

Saluting Military Food Service

By Laura E. Vasilion

Dietary managers have an integral role in the military. Whether serving at bases on American soil or serving overseas, they work to ensure the men and women of the Armed Forces are properly fed and nourished.

“An army marches on its stomach,” said Napoleon Bonaparte.

There’s no denying that. Feeding an army, however, is a daunting task. In our current combined Armed Services, there are roughly 1.5 million soldiers, at home and abroad. At three meals a day, that adds up to over one billion meals a year!

Many of those meals are prepared and served by contracted civilian foodservice vendors. Others are planned and prepared by military foodservice workers. Whatever the case, dietary managers are there, working in unison with military cooks, dietitians, and clinical nutritionists, playing a vital role in preparing our troops for the rigors of battle.

Without question, the work is hard, the hours long. The rewards, however, are abundant. Dietary managers feed wounded soldiers and civilians in war-torn countries, conduct humanitarian efforts at home and abroad, provide nutritional counseling to soldiers and their families, and give tired, homesick soldiers a little bit of home in the form of a favorite food in the chow line.

On the battlefield, a warm meal can foster morale. At home, food can close the gap between soldiers of differing cultural and regional backgrounds, if dietary managers are sensitive to their needs. Big changes from the meals some veterans may recall. Unlike the dehydrated eggs and chipped beef on toast once served at military bases, the menu today may include McDonald’s hamburgers, Pizza Hut pizzas, and even the occasional Starbucks’ latte.

The influx of civilian foodservice vendors in the military is impacting more than just a soldier’s taste buds. For example, at the Great Lakes Naval Training Center near North Chicago, Ill., new recruits no longer peel potatoes, sling hash, or scrub pots. According to an article in the Chicago Tribune on November 7, 2003, galley chores dating back to World War II are now done by 1,000 contracted civilians who serve up nearly 60,000 meals a day at the center. This trend is spreading,

relieving thankful new recruits of hours of KP. That time is now spent practicing live-fire exercises and receiving counterterrorism instruction.

Training soldiers for food service in active duty situations (aboard ships, in the field), often falls on the shoulders of dietary managers. Many others work in military hospitals and clinics. The remainder plan nutritional and rehabilitative menus, manage military health and wellness centers, write instructional material, teach, and do nutritional research. With all these choices, it is hard to imagine a place with more opportunities for advancement than the military.

Valerie Stokes, CDM, CFPP, an Army Nutrition Care Specialist, is a prime example. A member of the 21st Combat Support Hospital, she is currently serving in Iraq.

Stokes began her career in 1992 after attending school to become an Army Food Service Specialist. After a short stint in Korea, she worked in cost accounting at the Ireland Army Community Hospital at Fort Knox, Ky. After rising to dietetic technician, Stokes became the NCOIC (Non Commissioned Officer in Charge) of Clinical Dietetics. Following her time at Fort Knox, Stokes went to Eisenhower Army Medical Center, at Fort Gordon, Ga., where she assumed the same position. From there she was stationed at Fort Hood, Texas, before being deployed to Iraq.

When Stokes first arrived in Iraq, all soldiers ate three packaged meals, called MREs (Meals Ready to Eat) a day. Once her hospital was set up (there are four U.S. military hospitals in Iraq), everyone received two hot meals a day and one MRE. Today, everyone in Stokes’ hospital (215 staff members and patients) gets three hot meals a day. There are no refrigeration problems and bottled water is plentiful.

Initially, there were Iraqi patients to feed, as well. Because MREs often contained pork, which Iraqis do not eat, Stokes and her staff scrambled to come up with creative alternates. First, however, they gain their trust. Leery of Americans, the Iraqi patients initially just picked at their food.

Via e-mail, Stokes said the morale of American soldiers is good. Having a hot meal to look forward to helps them get through the day. Morale soared on Thanksgiving when they were treated to turkey, ham, roast beef, mashed potatoes, sweet

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potatoes, herb dressing, green beans, corn on the cob, and a variety of pies. The menu was repeated at Christmas.

