

2015 Regional Olympiad Transcripts, Questions and Answers

8th Form Transcript

Much of the food Americans buy at the store has a secret military history.

People in the United States eat more processed foods than those in other countries. Now, an American writer says many foods like energy bars and frozen dinners can be linked to a U.S. military laboratory somewhere.

Anastacia Marx de Salcedo writes about food. She wrote the book “Combat-Ready Kitchen.”

She says the U.S. military’s interest in food science expanded during World War II. At that time, the military went from feeding 400,000 soldiers to sending meals to 11.6 million troops worldwide. However, these foods would turn bad, and ruin over time. That led to a major effort to learn how to protect, store and carry food into battle.

The military enlisted big food industry businesses to help produce foods for soldiers. As a result, this U.S.military-led effort led to the invention of products like energy bars, restructured meat and extended-life bread.

The relationship between these food companies and the military did not end when the war did.

“The government never wanted to have to go through the experience of ramping up for a World War III, should it come along,” says Ms. Marx de Salcedo.

“And so the system where the military, universities and industry worked together to solve some of the big issues in food science has stayed intact. And from that system, all sorts of processing techniques have come into the marketplace.”

These foods ended up becoming part of the American diet. And this was no accident.

“They (U.S. military) have a mandate to get the science used in creating combat rations into consumer foods items,” she says. “At a moment’s notice, the food industry needs to be able to convert its production lines over to producing combat rations.”

This effort led to the development of many of the foods Americans find in grocery stores. For example, the military developed whole cheese powder,

like the kind often found in boxes of macaroni and cheese. To create the powder, manufacturers removed water from the cheese in an effort to reduce the weight and size of food sent to soldiers overseas.

The military also wanted a way to remove water from potatoes. The resulting technology made Pringle's potato chips possible.

In the 1960s, a technology called "modified atmosphere packaging" was developed to send farm produce to American soldiers in Vietnam. Today food suppliers use this technology to lengthen the life of fruits and vegetables. High-pressure processing appeared in the late 1990s. Today it is used to keep ready-to-eat meals fresh.

The next food product Anastacia Marx de Salcedo expects to see from the military is "nonperishable" pizza. This special kind of pizza would not have to be kept cool before it is heated.

The food writer believes the popularity of processed foods has both good and bad effects.

"We consumers have benefited by having food that is convenient and safe to eat. And it certainly has helped us in managing our modern lifestyles," she said. "On the downside, because the military focuses foremost on the values that go into making a ration, which are long shelf life, durability, affordability and sort-of-broad palatability, those are the values expressed in the food items you find on our supermarket shelves."

In other words, U.S. military-driven processed foods might last a long time and taste good. But they are not necessarily good for you.

I'm Anne Ball.

VOA's Dora Mekouar reported this story. George Grow adapted it for Learning English. Kathleen Struck was the editor.