



# GOURMET GRUNTS, 1968-70

**GIs used ingenuity – and initiative –  
to turn field rations into field “cuisine”  
during the Vietnam War.**

BY PHIL GIOIA

In every war, soldiers have griped about their food; American GIs serving during the Vietnam War were no exception. Yet even at the remote terminus of an extended logistics chain reaching halfway around the world, the U.S. Army in Vietnam generally performed very well in getting the right field rations to its troops fighting “at the sharp end.”

Depending on the tactical situation, fresh food cooked in unit kitchens – Type A Rations – could sometimes be sent forward to feed field units. (See “Vietnam War-era U.S. Army Rations,” p. 23.) This “hot chow,” transported by jeep, truck or helicopter, was served from three-compartment, insulated, mermite containers that each kept about five gallons of food hot (or cold) for extended periods. But for most GIs serving in the bush, “Meal, Combat, Individual” (MCI) field rations – still universally known by their World War II predecessor’s designation, “C rations” – were the order of the day ... every day.

During the 1968 Tet Offensive, I was a 2d lieutenant infantry platoon leader in 505th Airborne Regiment. It was very cold and wet – especially at night – that February in I Corps (at the northernmost combat zone in South Vietnam), and the fighting seemed always to take place under heavy rain or in dense, gray overcast. In our rucksacks, we each carried several olive-drab colored cans of C ration meals. C rations weighed a lot and weren’t inspired cuisine, but we were grateful to have them.

C rations arrived in very strong, reinforced-cardboard, wire-banded cases. There were 12 boxed meals to each case, with varied main menu items (M units) in each box’s largest can. These ranged from the popular “Spaghetti With Meatballs in Tomato Sauce” to the dreaded “Chopped Ham and Eggs,” a mysterious concoction apparently intended as a breakfast unit. Along with each main M unit meal came smaller cans (designated B-1, B-2 and B-3, and D-1, D-2 and D-3) of supplementary foods such as cheese, crackers, peaches, fruit cocktail, peanut butter, chocolate and pound cake. Finally, an accessory pack contained salt, sugar, instant coffee, nondairy creamer, toilet paper, matches and (in that era) cigarettes. Given the unpopularity of some main menu items, to be perfectly objective about who received what meal, we turned the case upside down and chose the main meals without seeing the labels. Everyone hoped *not* to pick the awful ham and eggs concoction, nicknamed “the Joker.”

In the field, improvising on the otherwise monotonous C ration menu became GIs’ daily game. On operations, my radiotelephone operator was a wizard at creating something very similar to the café mocha sold at today’s Starbucks by combining several coffee, sugar and nondairy creamer packets and then shaving two discs of the foil-wrapped milk chocolate into the brew.



Three-compartment, insulated, mermite containers like this one were used to transport hot food to field troops in Vietnam.





1966. Marines eat field rations during a lull in the fighting near the demilitarized zone (DMZ) during the Vietnam War.

He mixed it all together and heated it in an empty B-2 can. The top of the can was opened most of the way around, bent back, and the sharp-edged sides folded under to form a convenient handle.

Though thousands of American GIs were constantly in the field in Vietnam over a period of 10 years, the Army never developed a small, folding metal stove or simple frame for heating C ration cans with heat tablets. Although the Germans had issued one during World War II that later was widely adopted worldwide (as the Esbit stove), for U.S. troops in Vietnam it was, "Sorry 'bout that, GI!" So we heated our C's on small, expediently built stoves made from empty B-1 cans. The cans were topless with holes punched around the bottom to provide air flow. Once fashioned, these jury-rigged "stoves" were kept for constant use.

We ignored the Army-issued Hexamine heating tablets as being too weak. Instead, our fuel of choice was a small chunk of C-4 plastic explosive, torn from one of the brown-wrapped demolition blocks we carried. Safely stable unless it had a detonator in it, adequately ventilated C-4 burned with an intense, blue-white flame, making an ideal cooking fuel. Use of C-4 for cooking was so prevalent that we

## Vietnam War-Era U.S. Army Rations

**TYPE A RATION:** Food prepared from fresh or refrigerated ingredients and centrally cooked in a unit kitchen.

**TYPE B RATION:** Food prepared from canned or preserved ingredients and centrally cooked in a unit kitchen.

**TYPE C RATION:** Canned/packaged, precooked food issued to individual troops when the tactical situation/field conditions prevented providing meals centrally cooked in a unit kitchen.

