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# Kosher MREs head from Salem to troops

By DEBORAH MOON



MARY ANNE JACKSON, president of My Own Meals, spends a lot of time on the phone at the Salem food processing plant that produces all of the U.S. military's Kosher Meals Ready to Eat.

Jews and Muslims in the U.S. military who are now able to follow their religiously proscribed diets if they so desire owe a debt of gratitude to a Salem woman and her food processing company.

During the first war with Iraq in 1991, My Own Meals, which produced all-natural, shelf stable children's meals, agreed to shift all of its production into making kosher MREs (Meals Ready to Eat) for U.S. soldiers.

Thanks to the swift end of that war, the Dept. of Defense cancelled the contract with My Own Meals after just two months. But MOM President Mary Anne Jackson was determined to meet the dietary needs of Jews in the military. She spent the next five years working with the Pentagon, Congress and Jewish organizations such as Aleph Institute, Agudath Isaral and Chabad, and military chaplains to get the program in place.

Jan. 16, 1996, exactly five years after the launch of Operation Desert Storm, the Pentagon awarded a contract for kosher MREs to MOM. The food-processing plant now also produces halal MREs, which meet Muslim's dietary guidelines.

"It was not an easy program to get in place, to compete

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to get it, or to fight to keep it," said Jackson. "But we believe we were destined to accomplish this, as well as a similar program for Muslims under a separate company called J&M Food Products Company. This company helped the war effort and helped our country appear sensitive to religious issues."

Col. Jacob Goldstein, kosher adviser to the Defense Logistics Agency, toured the Salem plant recently and called it an intriguing operation. He said he was part of the team that three years ago launched the Dept. of Defense's program to provide seder kits to all Jewish soldiers.

My Own Meals sold the first full Passover military-issued ration designed for the seder and all eight days of Passover for use in 2005. The company's Passover Beef Stew was in all MRE seder kits for Pesach in 2006.

Last year, MOM shipped 5,500 cases of kosher MREs to the military.

"For perspective, standard MREs are more than 2 million cases in a non-war year and have gone to about 8 million during the height of the war, I think," said Jackson.

According to its Web site ([www.myownmeals.com](http://www.myownmeals.com)), in 1999 My Own Meals became the world leader in the manufacture, sale and distribution of kosher-certified, refrigeration-free meals.

"Our meals were used for the ill-fated Israeli astronaut Ilan Ramon when he went into space," she said, adding the Russian astronauts also took them to the space station years ago, but for taste rather than religious reasons. "We do special diets, such as for autistic children, celiacs, dairy-free and allergies."

Jackson said My Own Meal also supplies its kosher packaged foods to hospitals, nursing homes, prisons and universities, as well as selling items in grocery stores and online.