

Soldiers must ensure special needs are met

By Karen Jowers
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Service members and their units now have to take more responsibility for making sure their religious dietary needs are met when they go to the field, officials said.

"Multifaith entrees" are no longer automatically included in cases of Meals, Ready-to-Eat (MREs). They have to be specially ordered by unit officials.

But after April, when Defense officials are expected to sign a contract with a commercial food supply company, those with religious needs will also have more choice in the kinds of meals they eat, said Tony D'Ambrosio, a contracting officer at the Defense Personnel Support Center in Philadelphia.

Previously, two multifaith entrees, certified as both kosher and halal, and a vegetarian entree were included in 12-pack cases of MREs. Kosher meals are prepared according to Jewish dietary laws, halal meats are prepared according to Islamic dietary laws.

Side dishes to accompany those entrees were not religiously certified, but were not offensive to Muslims or Jews, D'Ambrosio said.

Under the new system, which will take about three years to implement, kosher and halal entrees will not be included in the cases; two vegetarian meals will be. In the meantime, supply personnel can order vegetarian cases of MREs, which will include six pasta-and-vegetable meals and six cheese tortellini meals, D'Ambrosio said. Officials are looking at the possibility of increasing the variety.

But unit supply personnel can work with the Defense Personnel Support Center to get meals that have been prepared according to religious guidelines, said D'Ambrosio.

The need to order religiously certified meals separately is not expected to present problems, he said. A message has been sent to military units advising them of the changes. Although the certified meals must be ordered separately, they will be ordered through the Defense Personnel Support Center. Those meals will have a shelf life of about 12 months.

The soldier who has special dietary needs will have to take some initiative in letting unit personnel know about them, said Chaplain Wilfred Brewster, the head of logistics in the Army Chief of Chaplains office. "I don't see it as a big problem," said Maj. (P) Brewster, who is also on the



More variety: Service members, such as these cavalrymen with the 1st Armored Division in Bosnia, will have more choices in MREs, or Meals, Ready-to-Eat, as the Defense Personnel Support Center changes its food ordering system.

logistics advisory group for the Armed Forces Chaplains Board.

"We encourage chaplains to assess the people in the unit before deployment," he said. "They won't be ordering the food, but they can go to the supply people and tell them there are 10 Muslims in the unit, and ask if they are covered."

The change was made after officials realized there is

much smaller demand than anticipated for the multifaith entrees, said D'Ambrosio. They also wanted to provide entire meals that are religiously certified, rather than just the entrees, he said.

The new system of ordering provides more flexibility to meet service members' dietary needs, D'Ambrosio said. "The best way to satisfy the need is to buy them under a separate contract," he said.

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