

Cooking With C4: A Veteran's Vietnam Food Memories

By Lisa Bramen, Smithsonian.com, adapted by Newsela staff on 07.24.17

Word Count **876**

Level **800L**



Crew of an American helicopter cook C-ration breakfast after an early morning flight to Kontum in Vietnam's central highlands, May 18, 1972. Photo by: Koichiro Morita/AP

Editor's note: In the interview, Lisa Bramen asks her uncle to describe the food U.S. troops ate during the Vietnam War. The war lasted from 1955 to 1975. During the war, soldiers had to rely on a type of canned food called C ration. On top of that, people had to be creative about how to cook their meal or find extra food.

My uncle Jay is a teddy bear of a man. He has a fluffy beard, gentle eyes and always has a silly joke. He and my aunt even collect Teddy bears. It's always been hard for me to imagine him as a soldier during the year he spent in the U.S. Army in the war.

He arrived in Vietnam on December 25, 1966. It was a few weeks after his 21st birthday. "Even for a Jew, this is no way to spend Christmas," he said. They may have served a Turkey dinner but if they did, it wasn't very good since he didn't remember.

Some meals did stand out. One of his earliest Vietnam food experiences was being in a food line at base camp. Bombs landed in the bread, injuring the guy who was serving it.

Feeding soldiers on the battlefield has always been tough. The winner of the American Revolution and the Civil War, for instance, was the side that had more food.

I asked Uncle Jay to share more memories about food during the Vietnam War.

Finding time to eat on the battlefield

Lisa: What did you eat when you were out on missions?



Jay: While out on missions we ate C rations, those "wonderful" meals in a can. We used an explosive to heat them that would burn and not explode. You couldn't do that at night, because the enemy might see you, so sometimes we ate them cold.

Lisa: What was in a typical C ration?

Jay: I remember they had turkey loaf, and another was lima beans and ham. They came with cookies that weren't very fresh. You remember how bad they were but when you're that hungry anything tastes good.



Lisa: How were meals back at camp?

Jay: We had the regular meals which were not great but better than C rations. Our base camp was near Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam. When it was possible we went to the big city for food.

"Eating was fairly safe"

Lisa: Was eating strictly about survival, or was it something you enjoyed?

Jay: It was kind of relaxing because eating was fairly safe.

Lisa: Did you ever dream about certain foods you missed from home?

Jay: Food from home was always better than army food no matter what it was. I missed anything my wife could cook, and as you know that is a very long list.

Lisa: Yes, I do! Did you eat any local Vietnamese foods? If so, do you like those foods now or do they have bad memories for you? Are there any foods you won't eat now because they remind you of the war?

I'll pass on the rice pudding

Jay: We ate any local food and some of the items were great. It's hard to remember any specific food. Yes, I will go to a Vietnamese restaurant, and I do like most of that food. Sometimes other soldiers will not eat Vietnamese food but to me food is food as long as I like the taste.

I don't think I ever eat rice pudding, because it reminds me of the rice paddies in Vietnam.

We worked with the South Vietnamese soldiers and they showed us how to catch shrimp. But the best way to catch fish was to throw a grenade in the water and go collect the dead fish.

The Vietnamese would also barbecue snakes. We were a little worried about catching them. There were some deadly ones, and we didn't know which was which.

Lisa: Do any particular meals stick out in your mind?

Popping popcorn

Jay: Someone sent popcorn, but it wasn't popped. This was before microwave popcorn, so we rigged up a popper with a pot. This colonel came by and we thought he'd be mad, and he just said, "American soldiers can do anything!"

Lisa: Do you remember the first thing you ate when you came home?

Jay: When I came home they had a homecoming party, and I remember Grandpa Leonard asked me if I wanted pizza. I said, "Sure," and so he ordered about 15 pizzas, even though there were only about 15 guests. He was so excited to have me home.

Just remembering all this makes me think of the guys fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Lisa: Thank you for sharing your memories, Uncle Jay. I'm so glad you made it home safely, and I wish the same for all the families of the soldiers overseas now.