Another Army Nutrition Care Specialist, Deborah Frazier, CDM, CFPP, oversees clinical and production services at Madigan Army Medical Center, Ft. Lewis, Wash. On a typical day, the commissary serves 1,100 meals. The snack bar serves another 500 snacks daily.

Frazier entered the service in 1985. In 1990, she was deployed to the Middle East to run a Desert Storm foodservice operation.

“I was 94F, hospital food service. We fed staff, patients, and operated day-to-day food service. Coming through the line, you got a smile and a hot meal. That helped morale and meant a lot to the soldiers,” said Frazier.

Most of the food during Desert Storm was dry or packaged. What perishables they used were kept in an 18 wheel refrigerated truck. Heat and serve meals, much like TV dinners, were warmed to 140 degrees in hot water. This, however, was a delicate operation.

“Back then we used M2burners to heat the water. Mogas was the fuel we used. It wasn’t very stable, especially in temperatures that reached 116 degrees. We were constantly trying to keep the tanks cool so they didn’t explode,” said Frazier.

After Operation Desert Storm, Frazier spent a year at Camp Humphrey in Korea, attached to 43rd M.A.S.H. Following that assignment, she was sent to Fort Sam Houston, Texas, where she assumed duties as an instructor/curriculum writer. Until December of 1998, she taught newly enlisted, non commissioned, and advanced non commissioned personnel. Topics included nutritional assessment, budgeting, organizing, inventory, patient ordering, preparation and serving of specialized diets.

Next, Frazier was transferred to Fort Campbell, Ky. While

assigned to the 86th Combat Support Hospital, Frazier advanced to platoon leader and platoon sergeant. Her position was changed to 91M. The M meant they were now under the umbrella of the Army’s medical division.

“This was one of my best duty stations. I learned so much. I was more patient-involved and more involved in training,” she said.

In January 2002, Frazier assumed her current position. Pursuing a master’s degree in human resources, Frazier has far exceeded her original plan.

“I came from a military background. My dad was in the Army. So, at 26, I enlisted. My plan was to do my three years, get out, and use my GI bill to go back to college. I’ve been in the service 18 years now,” she said.

The reason for her delayed exit is simple: Frazier loves her job. She especially loves being a mentor to soldiers. And they, for obvious reasons, look up to her.

“There was a time when I was the only female ranking officer at a meeting. Some of the men would look at me funny and want to challenge me. Being in food and nutrition, they often made the mistake of thinking I wasn’t current on military drill and ceremony. But I was and that gave me confidence. Where I am now, there are the most female ranking officers I have ever worked with. It’s good to see the change,” she said.

Close to retirement, Frazier doesn’t know what the future holds. This is where being a member of DMA helps. Although there isn’t an active chapter in her area, Frazier checks DMA’s Web site often, finding it especially helpful for sanitation issues. Feedback in the chat room alerts her to the possibilities available to her outside the military.

“When I retire, I want to be on the same page as the civilians in my field. DMA is very helpful in that regard,” she said.

Daniel George, CDM, CFPP, a member of the Air Force

A Word About Food Safety for Our Troops

A new awareness of national safety has gripped our country since 9/11. This extends to the food we feed our troops, as well.

Imagine the impact of a fighting force of 1.5 million plagued by outbreaks of foodborne illnesses. Naturally, our government is doing everything possible to prevent such an event.

To combat outbreaks at sea, military foodservice personnel are exhaustively educated, by military and civilian instructors, about food safety before ships leave port. Understanding how to store and

rotate stock in limited spaces aboard ship is also critical.

Conditions are just as challenging once troops land on shore. Can you picture yourself, for example, cooking on a moving truck?

In the field as well the military has utilized the most sophisticated technology available to screen high-risk food for pathogens, spoilage organisms, and pesticides before it is served to soldiers. These means guarantee food safety in areas posing the highest potentials for biological terrorism and conditions prone to the

abundant presence of foodborne illnesses.

The military is also on top of food safety when it comes to food transportation. Utilizing insulated food transport containers helps keep foods fresh for troops in combat positions and prevents contamination due to time and temperature abuse.

