



Army Heritage Center  
**Foundation**  
*Telling the Army Story...  
one Soldier at a time*

# Voices of the Past

## WORLD WAR I

### Highlights:

- In all wars a Soldier's rations are key component of their morale and fighting ability.
- For much of the army's history the Soldier's rations were simple and bland.
- During World War I improvements, such as field bakeries and food carts, enabled the Army to bring fresh, hot meals to the men on or near the front lines.
- Support organizations such as the Red Cross and the Salvation Army provided additional luxury items to the Soldiers.
- Concerns over insecure supply line lead the Army to develop the emergency ration, which provided Soldiers with food in the event that food service from the rear was interrupted.

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## World War I Rations: Full Belly, Fully Ready

**(Europe, 1917-1919)** As any Soldier will tell you, food is critical to morale. Good food may not solve all of a Soldier's problems, but bad food only adds to them. The importance of wholesome, appetizing food to the morale and fighting ability of an Army is hard to underestimate. This reality once led Napoleon to remark: "C'est la soupe qui fait le soldat" (The soup makes the soldier).

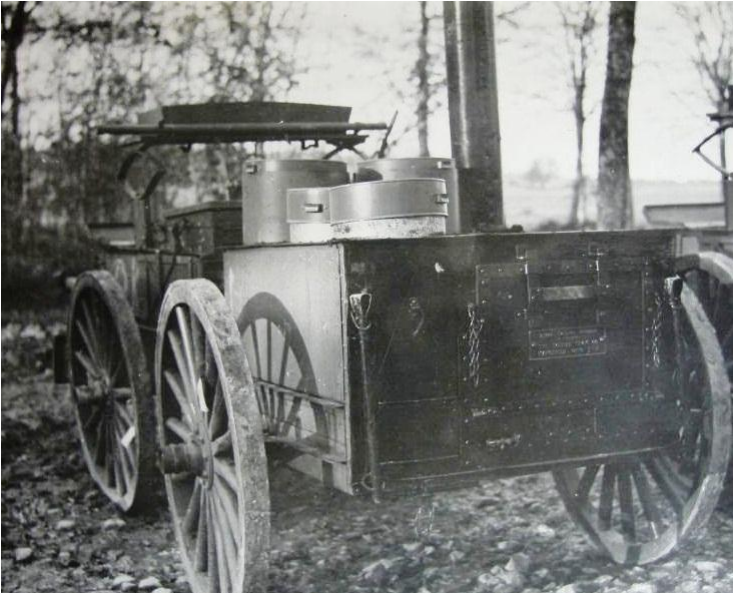
The first Army field rations, authorized in 1775 by the Continental Congress, consisted of a pound of beef, pork, or fish; bread, beer, and milk, and were expected to feed a man for one day. By 1917 when the AEF arrived in Europe, the guidelines had changed little, with an increase in quantity and the addition of potatoes. In addition to basic foodstuffs, Doughboys also received luxuries

such as milk, butter, candy, and cigarettes; luxuries their fellow allied Soldiers lacked. The Army often experienced shortages of fresh fruit, but in general, as one historian noted, "the dough-boys of the American Expeditionary Force were the best-fed army in World War I."

As in all wars, however, feeding the troops was often a challenge. Simply getting food to the troops could be difficult, especially when the enemy tried to zero in and attack supply lines. During World War I, responsibility for food and supplies fell to the Quartermaster Corps, which implemented a number of innovations to address the particular situation in France in 1918. One of the more significant innovations was the creation of Field Bakeries that could provide fresh hot food to the Soldiers.



Miss Birdsall of the American Red Cross serves hot chocolate to PVT Wilson Melanson, B Company, 103rd Infantry, 26th Division, Meuse, France. October 14, 1918. Photo Courtesy of USAHEC.



Four wheeled carts (mobile kitchens) could carry a heavier load of hot meals to the Soldiers than the two-wheeled version, but were less maneuverable. Photo Courtesy of USAHEC.



German prisoners of the 79th Division receive bread rations, November 3, 1918, Meuse, France. In all likelihood neither they nor their captors had any idea that the war would end in just eight days. Photo Courtesy of the USAHEC.

Field Bakeries meant the end of reliance on that old staple of armies in the field: hard tack. American Soldiers relished the fresh bread that came from these bakeries.

One of Donald Kyler's duties included leading food parties to the front. A fresh meal was always a welcomed luxury in the trenches, and whenever possible, Soldier received hot food delivered in food carts.

As [Kyler's story](#) illustrates, however, getting food and other supplies to the front is often difficult. Bad weather, poor organization, and especially enemy action (which often targets supply lines) can get in the way. A gas attack would ruin any exposed food in the trenches, and the trenches themselves were full of rats and other vermin. Well aware of the problems of resupply, the Army developed the first emergency ration in 1901. The idea behind the emergency ration was that Soldiers could carry food for use in the event that they were cut off from supply lines.

The reserve rations that doughboys carried contained over 3,000 calories worth of meat, bread, coffee, and sugar, and were designed to sustain them during assaults and periods when regular rations were unavailable. Emergency rations were tinned to preserve them until needed and to protect them from contamination during gas attacks as well as from mice, rats, and other scavengers. With these rations on hand, Soldiers were expected to survive seven days without resupply, if necessary.

As always, the cost of feeding the Army was an issue. Feeding a Soldier cost 26 cents a day during World War I, for a total of \$727,092,430.44 (more than \$11 billion in 2012 dollars) for the period of 1917-1918. Defending this high cost, Senator James Wadsworth of New

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York said, "what we should remember at this time is that the American Army is being fed as well, if not better, than any other army on the face of the earth..."

All in all, Soldiers serving during the First World War had access to much better food than their predecessors, or even their contemporaries serving in allied armies. With access to the extra luxuries such as dairy products, candy, and freshly baked bread, and thanks to the efforts of men such as Donald Kyler, the Doughboys fought as well as they ate.

### Sources

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The exact origin of the term 'Doughboys', said to be in use since the 1840's, is in dispute, but many believe the name came to be especially associated with the Soldiers in World War I because of their affinity for doughnuts and other baked goods made by Red Cross volunteers.  
Photo Courtesy of USAHEC