

# “Fueling the Team” for Better Health and Performance

BY BILL ROCHE

Providing nutritious meals that are easy to make and that customers enjoy is the goal of a new program underway throughout U.S. Army Europe.

**U**.S. Army Europe’s (USAREUR’s) Fueling the Team program is aimed at helping Soldiers, Department of the Army civilians, and family members across Europe eat healthier to improve their performance and their lives. The program involves a variety of agencies that are working together to transform what is on the menu in the 24 Army dining facilities in Europe and to teach the USAREUR team how to make healthy food choices all of the time.

As the agency that oversees Army dining facilities in Europe, USAREUR’s logistics directorate is responsible for the Fueling the Team program. Although it is USAREUR’s program for now, the hope is that what is learned in Europe will become the model for the entire Army.

## Origins

Fueling the Team has its roots in the Army’s Soldier Fueling Initiative, a program started by USAREUR commander Lieutenant General Mark Hertling when he was deputy commander of the Army Training and Doctrine Command. Under the Soldier Fueling Initiative, dining facilities at a dozen basic training locations across the United States were reshaped to provide healthier meals designed to boost Soldier performance.

Chief Warrant Officer 4 James Donaldson, the USAREUR food advisor when the program was planned and launched, said the Army’s Soldier Fueling Initiative is a good model for basic training units, where diners are trainees who can eat only in their unit dining facilities. However, it does not quite fit the broader Army, where

Soldiers can easily opt for fast food over dining facility fare. That is why USAREUR’s fueling program has taken that basic training model and modified it for the Army community beyond basic.

## Breaking Out of the Comfort Zone

The Soldier Fueling Initiative removed deep fat fryers from dining facilities without consulting dining facility staff, but Fueling the Team has left the decision to remove deep fat fryers to dining facility managers.

*A medic and eye technician at the Heidelberg Health Center in Germany bakes chicken for a unit event in the center’s dining facility under the direction and guidance of the dining facility staff. The meal follows the guidelines of the USAREUR Fueling the Team program, under which baking has replaced frying in many dining facilities. (Photo by SGT Joel Salgado)*



*A 2d Stryker Cavalry Regiment Soldier samples turkey yakisoba and glazed green beans during a “Go for Green” lunch at the Stryker Inn dining facility at Rose Barracks in Vilseck, Germany. The “Go for Green” program labels dishes served in dining facilities by their level of nutrition and effects on Soldier performance. It is linked to the Fueling the Team program aimed at helping Soldiers, civilian employees, and family members in USAREUR to eat healthily. (Photo by Jeremy Buddemeier)*



“In a garrison environment, we have to make it more competitive and allow the managers to think about what they are doing,” Chief Donaldson said.

He explained that deep fat fryers have provided a comfort zone to dining facility managers because they can quickly prepare french fries or other backup items when the dining facility runs out of what it planned to serve. However, the Army and the larger American society are moving away from fried foods, and food service personnel have to get used to new processes and workflows. French fries that took 3 to 4 minutes to cook in a deep fryer, now take 10 to 15 minutes to bake.

“This process initially takes us out of the comfort zones of what we are used to, or taught to do,” Chief Donaldson said. He explained that the workforce has to be reeducated, and changes to the thought processes of dining facility managers and personnel are required. Personnel will now have to spend a little more time planning menus and costing out plates and meals to ensure that they still stay within the Army budget.

Fueling the Team challenges food service personnel to analyze how they can conduct business better and provide diners with nutritious meals and nutrition information about those meals. When customers know upfront what they are getting, they can more easily make solid food choices.

Serving lines are being set up in ways that encourage diners to choose more nutritious dishes, and the Army “Go for Green” labeling system designates foods as red, yellow, or green based on their nutritional value.

In addition to replacing deep-fat frying with other longer, cooking methods, some challenges to making healthy meals have arisen, including the ability of food service program personnel to get the ingredients and equipment needed to create new menu items. Chief Donaldson said it sometimes takes months to get supplies

to Germany that can be in stateside dining facilities in a week or two.

### **Changing a Frame of Mind**

Chief Donaldson and other program officials agree that the biggest hurdle for the program is overcoming the mindset of diners, who rely on what Chief Donaldson called a “fast food, drive-through lifestyle,” and food service personnel, who learned their trade before deep-fat fryers were the enemy.

Sergeant First Class Cheavlier Slaughter managed the dining facility at the Miesau Army Depot in Germany when Fueling the Team was put in place. He said the toughest part about bringing healthier meals to his diners is that it takes extra effort to come up with creative ways to manage the program and bring to the menu appealing new dishes that are healthier than past dining facility fare.

