still have to eat. Eating in the armed forces is always an experience all of its own, but eating out in the field creates special issues and is a real experience like no other.

Normally our field rations were C-RATS. The food items in C-rations were all canned. The main course, the crackers and even desserts were packaged in cans.

The cans were opened with a little can opener that we called a P38. These rations were delivered about every 3-5 days by helicopter. They dropped a sling full of cases at a time, and then these were divided up among the troops. There was always a rush to pick up a case. At first I didn't understand this because everybody was going to get his fair share anyway. After a few meals of canned ham and eggs that smelled like sulfur, as soon as you made that first punch with your P38, can opener, you knew there was a catch. It turns out that all of the packages had code numbers on them and after a while, survival instincts make you remember which codes had "beans'n weenies", pound cake, (hurrah) peaches, or something at least edible, if not desirable. Of course, the seasoned troops already knew the codes and soon, I did too. It is amazing how fast and keen survival skills like eating develop.

Occasionally we would even try to spice up our food by seasoning it with little peppers that we picked off of bushes. One time one of the guys decided to try the root of a plant that the Vietnamese always seemed to have drying around their hooches. What he didn't know is that the root is

extremely hot and somewhat poisonous when it is green. He was in such bad shape that he had to be med-evac'ed out for treatment. We would also try to eat the bananas that grew in the area. These would really pucker up your mouth, if eaten as picked off of the trees. They had to be aged in the dark after being picked, in order to be sweet. Sometimes, we could find some aged ones in a hooch that were good to eat, but we left the ones on the trees alone.

Once in a while we would hook up with troops from other countries and one of the rituals we would go through at these times would be to exchange rations. The Koreans had the best, dried noodle rations that could be mixed with water and heated in a canteen cup over a heat tab. These actually tasted like food. The other thing we discovered was that the Australians had MRE'S (Meals Ready to Eat) before we did. These were great compared to the World War two C rations that we normally ate. I had the distinct feeling that the army was probably sending some good rations over to Nam but the people in the rear (REMFS) probably scarfed up the good stuff and sent the crap out to the grunts in the field.

I still remember the first time that we got full rations of MRE's—what a treat or so we thought, they were better tasting, much lighter and less bulky than C-rats. What I didn't know at the time is that we were being equipped with LRP's or long range patrol rations which meant you were going to exist on what was in your rucksack for the next 7 or more days and that meant you were being sent into an area where it was not safe to fly helicopters or re-supply you in any way. So our elation at getting these "great" rations was not what it seemed, there was a price to pay for the luxury of edible food.

Of course, any of the food that was heated out in the field, used the trusty canteen cup. The canteen cup had to be one of the most versatile pieces of equipment we had. It served as a soup bowl, coffee cup, frying pan, mixing pot, dipper and whatever needed to be heated got heated in the canteen cup. Of course, one of the drawbacks was the fact that it was stainless steel; you inevitably burned your mouth or lips as soon as you tried to drink anything hot like coffee out of it. To heat anything, you held the canteen cup over a burning heat tab. The heat tabs burned with

virtually no visible flame, they were lightweight and heated anything quickly. The heat tabs were one of those little conveniences that made life in the field just a little bit more bearable.

It was a real treat when they would occasionally deliver A- rations or “Hot Alphas” out to secure areas in the field, usually in conjunction with a re-supply. These were delivered in those insulated rectangular containers and were somewhat warm when delivered. This was a real treat and sometimes would include a blivit of potable water to fill canteens so you wouldn’t have to drink water with iodine tablets in it for a day or so.

(Now that was living)

Another occasional treat was the occasional PSP (personal sundries pack) box. These were delivered occasionally and had stuff like writing paper, pens, and toilet paper, shaving supplies, toothbrushes, some candy and even some cigarettes for those that smoked. Every time one of these was delivered and divided up, it felt like opening a Christmas present. It is amazing how simple little comforts that we take for granted in our daily lives seem like a great gift when you have to live without them.

Of course, one of the ultimate treats was any food that was sent from home. (Or “The World” as we referred to it.) One time, my squad had OP (Observation Post) duty on Hill 352 while the rest of the company was on LZ Center for a week. During this time I received a package from home that had some hard salami in it. What a treat! Of course, because of the heat and humidity in Viet Nam, it was covered with green mold by the time it arrived. A minor issue like that was not going to stop some seasoned army troops from enjoying this special treat, so we scraped off the mold and went on to fully enjoy this special treat. I still remember how good that salami tasted—maybe it was the special aging process!

Now as I sit in my easy chair this evening, watching television and playing with my computer I think I’ll go raid the refrigerator and have a nice cold beer!

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