



Fixing the Army's Feeding System

We Can, and Should, Do Better

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Chow halls, messes, galleys, and dining facilities (DFACs) are a ubiquitous part of military culture, regardless of service affiliation. Their history and evolution can be traced back as far as our military itself. From far-flung outposts to the garrisons that resemble cities, these facilities have served our soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines for generations. Unlike other aspects of the military, garrison feeding programs have changed very

little over time, rendering the current model less capable to address current soldier feeding requirements.¹ That is why it is time for a paradigm shift in how the Army approaches garrison feeding programs.

Garrison DFAC operations cost the Army hundreds of millions of dollars each year, and countless soldier man-hours on a system that continues to lose money.² The primary purpose of DFACs is to provide nutritious



meals to enlisted service members who hold meal cards as part of their overall compensation package, but with an increased variety of meal choices in the private markets in close proximity to bases, coupled with increasingly limited access to DFACs, it is easy to see why utilization rates continue to decline.³ A prime example of this problem can be seen in the recent closure of the Eagle's Nest Dining Facility at Fort Belvoir, Virginia. Less than a year after completing a \$6 million renovation, this facility closed, primarily due to low utilization.⁴ This example is not exceptional. In the coming years, the Army plans to close or consolidate one in three dining facilities based on low-utilization rates.⁵ While consolidations and closures address unnecessary overspending on underutilized facilities, the underlying issues of limited access and increased competition from the private sector remain.

One of the major underlying causes of declining utilization rates in our DFACs is limited access to the facilities. According to a 2015 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report, junior enlisted members—the target customers for DFACs—indicated

Spc. Stanley Jean, 101st Combat Aviation Brigade, and Pvt. Antonio Fonville, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, serve breakfast to hungry soldiers waiting in line at the 4th Brigade Combat Team Dining Facility 12 February 2013 at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. (Photo by Sgt. Kimberly K. Menzies, U.S. Army)

that limited access to DFACs often sways their decision regarding where to eat their meals.⁶ Issues such as extended or irregular work schedules, distance to the facility, time spent in line, parking availability, or hours of operation negatively impact their ability to utilize their meal entitlements at a DFAC. Often, the easiest meal solution is to purchase a meal from a private vendor, either on or off post. When this happens, the soldier essentially pays for that meal twice: once with the actual rendering of payment for that meal, and again in an unused entitlement.

Consider those times when installations close DFACs, or temporarily consolidate them during the holiday season. The meal card holders who remain in the

barracks are afforded the opportunity to walk to a pre-designated bus stop and take a bus to the DFAC, only at designated times, and then return to the barracks on the bus after consuming a meal. These soldiers must repeat this process each time they wish to consume a meal with their meal card under the current construct. Because of the inconvenience involved, meal card holders tend to opt for a more convenient solution, which means paying out of pocket. This then contributes to reduced DFAC utilization and perpetuates the issues of closing and consolidating these facilities. It is unrealistic to think that the current model of garrison, soldier-run dining facilities can continue to meet the requirements of the populations they are intended to support.

Campus-Style Concept

Because of the issues of increasingly limited access to DFACs and the ever-present availability of private options, soldiers often choose to consume meals away from their local DFAC. As a result, in order to optimize use of meal cards for their intended purpose of feeding soldiers, the Army should consider adopting a campus-style concept in which meal cards are accepted at any place that sells food on the installation. Colleges and universities across the country have successfully managed to meet the needs of their students and faculty by providing a wider variety of feeding program options, to include allowing students to use their meal plans at private food vendors located on campus. In fact, in 2012, the Joint Culinary Center of Excellence (JCCoE) conducted a holistic

review of the Army's food service program and determined that the Army could benefit from such a model.⁷

