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VIRGINIAN PILOT
MILITARY SECTION

Krations

THAT FIT THE BILL

Once, the military's Muslims and Jews had no choice at mealtime; they ate what everyone else did, regardless of religious dietary restrictions. But times have changed.

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There was a time when, if military service members were Jewish or Muslim, they couldn't get a decent meal in the military.

Soldiers in the field ate the standard MRE — meals ready to eat — but people with strict religious dietary guidelines stood the risk of almost certainly defying them.

Now kosher field rations for Jews, halal meals for Muslims and vegetarian MREs for Seventh Day Adventists are available to U.S. armed forces anywhere in the world.

"This really is history-making," said Mary Anne Jackson, president of the Illinois-based company that has a government contract to produce the meals.

It took five years of negotiations between Jackson, the Jewish Welfare Board — which endorses and supports Jewish chaplains in all branches of the service — and seven military agencies to come to an agreement that the specialized meals were necessary.

As of the end of July, when "My Own Meals" started shipping the MREs, 60,000 packaged meals have gone to such far-off places as Bosnia, Haiti, Korea and Germany. The most frequent reorders have come from bases in Fort Bragg, N.C., and Korea, Jackson said.

Hers is the only company currently manufacturing, storing and distributing the MREs. This means she employs a

rabbi and a Muslim inspector to supervise every step of the rigorous processes needed to produce the meals.

Kosher MREs must not contain pork or pork products; there are strict guidelines for slaughtering the animals that are used for meat products. Cleaning of the kitchen facilities requires not one, but two thorough steam washes. Dairy and meat products must not be included in the same food package.

Kosher and halal MREs follow similar preparation rules:

- They must not contain pork or pork products; there are strict guidelines for slaughtering the animals that are used for meat products.
- Cleaning of the kitchen facilities requires not one, but two thorough steam washes.
- Dairy and meat products must not be included in the same food package.

Halal MREs also have stringent rules for preparing and packaging, but they are so close to kosher rules that kosher preparations may be used for both types of dietary restrictions.

The 14 varieties of kosher and halal field rations are specially marked to guarantee they meet religious regulations.

Until Jackson and the government signed a contract, speciality MREs were nearly impossible to get. The Jewish

Welfare Board supplied kosher foods on an "as needed" basis to troops in Vietnam, said Rabbi David Lapp, a retired Army chaplain who served there.

When he made a trip to Bosnia a couple of years ago, a few of Jackson's meals were ordered, but they weren't routinely supplied; soldiers had to pay for them. "The troops were overwhelmed," he said. "They said they never thought they'd see the day when kosher meals were available."

High-calorie, nutritionally sound kosher or halal meals cost \$81.12 per case of 12 to ship anywhere in the United States, \$98 to \$103 anywhere in the world. That breaks down to roughly \$6.75 per speciality meal, compared with \$5.65 for a standard MRE. Shelf life is one year, compared to three years for standard field rations.

Jackson said there are about 5 million Muslims living in the United States; her company supplies halal meals not only to the armed forces but to the federal prison system as well.

"Not just anyone can get the meals," Lapp said. "They have to let their unit commander or chaplain know that they are observant in their religion before the meals can be ordered."

But within 24 hours a Jew or Muslim in the field with the U.S. armed forces can get a decent meal anywhere in the world, Jackson said.