On military bases at home, each foodservice truck that passes through the gates is searched and thoroughly inspected. More informative labeling requirements and strict storage procedures are also in place to insure that foodborne illness outbreaks at home are prevented.

for 27 years, is Chief Master Sergeant at Wilford Hall Medical Center, San Antonio, Texas. As manager of the 959th Diagnostics and Therapeutics Squadron, George oversees the preparation and serving of 3,600 meals a day. George is also Career Field Manager for 4DX1 (Diet Therapy) for the entire Air Force.

Like many dietary managers, George grew up loving food. Family time was meal time in Glasgow, Mont. After her shift at the town's hospital kitchen, George's mother came home to her own kitchen where she spent more hours around food.

"Glasgow had a large Norwegian population. Growing up, I saw a lot of Lutefisk (a white fish Norwegians use during the holidays)," he said, jokingly.

When Air Force recruiters came to town, George was hooked.

"I came from a rural area. If I hadn't joined the military, I would have stayed in Montana and never had the life experiences I've had. Besides that, the pay and benefits are great, and food service is food service, whether you're in the military or out," said George.

Elizabeth Watson, RD, Sheppard Air Force Base, Wichita Falls, Texas, started out a dental hygienist. Disillusioned with that career path, she went back to college. A job at a hospital cafeteria helped pay for her education. Liking what she saw, Watson enrolled in an Air Force dietetics internship after graduation. The interns got hands-on training almost immediately.

"I came into the program during Desert Storm. Our hospital deployed a lot of the cafeteria staff. Instead of class projects, we were doing real work," said Watson.

Today, Watson holds a master's degree in nutrition. She is currently rewriting a course for dietetic technicians and working as a registered dietitian in the Air Force.

"There are many different roles we can have in the military. You can do health promotions or manage a health and wellness center. As a military dietitian, you can be a clinical manager or an ICU dietitian. You can be in charge of a hospital food service. The opportunities are terrific," said Watson.

But there is another reason Watson chose to enter the Air Force.

"My father flew in World War II. My brother is stationed in San Antonio. I guess, like them, I feel I am giving back to my country by doing what I am doing," she said.

Military hospitals face many of the same challenges as civilian hospitals. There are decreased inpatient stays and more same day surgery patients. These things change the way a hospital is run, including food service.

"We're really dealing with the same healthcare environment. We face the same challenges. In addition, we're dealing with the impact of 9/11 and the increased security in every area. More information is required when labeling food, for example," added Watson.

All dietary managers deal with unexpected staff absences.

"On the battlefield, a warm meal can foster morale. At home, food can close the gap between soldiers of differing cultural and regional backgrounds, if dietary managers are sensitive to their needs."

In the military, however, absences are to be expected. James Lohry, CDM, CFPP, a hospital foodservice director at Travis Air Force Base, Fairfield, Calif., knows from experience.

"Manpower is always a challenge, especially when you are working with a unit that is highly deployable," said Lohry. "At one point, a third of my staff was deployed."

Soon to retire after more than 20 years in the Air Force, Lohry loves creating theme meals for his patients and staff. Whether preparing a Thanksgiving feast, an Oktoberfest spread, or a meal to honor the differing cultures of his patients and staff, Lohry finds all the rewards necessary in the faces of the recipients.

"It is absolutely the best thing in the world to see their smiles," said Lohry.

Lohry also feels working in the military has advantages that are hard to match in the civilian sector.

"You get a free education. You always have a paycheck. You never have to worry whether you'll have a roof over your head," he said. "Those are just some of the perks. Then there is the knowledge that you are giving back to your country. That is hard to top."

Retirement, as well, doesn't mean the end for those with military foodservice experience. Many move into positions in long-term care in the civilian population. Others, like John Oates, CDM, CFPP, a Retired Army Master Sergeant, find positions teaching.

"I teach an adult continuing education class at San Antonio Community College in San Antonio, Texas, for students who are interested in working as dietary managers. Once a student has satisfactorily completed the course, he or she will receive a Certificate of Completion. Students have varying degrees of foodservice experience. Some have been recognized by their facility's administrator as having managerial talents and were referred to the class. Others work in local restaurants or schools and are striving to meet personal goals in a field they love," said Oates.

