
Kosher food for troops in Somalia

By STEWART AIN

In response to the fact that service personnel who keep kosher found it difficult to get suitable food during the Persian Gulf war, the JWB Jewish Chaplains Council bought and shipped 200 prepackaged kosher meals to the more than 100 Jewish Marines in Somalia.

"We needed it and we couldn't wait for them [the armed forces] to do it for us," said Rabbi David Lapp, director of the council. "We've gotten some very good reports from the field chaplains that this is a very good product."

In fact, Lapp said, he has sent word to Jewish chaplains stationed around the world that they should arrange directly with the manufacturer "if they want kosher food rations between now and when it becomes a part of the regular food distribution system."

Because of the overwhelming response to the first 200 meals in Somalia, another 4,000 meals were ordered and are to be sent this week from Camp Pendleton, Calif., according to Mary Anne Jackson, owner of the kosher food company, My Own Meals.

Jackson, speaking from her office in Deerfield, Ill., said her firm first began operations in 1986 with a non-kosher line of prepackaged children's meals. But at the beginning of 1992, she said, she switched to all-kosher products because no firm was serving this market with convenient, portable meals that need no refrigeration and can be cooked in minutes in boiling water or a microwave oven.

Jackson said she has developed 10 prepackaged kosher meals — three eight-ounce, vacuum-packed packets for children and seven 10-ounce meals, each packed in a disposable plastic bowl. Five meals are chicken, two are beef and the rest are dairy — lasagna and two versions of tortellini. The meat is glatt kosher, she said.

When the product hits store shelves in about two months, Jackson said it will carry the brand name Streit's to provide name recognition among kosher consumers. The food is under the kosher supervision of Rabbis Aaron and Moshe Soloveitchik and Rabbi Nathan Bialik.

Unlike kosher TV dinners served on airplanes, My Own Meals consists only of main courses. All are in the form of a casserole, with vegetables and sometimes potatoes in addition to chicken or beef.

Jackson said she began developing prepacked kosher meals during the Gulf war in cooperation with the Army's research and testing lab in Natick, Mass. Initially, the military believed that all that was needed to develop kosher rations was to "take the pork-out of a product," she said.

When the war ended, the military said it no longer was interested in the project.

"But I said the military still needs it, and I continued working on it," Jackson said. "Now that we have the products, we're trying to get the military to accept it. And until we can come through the front door, we'll come through the back door."

The JWB picked up the \$500 tab for the first 200 meals sent to Somalia; Jackson said Camp Pendleton will pay for the next 4,000. She added that Marine Lt. Col. John Jones at Camp Pendleton has put through the paperwork for the military to pay for another 16,000 meals.

Lapp of the JWB said he believes that before the military orders these meals on a regular basis, they have to be completely tested at the Army's Natick lab.