**MEAL, COMBAT, INDIVIDUAL (MCI):** Replaced the Type C Ration (1958). Except for adding some new menu items, MCI packaging and contents were nearly identical to that of Type C Rations.

**FOOD PACKET, LONG RANGE PATROL (LRP):** Freeze-dried, dehydrated food, vacuum sealed in plastic packaging (to be reconstituted by adding water), issued beginning circa 1966 as a field ration to individual infantry troops.





## Why the "Crescent Symbol" on Army Rations?

The crescent symbol was used in ancient times, by the Babylonians and later the Romans, to represent the concept of "plenty." In 1453, when Islamic armies overran the Eastern Roman Empire at Constantinople, the Ottoman Empire conquerors adopted the crescent symbol. According to legend, when Ottoman armies failed to capture Vienna in 1686, their soldiers left behind some of their daily rations – bread baked in the shape of the Ottomans' crescent symbol. The shape was copied by Viennese bakers to memorialize the defeat of their would-be conquerors. Continuing this storyline, during the French invasion of Austria in the Napoleonic Wars (1803-15), Napoleon appropriated the Viennese crescent bread for his soldiers, thereby bringing the distinctive shape to France, where it became the symbol of French army rations (and, this version claims, inspired the famed croissant bread roll).

The U.S. Army, in mid-19th century heavily influenced by French military uniforms and procedures, adopted the crescent symbol for its Commissary Corps during the American Civil War (1861-65). By World War I (1914-18), the crescent appeared on all U.S. Army Commissary Rations, and it eventually became the international food and rations symbol for Allied armies (notably British, French and American) during World War II (1939-45). Upon NATO's 1949 formation, 10 standardized supply symbols were established, with the crescent being the NATO symbol for food. Today, the crescent is the symbol most identified worldwide for food and subsistence, not only for armies but also for civilian relief and assistance missions.



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once received official notification from Division Headquarters to knock off using it for that purpose – the engineers were running out of C-4 for demolition use.

On my second Vietnam tour in 1969-70, I was a captain and infantry company commander in 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), operating against North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regulars in III Corps war zone (in central South Vietnam along the Cambodian border). In summer 1969, we received a number of very clever C ration cookbooks from the famed McIlhenny Company in Louisiana, makers of Tabasco hot pepper sauce. The company sent thousands of small bottles of their famous sauce, packaged in green watertight containers, each containing a copy of *The Charlie Ration Cookbook: Or No Food Is Too Good for the Man Up Front* and a few small, fold-out can openers we called "P-38s." This was a stroke of marketing genius by McIlhenny. Nearly a half million men were in Vietnam then, and many GIs were first introduced

**RIGHT:** A typical Meal, Combat, Individual (MCI) consisted of one main menu item [in this image, Beans and Wieners, in the large can]; supplementary foods [the two smaller cans] such as cheese, crackers, peaches, fruit cocktail, peanut butter, chocolate and pound cake; and an accessory pack containing salt, sugar, instant coffee, nondairy creamer, toilet paper, matches and cigarettes.

**RIGHT CENTER:** The McIlhenny Company sent thousands of small bottles of their famous Tabasco hot pepper sauce to troops serving in Vietnam. They were packaged in green watertight containers, along with a copy of *The Charlie Ration Cookbook: Or No Food Is Too Good for the Man Up Front* and a few small can openers.

**RIGHT BOTTOM:** Long Range Patrol Rations introduced freeze-dried, dehydrated main meals vacuum-packed in a lightweight plastic bag. These meals also came with a cereal or fruitcake bar, two foil-wrapped milk chocolate discs, some pieces of candy and an accessory pack.



*The Charlie Ration Cookbook: Or No Food Is Too Good for the Man Up Front* inspired untold GIs to create thousands of concoctions using the contents of their field rations.

to Tabasco sauce by this clever effort. The cookbook was illustrated by Fred Rhoades, who inked the famous *Beetle Bailey* comic strip. It suggested several ways the different C rations could be combined – with a few dashes of Tabasco sauce, of course – to create meals such as "Fox-hole Dinner for Two," "Ceasefire Casserole" and "Patrol Chicken Soup." We all tried a few recipes; we all survived.