According to the 2011 GAO report, the Air Force has run a pilot test on the campus-dining concept with promising, though as yet tentative, results.⁸ Col. Marc D. Piccolo, then commander of the U.S. Air Force Services Activity, asserted that the outcome of this

practice has been a more efficient use of the meal card entitlements by service members, significantly increasing the number of meals served to meal card holders.⁹ The JCCoE "Holistic Review of Army Food Service" examined the Air Force's pilot Food Transformation Initiative in 2012 and determined that these changes resulted in a 15.2 percent increase in utilization of services, and a 67.3 percent increase in patronage by enlisted meal card holders.¹⁰ By adopting the Air Force approach, which reflects the best practices of colleges and universities, the Army could implement a similar campus-style solution where soldiers could use their meal cards to purchase meals not only at their local DFAC, but also clubs, restaurants paid for out of nonappropriated funds, or even exchange food courts. However, in order to effectively employ this concept, the Army would need to fully transition from the paper DD Form 714 meal card to a common access card-based meal card system and determine the best method to ensure these vendors have the capability to recoup funds from the meal cards.

Under such a campus-style concept, the current meal pricing framework could remain in effect. Let us say it costs a soldier \$5.55 to eat lunch in a dining facility. Under the campus-style concept, a meal card holder would have \$5.55 to spend on lunch at any restaurant on post. If the amount of food ordered costs more than the allotted amount for that meal period, the soldier would then pay the difference out of pocket.

With this, the Army could potentially divest itself of unit-managed DFACs, with a high potential for cost savings as a result.¹¹ In other words, the Army could remove the military occupational specialty 92G (food service specialist) soldiers from the DFACs and invite private companies to run feeding programs for profit. Certainly there are private companies who would be very interested in earning a portion, if not most of, an installation's collective meal entitlements. Such private companies would be responsible for all food acquisition, inventory management, marketing, packaging, personnel, and facility management. However, much like colleges and universities, meal pricing should be aligned with entitlements, or meal plans.

It is important to point out that the Army is taking measures aimed at increasing the utilization of its DFACs. Some of these measures include modifying hours, introducing grab-and-go kiosks and food trucks, expanding meal choices options, referring to Army cooks as chefs, and remodeling existing facilities in order to appeal to

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soldiers. The effectiveness of these efforts and investments remains to be seen. The challenge that remains is competition with commercial restaurants, in other words, the impact of profit motive on effective provision for soldier dining. Restaurants are motivated by one thing—profit, whereas DFACs, and the soldiers who run them, are not.

Additionally, restaurants can make changes more rapidly to their services in an effort to increase profit, and are unencumbered by the oftentimes thick bureaucracy of the military. Perhaps the Army could approach garrison feeding like a business and leverage the expanded, campus-style concept in its favor in order to help ensure that soldiers are making “healthier” choices if allowed to use their meal card at an on-post restaurant.

Meal plans. As an alternative to, or in conjunction with, the campus-style concept outlined above, the Army could adopt a meal plan concept. The Army meal-card program in its current state is both inconsistently applied and needlessly bureaucratic. The Department of Defense Financial Management Regulation 7000.14-R, *Special Military Pay/Personnel Programs and Operating Procedures*,

Spc. Luke Wilson, Spc. Michelle Santiago-Lopez, Spc. Kallan Clements, and Staff Sgt. Raymond King from the Wiesbaden Strong Teams Cafe Dining Facility prepare meals from a mobile kitchen trailer to feed soldiers at Wackernheim Regional Range Facility 30 March 2016 in Wackernheim, Germany. (Photo by Dee Crawford, U.S. Army)

requires single soldiers residing in the barracks be issued a meal card and receive rations from government mess facilities.¹² The accountability and record keeping pertaining to these cards can be complicated at best, or an opportunity for fraud at the worst. To complicate matters, commanders may authorize soldiers to receive full basic allowance for subsistence entitlements based on unique mission requirements or special dietary needs. The management and tracking of this is one of many corollary burdens placed on commanders.