Oates has found his class helpful in recruiting people for DMA.

"It is an excellent avenue for students desirous of learning about Dietary Managers Association and its certification examination. The class is also excellent for students familiar with DMA but unsure how to become a member and earn

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certification,” said Oates.

In addition to teaching the Dietetic Supervisor Course in San Antonio, Oates also offers his knowledge of basic military foodservice skills to basic entry U.S. Navy students via the San Diego Community College. A number of classes deal with the essentials of sanitation, large quantity food preparation, and baking fundamentals. Upon successful completion of the course, students go to their respective assignments as Mess Specialist. Those assignments may take them aboard a ship, a submarine, or to shore duty.

“Sailors really enjoy and express a true sense of accomplishment upon successfully completing an assigned bakery item. Keep in mind, these students arrive at the school with varied amounts of cooking experience. Someone whose only

experience at food preparation prior to joining the military may have been putting a Pop Tart in the toaster. Now he or she has the ability to prepare a fresh, hot apple pie, quick breads, decorated cakes, cookies, and even their own hotdog and hamburger buns from scratch. In most cases, this is done with minimal supervision by following an Armed Forces Recipe Series Card,” explained Oates.

At sea, cooks prepare most menu items from scratch because bulk ingredients have a longer shelf life and tend to be more cost effective than commercial bakery items. Labor, as well, is less expensive.

In recent years, Oates has witnessed many positive changes in military food service. Privatization of lower grade civil service positions (for gate guards, mess attendants, etc.) at MTFs

A Brief History of Military Food Rations

Ever since there has been a need for soldiers, leaders have wrestled with how to feed their troops. Even the early Greeks knew the impact adequate food had on the performance, morale, and mood of their soldiers. So, after pillaging became unpopular, the military ration was born.

In the U.S., military rations first appeared during the Revolutionary War. On November 4, 1775, Joseph Trumbull, Commissary General of Stores Provisions, legislated the fixing of components for the Army ration. That ration, intended to feed one soldier for one day, provided the following items:

Revolutionary War Military Ration

16 oz. beef	6.8 oz. peas
1.4 oz. rice	1 qt. spruce beer
.1830 oz. soap	.0686 oz. candle
16 oz. milk	17 oz. flour

As you can see, this ration is a little light in the vegetable and fruit category.

Rations during the War of 1812 declined in quality due to shortages and procurement problems. Added to this ration are some vinegar, salt, and rum. Gone are the peas, rice, milk, and spruce beer. Meat and flour portions were increased but did little to offset the poor nutritional quality of this ration, which was deficient in Vitamin A, riboflavin, and Vitamin C.

War of 1812 Military Ration

20 oz. beef	1 gill vinegar
.64 oz. salt	.64 oz. soap
.24 oz. candle	18 oz. flour
1 gill rum	

Rations improved again by Congressional Acts in 1860 and 1861. By the Civil War, military rations contained the following items:

Civil War Ration

20 oz. beef	2.4 oz. sugar
22 oz. flour	.32 gill vinegar
7 oz. potatoes	.64 oz. salt
.045 oz. yeast	.04 oz. pepper
2.54 oz. dried beans	.64 oz. soap
1.6 oz. green coffee	.24 oz. candle

Rations During World War I

Feeding soldiers fighting in trenches during World War I provided new challenges. To keep them relatively healthy in those harsh conditions, the number of items in rations during this period increased. So did the cost. To combat those costs, less expensive items were added: bacon, lard, onions, canned tomatoes, and margarine. Still, this diet lacked in Vitamin A.

Most of the rations in the World War I ration were fresh and had to be prepared in some sort of kitchen facility. If a kitchen facility was not available, it became difficult for the soldiers to feed themselves.

Distribution was also a factor. If a soldier got his authorized ration each day, he was eating fairly well. However, soldiers on the move often missed getting their ration. To take the place of those rations, hard biscuits and salted meat were substituted. The belief was these items would hold up better in harsh conditions. They did not. After a time, the meat became rancid, the bread infested with weevils.