We were still being fed C rations at the beginning of my second Vietnam tour, but within a few months we were issued a completely new type of field ration. Although in that era the only "freeze-dried" product we knew was instant coffee, the new ration was a freeze-dried, dehydrated main meal vacuum-packed in a lightweight plastic bag. It seemed like science fiction – one simply added water to reconstitute the food (hot or cold water, but the food sure tasted better hot). These were known as Long Range Patrol Rations (LRP), which the troops immediately pronounced "Jurps." They featured eight main meals, in-

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## benefitted from a truly inspired battalion mess sergeant.

cluding "Chicken With Rice," "Spaghetti With Meat Sauce," "Pork With Scalloped Potatoes," "Chili Con Carne" and "Beef Stew." They also included a cereal or fruitcake bar, two foil-wrapped milk chocolate discs, and some pieces of candy. They had the same accessories as C rations but were a lot tastier, and the main meal seemed of larger volume. Later, I discovered that an LRP ration actually provided about 1,200 fewer calories than the equivalent C ration. Perhaps they freeze-dried out the calories!

While the LRP was definitely lighter than the C ration (11 ounces vs. 32.7 ounces), its drawback was the amount of water needed – 1.5 pints for each LRP meal. Yet in Vietnam's hot and humid climate, we normally carried a lot of water anyway. In my company, we each typically carried two or three one-quart canteens plus a two-quart plastic canteen. We were also issued a five-quart canteen that hung off the back of the rucksack (similar to today's camelback canteens, but without the over-the-shoulder drinking tube). A quart of water weighs two pounds, so we each carried 10-20 pounds of water alone, before adding equipment, weapons, grenades and ammunition to our loads.

One benefit of the new LRP ration was a "tactical plus" – its lack of metal cans. The Viet Cong were very skilled at scavenging, turning retrieved C ration cans into mines and booby-traps. While not large, a B-2 can filled with explosives and packed with nails, stones, metal scrap and bits of wire could kill and maim as well as a fragmentation grenade.

After the war, companies (among them, Mountain House) that had developed the Army's freeze-dried LRP rations began marketing these lightweight meals for civilian campers and backpackers. Today, if one purchases a freeze-dried "Chicken With Rice" backpacking meal at a camping supply store, it is the direct descendant of the LRP forebear issued to GIs in Vietnam.

Ingenuity in turning field rations into field *cuisine* was not restricted to individual GI "gourmets." Occasionally, all troops in an especially fortunate combat unit benefitted from a truly inspired battalion mess sergeant. In 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, ours was a big, cheerful noncommissioned officer from Louisiana, known to the troops as "Mess Daddy." Although the Army had a strictly prescribed official "feeding plan," Mess Daddy could create some ingenious improvisational gourmet touches. For example, when an enormous wild boar wandered into a rifle company's defensive perimeter one night, tripped a flare and was promptly shot, the hapless animal's carcass was airlifted to the battalion firebase the next morning. Later that afternoon, the company received mermite containers filled with Mess Daddy's "Special Louisiana Wild Boar Gumbo," with rice, herbs and spicy vegetables. At veterans' reunions, the troops still talk about that memorable meal ... and perpetuate the persistent rumor that one of the diners enjoying Mess Daddy's gumbo chomped down on an undetected M-60 machine-gun round.



1966. Three American Soldiers eat C rations while in the field during the Vietnam War.

Also very important in turning field rations into field *cuisine* was ingenuity in obtaining food in both variety and quantity – however that could be accomplished. Our battalion supply (S-4) section had a highly developed ability to "scrounge," a polite term for "acquiring by any means possible." And since 1st Cavalry Division had several hundred helicopters assigned, our S-4 section's "scrounging range" was extensive. Typically, our battalion S-4 would drive his jeep with trailer up the ramp into a CH-47 Chinook helicopter and fly off on a "marketing mission" to various rear echelon units that always seemed to be well stocked with ration "goodies" the field troops rarely received. With his jeep and trailer loaded with captured Viet Cong and NVA gear and weapons that an aggressive combat unit like ours had in excess after our frequent engagements with the enemy, our S-4 had plenty of valuable "trading goods." He exchanged these sought-after combat souvenirs with the rear echelon types for what our field troops *really* wanted – boxes of frozen steaks, extra cases of LRP rations, fresh fruit and vegetables, and a wide array of condiments. Thanks to our resourceful S-4, we always had "something extra" to provide as rations for the troops in the field, and the troops greatly appreciated it.

Our battalion was also famous for flying freshly made ice cream out to our rifle companies in the field. The rumor circulating then was that our S-4 had scrounged a complete, pallet-mounted, diesel-driven ice cream-making plant from some other unit that had "less than adequate" local security. Morale spiked; no one questioned the source. ★

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