

Bivouac Food Service

Many cadets will remember the many unique meals that were provided on the Map Reading, Weapons, and Patrolling Bivouacs held in multiple locations between 1964 and 1985. But, few probably know much about the consideration and extensive thought that went into their design and development. Actually the menus were usually different for each trip and were continuously changed over time as we gained experience and food preparation equipment.

When planning for each bivouac began, there was always an effort to keep costs as low as possible because every Cadet attending had to pay his or her own way. We didn't want anyone to be left behind because their family could not afford the cost of the bivouac. This factor affected almost every decision we made about the meals that were to be served.

So exactly how did we plan the menus? Our first consideration for each meal was for it to be filling, yet inexpensive. The initial bivouac menus were always built around the items that were available in the US Department of Agriculture surplus food program. This food was donated to public school cafeterias and we could usually get it at no cost if we gave the cafeteria manager a little notice. The bulk food we received often included large quantities of butter, cheese, dried milk, oatmeal, dried beans, rice, raisins, prunes, bulgur, and sometimes large number 8 cans of peanut butter. The menus were always finalized on the Wednesday evening before each bivouac when we could check supermarket sale items in the food section of the Sacramento Bee. Sale items were used to supplement the free items we got from the cafeteria. We would routinely visit each of the seven or eight grocery chains operating in the Sacramento area usually buying only the items that they had on sale. In addition, bread was always purchased on the Friday before the bivouac from the day old bakery outlet store.

Each of the bivouac meals had to be filling. We wanted food on the bivouac to always be plentiful as we didn't want to have a bunch of hungry kids on our hands. Everyone may not have liked each of the food items we served, but there was always good variety, large serving sizes, and almost always seconds for those with large appetites.

Finally, each of the meals had to be easily prepared in the field on the Coleman camp stoves and their small



Cooking on and Serving from Coleman Stoves

griddles that initially barrowed friends and parents. We eventually purchased several of these stoves by adding a small camping equipment fee to the price of the bivouac. In spite of these restrictive menu requirements and limited equipment, we were usually able to do quite well with a three or four dollar bivouac fee for a three day trip including transportation.

We also began to accumulate military food service equipment items from the California State Department of Educational Surplus warehouse. Large aluminum pans, stainless steel cooking utensils, mermite containers, and a number of other items were accumulated over a period of years. Each new piece of equipment allowed us of equipment added to our capabilities expand our menu choices. One afternoon, we discovered that Educational Surplus had a large number of M-1937 Army field ranges on sale for only \$20 apiece.

Each of them contained a variety of large pots, pans, baking sheets, and cooking utensils. We bought four of these range units because we knew that we could use their contents, especially the pots and pans.

But, when these field ranges were delivered, we

noticed that they were in excellent condition and also still had their burner units in them. So we began experimenting with the burners to see if we could get them to function. After a little instruction and maintenance assistance from one of my National Guard cooks, we got



Cadet Corps Bivouac Field Kitchen with Army Surplus Field Ranges set up in the Spenceville Recreation Area

one third less expensive than white gas. And more time with Cadet Corps activities. We eventually taught ourselves how to fry eggs to order, make “hash gray’s”, and even bake cakes. Pies and cookies using these



Chocolate Cake Baked in a m1937 Field Range on a California Cadet Corps Bivouac in the Spenceville Recreation Area

Army field ranges. Our Coleman stoves were relegated to only keeping items warm and sometimes brewing coffee. There was not much that we were not willing to try with these field ranges.

the burners to run quite well although they were sometimes a little bit tricky to get started on cold mornings. The first time we fired them up in the field, we just heated water for cleanup. This experience was so successful that we began to cook on them. These Army field ranges had a great advantage over our Coleman stoves. They produced much more heat more quickly than Coleman stoves so we could spend much less time in food preparation. They also burned regular gasoline rather than the white required for the Coleman stoves. Regular gasoline was

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We also obtained the use of a large cast-iron, propane fired griddle that had been purchased to support the preparation of breakfasts sold at the El Camino High School Gun and Coin Shows. This item made food preparation even easier and added variety to our menu choices. Over time, the Army Field Ranges

and griddle were instrumental to improving variety and methods of preparation for food that was served on California Cadet Corps bivouacs.

One of the more interesting establishments that we often visited in our continuing quest for inexpensive but filling food items was Sacramento Cannery Sales. This store specialized in carrying excess stocks from local canneries, dented cans, and often cans without any labels. Sometimes there was a label on cardboard case but often there were no labels at all. (The cans without labels were interesting, because all we knew about them was that they contained fruit. We didn’t know what kind until we open them. Sometimes it was fruit cocktail and other times it was peaches, apples or apricots.) This store was also the source for large number of main course “Army C-ration” cans which became center piece for meals that we could prepare very quickly in the field. All we had to do was boil the C-ration cans in water and distribute them. All of these C-ration cans had dents that ranged from small to quite large. The badly dented cans were always a challenge to open without getting sprayed with their contents. The beanie-weenie cans were one of the most popular C-ration meals that were it we were able to obtain. But we also had beef and potatoes and the dreaded Ham and Lima beans, both of which were much less desirable. For this reason, we were always careful to make sure that everyone got the same kind of C ration for each meal’s main course.

