

Good Eats: World War II Army marched on its stomach

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(Note: This article appeared in the 15 May 2009 issue of the *Monmouth Message*)

The United States fed its citizens, Armed Forces, and Allies during World War II thanks to government programs and grassroots home front efforts, which included an enormous home or “Victory” garden campaign. The diets of those in the service often improved both qualitatively and quantitatively when they answered Uncle Sam’s call. Some called America’s WWII Army “the best fed Army the world has ever seen.”

Fort Monmouth did its part to uphold that reputation, with the average recruit gaining between nine and twelve pounds in their first six weeks stationed here. A motion picture school instructor, Dr. Bill Ryan, fondly recalled his days at Fort Monmouth. When asked about the quality of the food here, he replied, “The Signal School had the best of any in the Army!”

Prior to World War II, many feared that Americans were, on the whole, malnourished. Harvey Levenstien reported in *Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America*, that the armed services rejected forty percent of the men drafted in 1941 for medical reasons. Doctors attributed many of these ailments to inadequate nutrition.



Recruits line up for a meal at an outdoor mess when Fort Monmouth was still Camp Alfred Vail, 1922.

One of the ways that the government fought this problem was to enrich the white flour that was used in the armed services and federal institutions. This trend eventually spread to the civilian sector. By 1943, over 75 percent of all bread in the United States was made with enriched flour.



Inspection and preparation at the enlisted men's mess kitchen at Camp Alfred Vail.

The United States army had approximately 174,000 soldiers in 1939. This number had increased to over 8,000,000 by 1944. The average soldiers in WWII were more than an inch taller, 10 pounds heavier, and had greater physical endurance than the soldiers of the First World War. This was the result of a concentrated effort on behalf of the US government to keep soldiers well-fed.

Everything that the army needed had to be produced in the United States and shipped to the individual theatre of operation. The Army Service Forces were

responsible for manufacturing and acquiring all the supplies that the government ordered. According to COL Karl Detzer, author of *The Mightiest Army*, “the Quartermaster Corps fed the soldier, clothed him, furnished his tents and canteens, knives, forks and spoons, his blankets and the packs to carry them in, and the belts to which to hook the packs and canteens.”

The Quartermaster Corps seems to have done a good job, at least according to Sergeant Philip Aquila, the son of Southern Italian immigrants. Sergeant Aquila wrote many letters home to his family from his various deployments. Letters from Sgt Aquila praised the quantity of food provided for the members of the armed services.

There was more variety, and greater portions, in the Army than he had previously been used to. He wrote “I had a nice piece of steak to eat this afternoon. All in all, I'm eating pretty good.”

This was very different from the many Depression-era meals of *pasta e fagioli*—pasta and beans—upon which the Aquila family had subsisted. With two parents and nine children, a varied diet was an impossible expense. While the variety of Army fare satisfied Sgt Aquila, he missed the tastes of his native Buffalo, New York.

Sgt. Aquila's letters showed that those in the American armed services were not doomed to a sub-standard diet while serving in World War II. While the World War I diet had been based around legumes, the World War II diet emphasized fresh meat, vegetables, fruit, eggs, and beverages.

Major H.B. Monroe, the Mess Specialists Division director at Fort Monmouth in 1942, recalled his own experiences with food during his time in the First World War. He said: “Plenty of times I sat down to a meal of cold coffee, baked beans, and goldfish (salmon) in the last war. And believe me, this Army is the best fed Army the world has ever seen.”



Men icing cinnamon rolls in one of the bakeries on post.

Mess Captain F.J. Coffey, here, reported that the typical monthly offerings at the base mess halls included 22 servings of beef, 11 of cured ham, 4 of chicken, 3 of veal, and 3 of lamb. This is not to mention all the eggs, butter, baked goods, fresh fruit, and fresh vegetables that were served every day! Dr. Ryan spoke of the variety, too. “We had spaghetti and meatballs, and there was very often fish.”

Soldiers could rest assured that they wouldn’t be deprived once they went out into the field, either. One *Signal Corps Message* headline from 1944 promised, “C Rations Take Step Nearer to Menu of Ritz.” This article described how the C ration had increased from three to seven units of meat, and had a different biscuit, beverage, and confection with every meal.



Aides-de-camp to generals attending a dinner at Gibbs Hall in 1953, celebrating the 90th Anniversary of the Signal Corps.