Soldiers who work nonstandard hours may be unable to get a meal at a DFAC during normal operating hours. To mitigate this problem, there should be options for soldiers to adopt a meal plan that best fits their work



schedule, and then change that meal plan as their duty hours change. College meal plans offer this sort of flexibility through a wide range of meal plans. For example, let us say that a soldier can only feasibly consume two meals a day during the week and all three meals on weekends. Should this soldier have to give up the entire amount of the basic allowance for subsistence entitlement in exchange for a meal card, even though he or she only consumes 76 percent of his or her meals in a DFAC? Or, could there be a meal plan option that allows that soldier to consume a predetermined number of meals per week and give them the remainder of the entitlement to spend on food elsewhere? By integrating a meal plan concept, soldiers could potentially alter their meal plans online in much the same way as they can set allotments, or change their Thrift Savings Plan contributions.

Consolidated field feeding company. If any of the aforementioned practices were adopted, and soldier-run DFACs were significantly reduced or eliminated, the manning levels of 92G soldiers required to support the Army's feeding programs would be most likely reduced. However, the requirement for the Army to feed itself in times of conflict and training

Soldiers, civilians, family members, and visitors dine at the Fort Hood Army and Air Force Exchange Service's (AAFES) Mega Food Court 30 September 2015 at Fort Hood, Texas. (Photo courtesy of AAFES)

would not disappear. In 2015, Combined Arms Support Command unveiled a consolidated field feeding company concept, where 92G soldiers are consolidated in a single company within sustainment brigades rather than spread across brigade combat teams and functional brigades.¹³ The idea is that, as required, units can request a field feeding capability to support training or operational requirements much like they do with regard to transportation, laundry and bath, and other combat service support functions. Employing this concept could potentially eliminate the impact such training and operational events have on unit-managed DFACs.

This concept as currently portrayed, leaves the Army in the garrison feeding business since the 92G soldiers must still run day-to-day operations at DFACs. Additionally, the Army is still in the costly business of purchasing food and operating under-utilized facilities. The dollar figures do not even begin to

capture the opportunity costs involved with all of the other minutiae associated with garrison feeding.

What about the 92G soldiers? If nonappropriation of the DFACs were to occur, as described in the campus-style concept, these soldiers would be free of the obligation to operate and manage these facilities and could focus on their core competencies: field feeding together with basic soldier skills, in support of the Army's larger mission, to fight and win our nation's wars. Currently, commanders who have 92G soldiers in their formations are often forced to make special accommodations in order for these soldiers to meet basic soldier readiness requirements such as command maintenance, weapons qualification, training mandated in Army Regulation 350-1, *Army Training and Leader Development*, and the Army Physical Fitness Test due to the narrow window of hours these soldiers are available to train as a result of their food preparation duties.

By contrast, in a nonunit-managed DFAC model of garrison feeding, soldier-skill training could be more effectively managed since 92G duties would be more predictable as activities are aligned with unit field-duty requirements. However, such a circumstance might also risk downsizing if 92Gs were not fully used in direct support of food preparation to support troops in the field. Clearly, the Army would have to reassess the optimal end strength requirement for this specialty based on the new mission set requirements. In this scenario, there is again a wide range of options to consider, from reduction in active component numbers to military occupational specialty consolidation.

Implementing even a portion of the proposals discussed above would be a difficult endeavor involving a myriad of stakeholders across the Department of Defense and private industry. Additionally, the current culture and attitudes pertaining to how the Army views its relationship with DFACs would have to change. The changes recommended here are in line with those made in a recent article by retired Lt. Gen. David Barno and Nora Bensahel, calling for "long-term institutional support missions" to "be civilianized or contracted to free up both military and civil service manpower."¹⁴

Joint base situations present another set of concerns, such as disparity in garrison food service from one service to the next. However, ideally, our sister services would work with the Army toward interoperability, mitigating disparity between services on a joint base. In other words, an airman, marine, or sailor should be able to partake in Army garrison feeding programs the same way that a soldier can; and vice versa with regard to entering non-Army food service facilities. To that end, garrison commanders would still maintain some measure of oversight responsibility for the privatized facilities.

The time and effort involved in such a monumental change would be tremendous, but worthwhile. By fundamentally altering the Army's Food Service Program, the Army could focus better on core competencies that allow us to focus on our mission: fight and win our nation's wars, while potentially saving hundreds of millions of dollars each year in the process. ■

Notes

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