

1967

EATING HIGH IN A LOW COUNTRY



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When I arrived in Vietnam, I soon found that whatever I had learned barely provided a preview of what I needed to know about surviving in a war zone.

The year was 1967 and I was a second lieutenant leading 46 warriors of the US Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade (Separate). We were deployed in II Corps area of South Vietnam, also referred to as the Central Highlands (**Figure 1**).

We were the second platoon ("Second to None") in Alpha Company, 2/503rd Infantry.

The men were all young. I was 21-years-old; but, most of my soldiers were 18-20 years old. My platoon sergeant was the oldest: 30-years-old.

Most of the time, we were in the "free-fire" zones in Vietnam's II Corps area. That meant if you saw someone armed with a Russian or Chinese weapon, such as the Russian Kalashnikov AK-47 rifle or the Chinese SKS Assault Rifle, you could shoot them before they could shoot you.

We learned to shoot first and ask questions later. We learned that you didn't have to kill the enemy. If you wounded him, his wound would get gangrene and he would lose a limb if not his life.



Figure 1 - II Corps

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We learned that changing clothes was a real luxury; but, wearing underwear was not recommended. Any tight clothing in the humidity and dampness of that region usually resulted in a rash, more commonly called “jock itch”. The rash would remain no matter how much foot powder you put on it.

The uniforms had no patches, other than “US Army” over the left pocket. They were clean, if unpressed, and we learned to look forward to having clean clothes for that first hour. (After that, the humidity took its toll and the “thrill was gone”.

The new clothes were delivered weekly by UH-1 Huey helicopters — like everything else. From those choppers, we got our water; our rations; “care” packages, ammunition; the in-country, Army-published newspaper; and — most importantly — mail. Care packages were those that came from loved ones at home. They contained candy, cookies and cakes.

You can never fathom how marvelous every one of those homemade cookies tasted. My girl would mail them to me and although it took 3-4 days to reach us — if we got our regular resupply — I would nibble on those cookies for days. Each aroma brought me closer to her. Each gentle bite brought me closer to heaven.

They might have been stale to someone else, but to me they were fresh from my lady’s fingers to mine.

We learned to improvise. We sealed envelopes, whose glue had become useless from dampness, with peach jam. We warmed our meals with fuel made by combining peanut butter with insect repellent — unless we could get C-4 explosives.

At first, we were issued C-rations. C-rations (**Figure 2**) are composed of food canned up to a decade before they are eaten. Most of the cans we were issued in 1967 were made between 1950–1952.

They were highly salted because their function was to keep us alert and fighting.



Figure 2 - C-rations

Each complete meal contained about 1,200 calories. The daily ration of three meals provided approximately 3,600 calories.

Gaining weight or having a heart-attack were not concerns when one was in a combat zone — and we were always in a combat zone.

C-rations is a box about 5"x10" with food for one person for three meals. There were basically three meat choices: Beef steak; ham and eggs; chopped ham slices; and turkey loaf.

You also got a canned fruit: Applesauce; fruit cocktail; peaches; or pears. Covered in a liquid syrup, each was sweet and filling.

IF you mixed the main meal with the fruit, it made the main meal almost palatable. Beef steak or ham and eggs in applesauce were actually quite tasty when compared to eating decade-old food.

Inside the box, you could get a pressure-packed slab of what-passed-as bread with a small can of cheese; or seven Crackers with a tin of Peanut Butter; or a "Candy Disc, Chocolate"; or "Solid Chocolate" patty which was so hard that *if* you could break it into sections, you could suck on those pieces from dawn-to-dusk with a piece of that candy in your mouth all day.

The tin cans painted an olive drab tone. Since the U.S. federal government no longer allows lead in any paint used on food items, one cannot recreate the paint on those cans. And it's the lead that gave the C-ration tins their unique appearance.

Each C-ration box came with an Accessory Pack consisting of a plastic spoon, salt packet, pepper packet, instant coffee packet, sugar packet, non-dairy creamer, two Chicklets (Gum), four cigarettes in a small package, moisture-resistant matches, and small toilet paper.

The cigarettes, in C-rations, were Winston, Marlboro, Salem, Pall Mall, Camel, Chesterfield, Kent, Lucky Strike, and Kool. (If you think decade-old food is horrific, imagine what the cigarettes must have tasted like. Fortunately, I never smoked so I cannot testify as to how they tasted.) Since I didn't smoke, I gave my cigarettes to my platoon sergeant who gave them to some trooper.

The "required daily intake," in weight, was 4.5 pounds (2 kg). The weight of a single ration's cans was 2.5 pounds (1.1 kg) while a case of 12 meals weighed 21 pounds (14 kg).

With the price per ration was \$9, and a case costing \$85, the government got its money's worth out of C-rations.

C-rations were designed to be eaten cold, but they tasted better hot. Nothing heated as fast as a small nugget of C-4 blasting compound set afire with the end of a cigarette. At chow time, no one was more popular than a smoker because a cigarette is the only safe way to light C-4.

We discovered that you could place the chopped ham pieces between thinly-sliced pieces of that tasteless bread. Of course, the bread had to be spread heavily with the cheese. We placed those into a topless can. Then we placed the can into a C-ration box. Then we burned the box. Voila! You've got "Nam Pizza".

