

NEWS

Finally, K(osh)-Rations for the Military

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It's been a struggle, but Jews who observe kosher dietary requirements can now enjoy a solid meal in the U.S. military.

Thanks are largely due to a non-Jew, Mary Jackson, who battled the government for five years to make kosher foods available to military personnel.

That fight ended in June when Jackson's Deerfield company, My Own Meals, Inc., was contracted to provide rabbinically certified kosher food for the military.

But the agreement was a long time in coming, Jackson told the *Jewish Star*.

Desert Storm in 1991 brought to light a need long overlooked by the military, Jackson says last week. It was during that conflict that thousands of troops were called to service who had never before been on active duty.

Among them, were many who keep kosher.

There were people in critical positions who had

no food, most rations were pork," Jackson says. "They tried shipping in fresh foods, but it was difficult logistically."

So the U.S. began looking for a kosher meal supplier, and of those asked, Jackson's refrigeration-free children's meals company was the only one to agree.

Jackson, a savvy businesswoman whose closest tie to Judaism was growing up in New York, says she figured kosher meals would make a good niche market.

When she decided to try to produce kosher packaged meals, she immersed spent time watching Orthodox women cook, visiting religious neighborhoods in New York, and studying food profiles.

But as Jackson was in the midst of this research the war ended, and with it, the military's interest in kosher foods.

In 1992, Jackson was offered an unfunded contract to develop a packaged kosher meal, with no guarantee the government would buy it. She

\$1 M later, a Deerfield company fills a gap

says she spent nearly \$1 million to develop the product.

After years of work, military officials decided that offering vegetarian entrées would be enough to satisfy kosher requirements. At that point, the Miami-based Aleph Institute, a Chabad-Lubavitch affiliate, stepped in.

"It's important all faith groups are able to eat while working," Isaac Jaroslawicz, director of legal affairs at Aleph, told the *Jewish Star*.

The influence of Aleph, combined with pressure from other Jewish organizations and state legislators Jackson commissioned to help her crusade, paid off.

Jackson now has a demand-driven contract to supply the military with a minimum of 15,000 pack-

aged kosher meals a year. My Own Meals is the first food manufacturer to sell packaged, refrigeration-free kosher dinners, Jaroslawicz says.

"This is not going to make our company grow," Jackson says of her contract with the military.

"But that's not the point. It became personal. They told me I didn't know what I was talking about, that Jews didn't care. I was offended."

The focus on kosher food has brought to light another military demand: hallal meals for Muslims. Jackson says she can easily provide for Muslim dietary needs with just a few variations to the kosher products.

The biggest concern for the military now, Jackson says, is that soldiers who have never kept kosher may begin requesting the meals when they spot the brightly colored commercial packages, compared to the drab brown and green of the military.

"Ours are pretty, white and blue boxes," Jackson notes.