

# Meals-ready-to-eat, from the rabbi

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For years, Navy Capt. (Chap.) James Apple, a Reform rabbi currently stationed at Camp Lejeune, N.C., has advocated the need for kosher Meals Ready to Eat (MRE) for observant Jewish soldiers, airmen and sailors whose dietary and religious requirements were often ignored while out at sea and on maneuvers and field assignments.

Now, however, Apple and other Jewish military personnel are enjoying kosher MREs in the field as a part of a new program designed to accommodate religious dietary requirements.

Although official Department of Defense (DoD) policy states that the department "places a high value on the rights of members of the armed forces to observe the tenets of their respective religions," there has never been fresh kosher food available to soldiers in food service facilities on military bases.

Kosher food, when available, had been purchased off the shelf of commissaries through the military quarter-master system, but the cost is high and transportation to the field is not manageable.

Under DoD regulation 1300.17, religious needs of soldiers "must be accommodated." Jewish soldiers may attend Shabbat and High Holiday services and wear kippot with uniforms if the head covering does not interfere with the standard

Kevlar helmet, gas masks or chemical suits. It was under that regulation that needs satisfying dietary requirements of several faiths were attempted several years ago.

"In an attempt to meet the dietary and religious needs" of Jewish and Muslim sol-

January.

The new kosher MREs, called Meal Religious Kosher (MRK), are manufactured by My Own Meals, a company out of Deerfield, Ill., and certified by Rabbis Aaron and Moshe Soloveichik of Chicago under the Organization of



diers, multi-faith meals were devised but, said Col. (Chap.) Cecil Richardson, an Air Force chaplain and director of the Armed Forces Chaplains Board in Arlington, Va., they were phased out when the cost became prohibitive and difficulties arose meeting daily caloric requirements dictated by the armed services.

Soldiers on field problems are required to have a diet that includes 3,600 calories per day.

"We tried too broad a sweep," Richardson said. The program was discontinued in

Orthodox Kashrus Supervision. The Soloveichiks also certify Streit's matzah and other kosher items.

In contrast to non-kosher MREs, My Own Meals have a lower fat content and less packaging, making them easier to transport. Whereas MREs have a shelf-life of three years, the shelf life for MRKs is one year, making possible the use of commercially available, off-the-shelf ingredients. Because the meals are purchased for immediate consumption, the cost of maintaining a three-year shelf life is negated.

Mary Ann Jackson, president of My Own Meals, said her company became certified kosher in 1991 although it had been in operation since 1986. In 1992, My Own Meals shipped over 3,000 kosher meals to Jewish soldiers on two-month duty in Somalia, Jackson said.

Since 1992, meals have been sent to soldiers stationed in Haiti, Germany, Japan and Korea. "We ship the same day," Jackson said, "with a bonafide order" from the contracting officer. Requests to the contracting officer often come from the chaplain.

Jackson said the company produces 5,000 meals per day. There are 14 different varieties, two of which are parve, two certified kosher for Passover and three dairy. The rest are beef and chicken. All meat used is certified glatt kosher.

Within the packaged meals there are granola bars, almonds, bagel chips, crackers and packages of ready-to-mix drinks. "Everything is parve except the cocoa mix," Jackson said.

Those meals were purchased through commercial channels because the military had not yet assigned a national stock number to the item, making it available through the military procurement system.

Apple was instrumental in having the meals field-tested by the Marine Corps in an all-day exercise conducted by Natick Labs from Massachusetts. After a day of eating the kosher meals, Marines were asked to fill out

forms for evaluation.

"I realized that it wasn't just Jews" who wanted the kosher food, Apple said. Muslim soldiers, who eat halal meat slaughtered in a similar fashion to kosher meat, also were interested in the new items as were Seventh Day Adventists.

Due to Apple's persistence, a national stock number was assigned to the MRKs. As of Feb. 29, military procurement officers on brigade and battalion levels could order kosher meals by the case for Jewish and Muslim soldiers.

"We put the word out to all Marine forces in the Atlantic," Apple said. All battalion logistic officers are now able to order kosher meals through the supply system.

"This system is going to stay," Apple said, "because of the demand and the availability through the system." Apple noted that in the past, he had purchased the meals off the shelf with available funds and distributed them to soldiers in the field.

The meals will also be available on pre-positioned Marine Corps ships throughout the world. Kosher meals have been shipped to bases in Texas, North Carolina, Alabama, Kansas, Georgia and Virginia.

Apple has favorite meals. "The pasta with vegetables and tomato sauce, veggies with potatoes and nuts and cheese tortellini with tomato sauce are absolutely delicious," he said.

"If we can ship meals to Somalia, we can do it on regular military bases."