Rations During World War II, Korea, and Vietnam

Rations became more standardized by the time America entered World War II. These rations were modeled for the environment, the individual, and the detachment, in the field or in combat. Seven different rations were created for these different situations and conditions. Of the seven, the most familiar were C and K rations. Both these rations were used throughout the Korean Conflict and the Vietnam War.

C Rations

C rations contained six key-opening cans (one day's ration) that included three cans of meat and vegetable rations and three cans of sugar, coffee, and crackers. They were intended to provide a soldier with a complete, nutritionally balanced meal. These rations were used during the initial phases of an amphibious operation

(Medical Treatment Facilities) enables soldiers to perform the duties for which they were trained.

Other changes include the constant upgrade of Combat Field Feeding System equipment and operational rations (MREs).

Whether working with civilians or soldiers, Oates strives to help his students believe in themselves and their abilities. His reward is seeing them realize their potential and reach their goals.

"I know some of my students have had limited opportunities in life. As a result of my military experience, I have the opportunity to share and give them something they can use: knowledge. When they achieve a goal, have something they're proud of and can call their own, it's a wonderful feeling know-

ing you played a part in making it happen," said Oates.

Before retiring after 22 years in the military, Esing Adams, CDM, CFPP, of San Antonio, Texas, did it all. She entered military food service in 1976, during the Vietnam War era. After 12 weeks of training at Letterman Army Medical Center at Presidio of San Francisco, Calif., she went to Walter Reed Army Medical Center (WRAMC) in Washington, DC, where she worked in clinical dietetics for 18 months.

Adams next assignment took her to 121 Evac Hospital in Seoul, Korea for three years. From there she was sent to Kenner Army Community Hospital in Fort Lee, Va. For five years, she ran the nutrition clinic and counseled military and civilian patients on various diets.

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or mobile combat situation. Unfortunately, by the end of the war, these rations proved too bulky for mobile troops. These rations also got a bad rap as they were too often used long after fresh food should have been available for cooking. Worst of all, there was little menu variety. Author Bill Maudlin, in his World War II book, "Up Front," said even the German prisoner complained about C rations. Apparently they did not believe the C rations they were being fed were standard fare for American soldiers. Used to having fresh food through their supply lines, the prisoners were convinced better food was being withheld from them.

K Rations

These rations were developed to deal with the inadequacies of the C ration. Better packaged, lighter, and developed for the individual soldier, these rations were more of a meal packet. Over time, the K ration's components were constantly changed to offer soldiers newer and better tasting products. These rations better catered to the needs of paratroopers, tank units, and troops constantly on the move. At least seven menus of K rations were available during World War II.

MREs (Meals Ready to Eat)

In the 1980s, C and K rations were replaced by Meals Ready-to-Eat, or MREs.

Employing technology used in space travel, these MREs were packed in vacuum-sealed pouches. Under normal circumstances, they could last for years.

Taste, however, continued to plague the military ration. In 1991, when troops fighting in the Gulf War tasted the newest version of the MRE, they deemed them, "Meals Rejected by Everyone." By the evidence found in the desert, unopened brown plastic bags of casseroles and dreaded ham loaf, nutritional researchers at the Department of Defense test kitchens in Natick, Mass., knew they had to work on the taste and variety of MREs.

And they have. The new breed of MRE offers a number of meal options. A vegetarian MRE, for example, might contain cheese tortellini or pasta Alfredo. Some MREs contain spicier ethnic foods, added to appeal to a fighting force from diverse cultural backgrounds. Bottles of Tabasco sauce, packets of cayenne pepper and Mrs. Dash seasoning are even included. Kosher meals are also available. Young soldiers especially like the MREs that include edible memories of home: M&Ms, Lorna Doone cookies, Skittles, and Jolly Ranchers.

The other plus for soldiers on the move is that today's MREs weigh only a pound and a half and are no bigger than a paperback novel. Designed to stay fresh for up to three years in 80 degree temperatures,

they are vermin-proof, waterproof, and able to survive a 100 foot drop from an airplane. Thanks to an ingenious chemical heating sheet in a plastic pouch, soldiers can heat their food in the field by simply pouring in an ounce of water to activate the heating sheet.

