



NEWS RELEASE

Defense Commissary Agency

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Happy birthday!

Commissaries honor Army's 243 years of service

By DeCA Corporate Communications



Note: To see a video on the agency's YouTube page related to the Army's 243rd birthday, go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SQqoXUIE4ro>. To see photographs on DeCA's Flickr page, go to <https://www.flickr.com/photos/commissary/sets/72157691957282840>.

FORT LEE, Va. – As the U.S. Army marks its 243rd anniversary on June 14, it's also significant to note that the history of American soldiers goes hand in hand with the commissary benefit.

It's an ongoing relationship that continues to this day with 77 commissaries serving military members and their families on Army installations.

“The Defense Commissary Agency is proud to salute the entire Army community on their anniversary and continue its delivery of the commissary benefit,” said retired Rear Adm. Robert J. Bianchi, DeCA's interim director and CEO.

In 1775, the Continental Congress established the Army and named George Washington its commanding general. That same year, Congress created the Office of the Commissary General of Stores and Purchases to provide the Army's daily rations. Officers in charge of subsistence operations were known as chief commissaries, while their staff consisted of assistant commissaries and commissary sergeants.

Fifty years later, the commissariat, as it was then known, began selling food items – which at the time were also known as commissaries or commissary items – from its warehouses “at cost” to Army officers for their personal use. By 1841, officers could also purchase items for their families.

In the Army's early years, soldiers who were tired of – or unable to get – official rations could buy additional goods from civilian vendors known as “sutlers.” While these merchants provided a valuable service, many charged exorbitant prices or sold goods of dubious quality. Because such abuses became commonplace during the Civil War, Congress subsequently allowed soldiers of all ranks to purchase non-ration items from Army subsistence warehouses.

These warehouses with makeshift sales counters were gradually replaced by Army-run grocery stores called “sales commissaries,” which sold items at cost, providing soldiers good food at reasonable prices.

When the Army's mission expanded around the world, commissaries followed, first to Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines in 1899, then to China in 1900, Panama in 1904, and France in 1917-18. After World War II, hundreds of stores existed in both hemispheres, serving America's military during the Cold War, and continuing that service today in nearly 240 locations around the world.

Since the official start of the modern benefit in 1867, U.S. military commissaries have existed at more than 1,000 different locations, on every continent except Antarctica. While they were originally created for active-duty Army personnel, the stores gradually were made available to members of every armed service, military retirees, and the immediate family members of all authorized shoppers.

-DeCA-

– *This release was adapted from an article originally written by former DeCA historian Dr. Peter Skirbunt.*

About DeCA: *The Defense Commissary Agency operates a worldwide chain of commissaries providing groceries to military personnel, retirees and their families in a safe and secure shopping environment. Commissaries provide a military benefit, saving authorized patrons thousands of dollars annually on their purchases compared to similar products at commercial retailers. The discounted prices include a 5-percent surcharge, which covers the costs of building new commissaries and modernizing existing ones. A core military*

family support element, and a valued part of military pay and benefits, commissaries contribute to family readiness, enhance the quality of life for America's military and their families, and help recruit and retain the best and brightest men and women to serve their country.

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