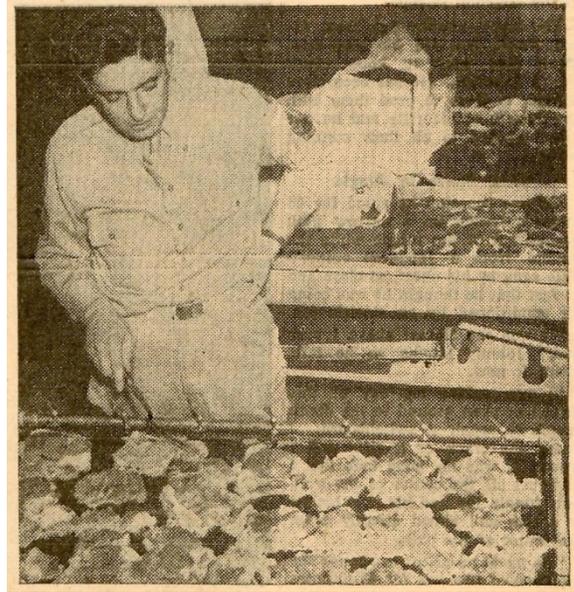
When wartime needs necessitated food rationing, available food went to the military first and to civilians second. In the fall of 1944, for example, the War Food Administration restricted the sale of turkeys to civilians until the Quartermaster Corps had fulfilled its requirements. Those requirements were described as “plentiful helpings of white meat and dark meat for every man in the service.”

In a letter received from Sgt Aquila's sister, Mary Aquila, she let him know that the family had roast chicken, potatoes, and soup for their Thanksgiving dinner. Eating in the Army was often better than eating at home!

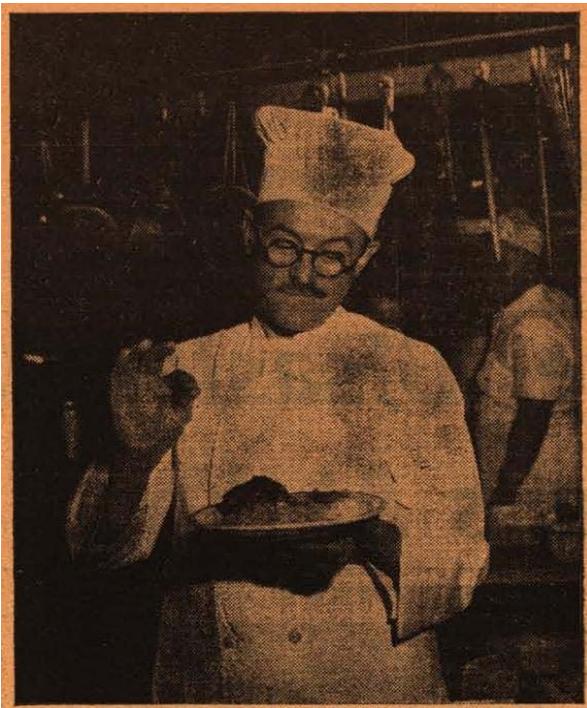
On Thanksgiving, November 23, 1944, Phil wrote that there was so much food that he could not even fit all of it onto his plate. Those soldiers who had wives nearby were invited, and had his wife lived closer, he would have brought her to the dinner, too.

Only a few weeks after Thanksgiving 1944, Fort Monmouth held an “Organization Day” celebrated by men “consuming hundreds of choice cuts of real steak.” Even a day that did not have a traditional food-consumption element, like Thanksgiving did, was still cause for indulgence by the soldiers. Dr. Ryan noted in an interview that “when there was steak, we always got the best!”

French chef Alex Abbate even joined the staff at the Service Club cafeteria. Before coming to Fort Monmouth, he was the head chef for the French and British nobility, and was the chef at the Harvard Club where he cooked for Teddy and Franklin Roosevelt!



Cook grilling steak for Organization Day, 1944.



French chef Alex Abbate brought years of experience cooking for royalty and dignitaries before coming to Fort Monmouth.

Abbate said, “The food at the Service Club is not as fancy as at the Harvard Club, but it is every bit as wholesome.” Even the pickiest G.I. couldn’t argue with that.

The *Signal Corps Message*, one of the weekly newspapers at Fort Monmouth during the 1940s, reported just how well fed military men were. The Army alone received 15 percent of all the food in the nation during 1944, and soldiers were told it was their patriotic duty to make sure that those fighting had the best food available.

The health of American soldiers was far better during WWII than during World War I or the inter war years. The experiences of soldiers at Fort Monmouth were typical of other soldiers who were stateside during the war. Those stationed here fondly recalled the good food from their time at Fort Monmouth.