Each MRE meal has to contain 1,250 calories with enough carbohydrates, fat, protein, and vitamins to meet strict government dietary requirements. Sugary drinks, jam, and candy help boost carb and calorie count. Vitamin-fortified grains help meet micro-nutrient requirements. Folic acid and iron, for example, are added to provide our women soldiers with the necessary nutrients. Vegetarian meals, on the other hand, get an extra boost of protein from including packets of peanut butter and jalapeno cheese spread.

These military rations are a far cry from the ones our forefathers endured. Still, the researchers at the lab in Natick continue to tweak the recipe. Behavioral scientists even go through soldiers' trash during field exercises to see what is being thrown away. To satisfy even the most finicky soldier, MREs are including dried cappuccino, chai, powdered Gatorade-type drinks, dried versions of milk shakes, and even a power candy bar the military calls a HooAH bar.

Could pizza and beer be just around the corner?

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In 1987, Adams was transferred to Tripler Army Medical Center (TAMC) in Oahu, Hawaii. While there she was site manager for the TRIFOOD computer system. Her job was to input all menu information, recipes, supply lists, and subsistence purchase orders. The program was supposed to make things easy. It didn't.

"My job was to implement the computer program, which I did. But after a couple of years, the higher ups knew changes would have to be made. It was so complicated, we were always having problems with it," she said, laughing. "The program that replaced it was much more user-friendly."

From 1992-1998, Adams was stationed at Brooke Army Medical Center (BAMC), Fort Sam Houston, Texas. From 1994-1998 she worked as the NCOIC of Education and Training. While in this position she worked with DMA to enable military personnel to become certified dietary managers. Under her guidance, students had a 100 percent pass rate.

While at BAMC, Adams was attached to a Field Unit. When activated, her unit conducted humanitarian missions in southern Texas near the Mexican border. Those missions involved setting up a hospital, conducting nutrition counseling, giving eye and dental exams, and inoculating children.

Duties also included serving one hot meal daily and passing out MREs for the other two meals.

Her last six months in the military, Adams was the NCOIC of Nutrition Research and Development at BAMC. When she retired in 1998, she was in the middle of researching the benefits of calcium in soldiers' diets and implementing ways to introduce more calcium into the dining facility menu of all five dining facilities on the base.

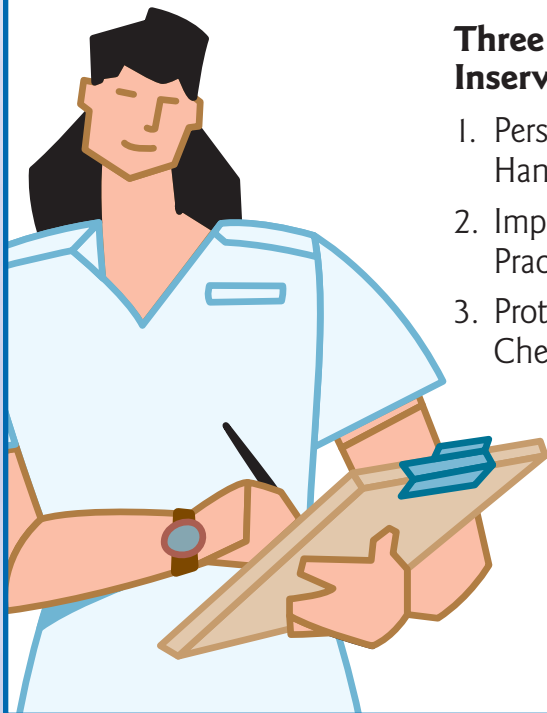
Adams came out of formal retirement in 2001 to work for San Diego Community College as an instructor of Baking Fundamentals to Navy Mess Stewards at Medina Base School of Culinary Arts, Lackland Air Force Base, Texas. Like Oates, Adams teaches students how to bake pies, breads, cookies, and other desserts.

In addition to serving their country, these dietary managers are making a difference in their profession. Although they insist they're just doing their jobs, we know better.

They make us very proud. ■

Laura Vasilion is a staff writer for DIETARY MANAGER.

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