

Budget Cuts Cause Military To Lose Meals In Afghanistan

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From [NBC News](#)

Marines at Camp Leatherneck in Afghanistan will lose a key daily meal starting Saturday, causing some to forgo a hot breakfast and others to work six-plus hours without refueling on cooked food, according to Marines at the base and Marine Corps officials.



The midnight ration service — known there as “midrats” — supplies breakfast to Marines on midnight-to-noon shifts and dinner to Marines who are ending noon-to-midnight work periods. It's described as one of the few times the Marines at Leatherneck can be together in one place.

The base, which is located in Afghanistan's southwestern Helmand Province, flanked by Iran and Pakistan, also will remove its 24-hour sandwich bar. It plans to replace the dishes long offered at midnight with pre-packaged MREs, said Marine Corps Lt. Col. Clifford Gilmore, who is in Afghanistan this week.

The moves, though unpopular with many Marines on the ground and their families back home, are emblematic of the massive drawdown of American troops in Afghanistan and the dismantling of U.S. military facilities. More than 30,000 U.S. service members will leave Afghanistan in coming months as the U.S. prepares to hand responsibility for security to Afghan forces in 2014.

While no Marine at Camp Leatherneck agreed to speak on the record, many are privately angry about the hit on base morale.

"This boils my skin. One of my entire shifts will go 6.5 hours without a meal. If we need to cut back on money I could come up with 100 other places," one Leatherneck-based Marine wrote in an email this week to his wife and shared with NBC News. (The Marine declined to speak on the record.) "Instead, we will target the biggest contributor to morale. I must be losing my mind. What is our senior leadership thinking? I just got back from flying my ass off and in a few days, I will not have a meal to replenish me after being away for over 9 hours."

Until Saturday, Leatherneck's dining facility will offer its customary four meals per day. After June 1, the menu drops to three daily meals and, eventually, there will be only two hot meals served,

Gilmore revealed in an email to the impacted Marines, adding: "Any time a dining hall meal is eliminated it will be replaced from a plentiful stock of MREs (Meals Ready to Eat) or any one of several creative acronyms our Marines have come up with."

"The fact is our force in Afghanistan is shrinking fast and all the creature comforts and services deployed military-members have grown accustomed to over the past decade are going to be reduced," Gilmore wrote in an email to NBC News. "When serving we are challenged to endure different things to face different challenges over time. But we're an odd bunch, we Marines probably no surprise that we'll complain more about losing the sandwich bar on the way out than we did about getting shot at on the way in."

The tactical reason for the cooking scale-down is that the people who are assigned to support services such as food workers need to go home before the people who provide the security which enables those services," Gilmore wrote. "This is a natural outcome of the drawdown process unrelated to sequestration or the ongoing budget issues back in the States."

Back home, spouses and friends of the troops in Afghanistan are criticizing the loss of hot meals as a poor logistical choice that will impact the service members' overall nutrition, energy and spirits.

"MREs are an alternative for when you can't get to healthy food. They're supposed to be for desperation," said Babette Maxwell, founder and executive director of Military Spouse Magazine, the wife of a Navy pilot and an advocate for service members and their families. "These guys have six to nine months left on their deployment. These are highly athletic and highly physical people, toting guns, not working any less now than before and not working out any less either. Now, they're short a meal and they don't have any healthy alternatives."