

The first sergeant woke me up sometime around “oh-dark-thirty.”

“Rise and shine, lieutenant. Rise and shine.” The rain hardly made a dent in his always chipper attitude. My foxhole had become a mud hole overnight and I lay for a moment contemplating the water flowing off my poncho and down the small of my back inside my shirt.

“Oh shit! Had I remembered...? I squirmed up to check my rucksack. Had I remembered to replace my split and beat-up paperback copy of Men at War, Ernest Hemingway’s wartime anthology, back in its plastic bag to keep it dry? I had. If the rest of the stuff got wet it didn’t matter.

Now, to find some breakfast. I stood up, my feet squishing inside my wet socks inside my wet boots. God, soldiers hate rain.

I climbed out of my hole and looked around for the chow point. The marine lieutenant assigned to our battery, ostensibly to learn something about field artillery, squished by. He stopped next to me, his raffish grin covered with raindrops. “Great night for patrols, huh?” I stared at him. Marines, I decided, love rain.

The chow point was a pile of c-rats under a tree. This was the time before the army discovered *haut cuisine* in the form of the modern Meals-Ready-to-Eat or MREs. We ate canned combat rations, C-rations, known affectionately as C-rats.

In order not to draw enemy mortar or artillery fire, we had trained not to congregate in a crowd around the chow point, so we waited well dispersed and approached the chow point one by one. I waited under a dripping tree until everyone had gotten their breakfast C-rats and then went over. There were only a few of the OD cans left scattered around. No chance of a fire in this rain so whatever I found was going to be consumed cold.

There were no breakfast c-rats left. Only a can of cold ground beef and spaghetti. Hadn’t Nick Adams loved this stuff when he was out camping in the woods, trying to forget World War One? I looked down at the can. “packed by Blue Star Foods, Inc., Council Bluffs, Iowa, 1944.”

1944! I just couldn’t eat it, despite Ernest Hemingway’s endorsement. I thought; I’m going to keep this can and someday, when I’m a distinguished historian, I’ll have it on my desk as a paperweight to remind me of all the fun I’d had in the army.

“Hey lieutenant, cookie’s got some hot chow down by the truck park.” I recovered my mess kit from my mud hole and went looking for cookie. Maybe I’d get breakfast after all.

The battery’s trucks were dispersed under the treetop foliage. Cookie was there. “Hey L-T, I got some mashed potatoes left.” I held out my mess kit. Cookie splopped a serving spoon full of cold lumpy mashed potatoes into my mess kit. I looked down at it and the rain ran off my helmet into the mess kit and the mashed potatoes floated off and splopped onto my boots and then dissolved into the mud.

The image of the dissolving mashed potatoes itself dissolved. I was sitting in my office finishing up this story. And on my desk, over a pile of yet ungraded term papers, was that can of c-rats: Ground beef & spaghetti, 1944.

