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Military buys special meals for Jewish, Muslim troops

By Russell Working

<http://www.JewishWorldReview.com> | (KRT) There was a time when soldiers who adhered to Jewish or Islamic dietary requirements often faced the choice of violating their consciences or lugging their own rations in their duffel bags.

But nowadays observant Jewish and Muslim troops in places as far-flung as Afghanistan and Iraq can dine guilt-free on meals like Chicken Mediterranean or Florentine Lasagna from two Chicago companies that produce military rations.

The kosher firm My Own Meals Inc. and its Islamic-oriented spin-off, J & M Co., are the military's sole providers of Meals Ready to Eat — a form of prepackaged rations - that meet the standards of the Jewish and Muslim diets.

Produced under the eye of Jewish or Muslim inspectors, the meals have found a market niche in serving troops whose needs the Pentagon had overlooked until the mid-1990s.

The military long ago abandoned its much-maligned C rations in favor of MREs, which feature dinners like pork ribs and beef



Jewish troops chowing down on kosher foods in Iraq

enchiladas. These don't have to be refrigerated and can be heated in a pouch with a chemical element that boils when water is added.

But Muslims and kosher-eating Jews can't consume pork, and there are other requirements. For example, Muslims may not consume food prepared with alcohol, while kosher Jews may not eat shellfish, or dairy and meat together.

"Before we had kosher MREs, I used to travel with suitcases full of tuna fish and dried salami and kosher beef jerky — all sorts of stuff," said Rabbi Irving Elson, 44, a chaplain for the U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Miramar near San Diego.

Elson has spent nine months in the Middle East in the last two years and relies on the Chicago companies' MREs.

The production of My Own Meals and J & M's meals is a far-flung endeavor. Their packaging plant is in Chicago and the office in Deerfield, Ill., but the companies buy from distributors across the country. The kosher beef is slaughtered in Iowa, while halal chicken is killed in Iowa, said Mary Anne Jackson, president of My Own Meals.

The meat is shipped under seal to a plant in Salem, Ore. Production of kosher and halal food occurs at separate times, under the direction of rabbis from Organization of Orthodox Kashruth Supervision in Chicago or inspectors from the Islamic Food and Nutrition Council of America.

Preparing for production of kosher meals requires meticulous effort in the kitchen, said Joshua Sklare, an Orthodox rabbi who works as a "mashgiach," or kosher supervisor. He is one of three rabbis from Chicago who travel to the Oregon site to oversee the cooking.

Rabbis have to participate in the entire cooking process, and nothing can come on the production floor without the permission of a rabbi. They are even required to light the boilers.

"When I first get here we *kashar* everything," said Sklare, referring to the process of making food and a kitchen kosher. "We submit all the utensils to heat and all of the factory to heat, either in a steam or boiling form, at 212 degrees Fahrenheit or above. ... This allows us to be able to use it for kosher."

Once cooked, the meals are shipped to Chicago for boxing, sorting and distribution. The meals are distributed with a packet of snacks that can be consumed without preparation, such as raisins, bagel chips, granola bars and even powdered cocoa.

"They can eat it plain," said Joseph D'Onofrio, president of J&M. "If you don't have water, you just pour it in your mouth. It's the greatest chocolate."

Muhammad Chaudry, president of the Islamic food council, said asking Muslim soldiers to eat *haram*, or unlawful food, would be asking them to commit a sin. And it could hinder troop readiness.

"Let's say you send a soldier just a regular meal," he said. "It could have pork, it could have gelatin, it could have things that Muslims or Jewish soldiers don't eat. And that soldier finds out right in the field that, 'I'm committing a sin by eating something (forbidden),' this is more serious than fighting on this earth for him. How is he going to perform his duty properly?"

My Own Meals began production in December 1992 even before it had a Pentagon contract, selling the meals to individual bases, Jackson said. In 1996, the Pentagon agreed to go forward, and the company began shipping.

James Lecollier, spokesman for the Defense Logistic Agency's Defense Supply Center in Philadelphia, said the Pentagon ordered 27,860 cases of kosher and 308,000 cases of halal MREs in the 2004 fiscal year (each case contains 12 meals) compared with a total of 6 million cases for the entire military.

But officials felt it was important to come up with something for troops with dietary requirements.

"We advertised it," he said. "The idea was ... if it was acceptable to the troops, we would add them" to the list of available rations.

The MREs are also served in prisons and universities, and people can buy them in some stores. The U.S. military distributes them to refugees in the Muslim world, and it has handed them out to Iraqi soldiers. Jackson has traveled to places like Saudi Arabia to do business.

The halal meals especially have caught the interest of competitors abroad, particularly when she had a booth at a trade show in Abu Dhabi, Jackson said.

"When the Pakistani companies came in, they would swarm around me and rip everything off the walls to take with them," she said.

Sometimes soldiers have complained that they weren't receiving their kosher or halal meals abroad, and there were reports of cases of kosher MREs stacked up in Kuwait in 2003. Jackson said soldiers or their families sometimes call or write, hoping to buy MREs directly from the company. It is possible to buy individual cases; Jackson says soldiers need to get approval from their chaplain and the military will supply them.

Elson, the Marine Corps rabbi, said the meals are surprisingly popular with the troops.

"The best comment and compliment is that people who are not Jewish want to get them," he said. "I don't know if it's because they taste better, or because they're different. When I was able to get a hold of some, my chaplain's assistant, who is not Jewish, thought it was the greatest thing."