Later, during my tour, we began to get long-range recon patrol (LRRP) rations. These are freeze-dried, dehydrated, just-add-water rations, along with items such as "imagination-required" cookies; cookie bars; candy; and powdered beverages such as Kool-Aid, cocoa, coffee, and apple cider.

They offered eight different menus (**Table 1**).

There is an accessory packet with a spoon, sugar, creamer, toilet paper (enough for two visits to the "great green latrine" as we called the jungle), matches, salt, and chewing gum.

The required intake is 0.4 kg per day.

I'm told that later research shows that use of this ration for longer than five days at a time is not recommended. Apparently, it can cause digestive problems such as constipation and cramps.

Oh, well, we ate them seven-days-a-week unless we could get a hot meal flown in.

The weight of one ration was 0.45 kg. Compare that to the C-rations listed above, and you'll only begin to realize why we loved these meals better.

By the by, one could use the meals as a walk-along snack. You carried an open bag in your Web belt, above a magazine pouch and pulled a small quantity out using your thumb and first two fingers. Then you sucked on those while you walked along.

The bad news for the accountants was that the price per ration was \$16, while a case costs \$205.

Both C-rations and LRRP rations came with a mini-pack of cigarettes and matches, salt, pepper, sugar, toilette paper, coffee, cream or cocoa, two "Chicklets" (gum), olive-drab matches, and a tooth pick.

Although eight menus were available, my favorite LRRP was chili con carne. Other entrees such as beef and rice, spaghetti with meat sauce, chicken and rice, beef stew, chicken stew were acceptable — and a vast improvement over C-rations.

LRRP RATION MENUS							
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Chicken Stew	Beef Stew	Sweet & Sour Pork	Chicken ala King	Lasagna	Spaghetti w/ Meat Sauce	Chili Con Carne	Beef & Rice
Cornflake Bar	Granola Bar	Branflake Bar	Branflake Bar	Branflake Bar	Cornflake Bar	Granola Bar	Cornflake Bar
Oatmeal Cookie Bar	Chocolate Covered Cookie	Peanut Butter Crackers	Chocolate Covered Cookie	Peanut Butter Crackers	Oatmeal Cookie Bar	Fig Bar	Fig Bar
Candy Toffee Roll, Chocolate (4)	Carmels		Candy		Chocolate	Hard Candy	Chocolate Covered Disks
Apple Cider Drink	Cocoa Beverage	Apple Cider Drink	Orange Beverage	Lemon Tea (2 packets)	Beverage Base	Orange Beverage	Lemon Tea (2 packets)
Accessory Packet	Accessory Packet	Accessory Packet	Accessory Packet	Accessory Packet	Accessory Packet	Accessory Packet	Accessory Packet

In addition to meals, we got special pack (SP) sundries. These packs contained cartons of cigarettes, chewing tobacco, chewing gum (Chicklets), Hershey's tropical chocolate bars, shaving supplies, soap, and other stuff.

The cigarettes were evenly dividing among the platoon regardless of whether you smoked or not. The Winston and Marlboro cigarettes were the first to go; the Kent cigarettes were the last. (Kent cigarettes were considered "feminine fair" and unworthy of warriors.)

You have no idea what a luxury hot water is until you don't have any. You'd use about half a canteen for the LRRP ration. With the other half, you could put in a tea bag or some instant coffee — and lots of sugar. For a few moments, way out in the jungle, forgetting what the day had brought, and not thinking of what the night could bring, for a few moments, you could have a hot meal and a cup of hot coffee and count the days before you could leave

the mess you were in and return to “the World.” (The world was our reference to home).

We used C-4 blasting compound (explosive) to heat our food; but you had to be careful.

C-4 came in a one-pound bar, wrapped in a green waxy paper. It was white in color, and had a texture of stale taffy mixed with very fine sand. We would pinch off a piece about the size of the end of your little finger’s fingernail or smaller.



Figure 3 - C-4 Explosive

You then had to roll it for a while to make sure it didn’t have any air pockets in it. If it had an air pocket, and you lit it, an explosion resulted. Not a bad explosion, but it would blow your canteen of hot water all over you.

You didn’t step on it either to put the fire out; you let it burn out. It wanted to explode when you stepped on it. Some soldiers tried and some instantly needed at least one new shoe.

To use C-4 as a cooking solution, you put a few rocks on the ground and made a little hole in the ground in the middle of them. Then you put the C-4 down in the hole, put your canteen cup full of water on top of the rocks, and lit the C-4. Cooking time was usually 2-3 seconds. (That’s right: 2-3 seconds.) There was no smoke and no residue. There was just a fast flash of fire and hotter than hell’s bells heat.

You had to do this outside and make sure you were not downwind of the fire. The gas the burning C-4 made was extremely toxic. We were warned to never burn C-4 in an enclosed space. The gas was really bad.

Survival took on a whole new meaning during the Vietnam years. A new uniform, a quiet meal, a hushed conversation, and the realization that tomorrow some of those around you would be gone. Some would be wounded; some would be dead.

But for the moment — that serenely surreal moment — your tummy was full, your crotch was dry, and life was good.

Tomorrow — if you survived the night — was a lifetime away.

And that's the way it was in a steamy jungle, in a forgotten war, in a world four decades behind me.

What a way to spend your 21st year on this planet.