“Some of the changes are the changes within our thought process and creativity, to include our menus, our production, and management,” Sergeant First Class Slaughter said. “We have to look for ways to buy the most nutritious products, like brown rice or whole-grain pastas. With creativity and production, we have to figure out ways to prepare foods that give Soldiers the best nutritional value (i.e., taking the skin off chicken or not adding sugars or fats to some of our other food items).”

### **Cooking Like a Ninja**

Captain Jeremy Brooks, dietitian at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, has been closely involved with Fueling the Team. He said the program does take effort from those who manage dining facilities and plan, prepare, and serve meals, but healthier food is often unnoticeable to diners. Captain Brooks and Chief Donaldson have labeled the method of giving the diner something healthier

without sacrificing taste “stealthy cooking.”

Stealthy cooking provides diners with the same menu items, such as meatloaf and baked fish, but makes the items healthier by using leaner meat and different varieties of fish (higher in omega-3 fatty acids) and by changing preparation methods.

“We’re reviewing a lot of the dining facilities’ menus and just making sure that they are using nutrition in a stealth way,” Captain Brooks said. “Maybe adding whole-wheat pasta or whole-grain rice to dishes (in place of) regular white pasta.”

Sergeant Slaughter said the Miesau dining facility has been quite successful at providing nutritious meals that diners swear were prepared the old-fashioned, “deep fry them all and let the gods sort them out” way.

“Our customer base doesn’t really notice all the changes we’ve actually done,” said the dining facility manager. “We took the deep-fat fryers out of our dining facility, and our fried chicken is not fried any more. We bake it in the oven, and to my surprise our customers didn’t notice it.”

### **Variety and Creativity: Keys to Success**

Captain Brooks admitted that there is a tradeoff in the fueling program because removing all the so-called “bad food” from dining facility menus could drive diners away. He said the program is about offering healthy alternatives, not simply deleting less healthy ones.

“We usually try to offer a variety, so that it’s not all green,” said Captain Brooks. “We are not trying to get rid of all the fried food, but we are trying to offer healthier choices so that the customer has an option if they want to eat healthy.”

Dining facility staffs have begun competing to see which facility can go the longest without using its deep-fat fryers, and other initiatives are prompting patrons to make healthy choices. Chief Donaldson pointed out that the Miesau dining facility team has risen to the challenge of offering novel approaches to getting diners to eat healthily.

One creative approach is to offer meals that emulate the combo meal menus offered at fast food restaurants but with a healthy twist. The meal is called the “High Performance Meal of the Day,” and it includes the most nutritious entrees from the meal menu.

Miesau also had a “Biggest Loser” competition that included nutrition classes taught by dining facility staff. The winner was a senior officer who lost 17 pounds in 60 days while eating in the dining facility.

Miesau’s dining facility also has made its healthy eating competitions and educational programs available to all members of the community.

### **Educating the Public**

In addition to dining facilities, Captain Brooks said partnerships are being forged with agencies ranging from wellness centers to commissaries to create “public

health-type” initiatives to reach the entire USAREUR team. The concept of performance is key to the program, and the USAREUR team needs to know how to fuel their bodies and minds to be at their best.

“We are trying to treat these people as athletes. It’s not just for performance nutrition; you’ve got to think, too, of cognitive nutrition,” he said. “Just because you sit behind a desk doesn’t mean you still can’t eat healthy.”

No matter what jobs people hold, their brains need to function properly. Captain Brooks said this requires fueling up with the nutrients, vitamins, and minerals found in healthy foods.

### **Analyzing Success**

Fueling the Team program leaders are using a variety of measures to gauge success. Chief Donaldson said the program is using lessons learned, periodic diner surveys, and headcount analysis to continually adapt and improve during its year-plus “phase in” to dining facilities in Europe.

Captain Brooks added that other analyses adopted from the original Soldier Fueling Initiative, such as looking at Soldiers’ eating habits before and after the program’s implementation, might be employed as well.

Of course, the real measure of whether the program is working is the response of diners. Chief Donaldson said he chats with diners to get a sense of their likes and dislikes, and those discussions indicate that for the most part diners appreciate the program and are showing a growing interest in it.

Sergeant Slaughter said he has talked to diners, too, and read the comment cards some fill out after their meals. He said the consensus is that there is no consensus. The program has mixed reviews.

The Fueling the Team program is a trailblazing effort that could revolutionize the way the Army eats and its overall level of fitness and performance. Chief Donaldson said the program is a building block, a foundation for accomplishing the Army’s mission one Soldier at a time.

“Of course [the program’s] success makes the Soldier a better Soldier because they can recover faster from PT [physical training] injuries or they have more energy to last longer and accomplish their missions,” he said. “And a stronger Soldier makes a stronger team, makes a stronger Army.”

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