One of the most popular and well liked meals that we almost always served on every bivouac was “chili with beans” made with family recipe (quantities increased by a factor of 15 or 20 dependent upon the number of Cadets that we had to feed). We are usually able to get dried beans from the school cafeteria. We used pinto beans, kidney beans, and one time even Lima beans. Not realizing that the cafeteria had provided us with Lima beans until we were in the field on the bivouac, we had no choice but to use them for Chile. I was worried about using the lima beans but discovered that every variety of beans seemed to work equally well in the chili recipe. Evidently the beans are just filler material with the flavor coming from the garlic, onions, and spices that are added. There were always seconds and thirds served during this meal.

One year we obtained several cases of dehydrated cabbage from Educational Surplus and we used it to thicken soups and to make some fairly respectable coleslaw salad. This was Paul Krumhaus’ specialty. However, we had to be careful that the Cadets didn’t see what the dehydrated cabbage looked like as it was reconstituted. If they saw what it looked like when we added and drained yellow water that it produced, I am sure that they would never have eaten it. We also used the dehydrated cabbage to thicken soups that we served to Cadets when they returned from cold night map reading and patrolling exercises.

Another year we got a couple cases of dehydrated prunes from the cafeteria. We did our best, but we couldn’t get many of the Cadets on the bivouac to eat the prunes. Most would not even try them (Prunes had a very bad reputation, especially with younger kids on the bivouacs.) Since they were a planned part of our meals, we began threatening that if they didn’t take and eat their dried prunes, we were going to start putting them in everything we served. Just to make the point I used a knife to cut the pits out of a couple dried prunes and then tossed them into the chili was cooking. From that day forth, the secret ingredient that made the bivouac chili really great was a few dehydrated prunes, even though we seldom ever really added any prunes after that first time. The announcement and seeing the prunes going into the chili did help increase the prune consumption at other meals. But more important, the prunes in the chili became an “urban legend” for all of our California Cadet Corps bivouacs.

Potatoes were always cheap and we used them extensively on every bivouac. Potato salad with a hint of horse radish was a popular favorite. Since they were inexpensive, we decided also to try making hash brown potatoes to serve for breakfast. Our initial experiments proved that the hash brown potatoes took a lot of heat much too long to cook. One morning we had some left over boiled potatoes from the previous day’s potato salad so we tried frying of making hash browns. We thought that since they were already cooked, the hash browns would be much faster to prepare. We put some bacon on the grill to provide the grease to keep the potatoes from sticking and then added several cups sliced boiled potatoes and a couple cups of diced onions. This mixture cooked up quite well and really smelled great while cooking. Cadets began lining up for breakfast even before they were called (Always a good sign especially when it was cold in the morning). What resulted that morning became known as “hash grays” because they were never heated long enough to become very brown. Hash Grays became a bivouac breakfast staple. On future bivouacs, bacon was considered to be too expensive to use, so we substituted bacon ends which are mostly fat. There were also very cheap, almost given away by the grocery stores in Sacramento when we asked for them. This menu item was filling, very inexpensive, and actually well liked the most of the bivouac participants.

When we found them on sale, eggs were used in many of our bivouacs meals. We hard boiled them, used them in egg salad sandwiches (also with a little horseradish to give the sandwiches some extra zip – this was another secret ingredient that few cadets knew about.) French toast for breakfast was also popular on the last day of the bivouac because it didn’t matter that we were using stale bread from one of the day old bakery outlets stores. By the time we used it at the end of a bivouac, it must have been almost a week old.

After we started using a gun show griddle, we occasionally had to eggs cooked to order for breakfast. I remember one morning when I was cooking the eggs and asking Cadets standing in the chow line how they wanted their eggs (Most wanted them scrambled). But, one youngster, from Grant I think, didn’t respond right away to my question. So, I asked him a second time. He must not have really understood the question because this time he simply responded by saying “cooked please”. He must have never has eggs cooked to order for him before. This time he got his eggs – cooked scrambled. The only way we ever served eggs for breakfast was “to order” because portion control would have been too difficult otherwise. If the menu called for two eggs per Cadet, we were sure that we could serve two eggs per cadet without ever running out.

Buying the food items on sale in grocery stores often had its humorous moments because of the quantities we purchased. One store had especially good price on eggs and we purchased a hundred dozen. The eggs filled two shopping carts and were the only items we were buying. It was late September and when someone inquired about why we were buying so many eggs, one of the Cadets that was helping pickup op the food said that we were going to use them for Halloween and there was plenty of time for them to get nice an rotten! Another time we had a shopping cart full of sugar another cadet responded to a similar question about the quantity by saying: “We were stocking up because of the coming national sugar shortage.” Hearing this, the lady put a couple bags of sugar in her cart.