



# NEWS RELEASE

## Defense Commissary Agency

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# Happy birthday!

## Commissaries parallel, honor Army's 245 years of service

*By Tamara Eastman,  
DeCA historian*



*American soldiers purchase items at a commissary in France in 1919. (National Archives)*

**Note:** To see a video related to this release, click on this link:  
<https://vimeo.com/427059508>. To read this release online, go to the DeCA [website](http://www.commissaries.com).

**FORT LEE, Va.** – On June 14 the U.S. Army will mark its 245<sup>th</sup> anniversary. It was on June 14, 1775, that the Continental Congress established the Army and named Gen. George Washington as the first Commanding General of the Army.

Just two days after the Army was created, the Continental Congress established the Commissary General of Stores & Provisions to provide daily rations to the Army. Today, the Department of Defense recognizes the commissary benefit as mission critical, and throughout the years it has gained the admiration and gratitude of soldiers and their families, said Army Command Sgt. Maj. Tomeka N. O'Neal, senior enlisted advisor to the Defense Commissary Agency (DeCA) director.

“The commissary consistently ranks as one of the military’s top non-pay benefits – it attracts new recruits and helps convince soldiers to reenlist,” O’Neal said. “Many of our young service families simply could not make ends meet each month without the savings provided by the commissaries.

“Throughout my career I’ve always benefitted from having a commissary that provided valuable savings to me and my family,” she said.

Going back to its establishment, Joseph Trumbull was appointed as the first Commissary General on July 19, 1775.

In the early days, traveling merchants known as “sutlers” followed the troops and sold foods and goods that weren’t in the daily rations. However, many of the sutlers charged high prices, and often the food was not in good condition by the time it reached the camps.

In 1825 the Army began allowing officers to purchase goods at Subsistence Department warehouses. In 1841 they received permission to begin purchasing goods for their families, as well.

After over 90 years of abuse by sutlers, Congress authorized the subsistence warehouses to begin selling goods to enlisted men on July 1, 1867. By 1868, soldiers could purchase goods from an official 82-item stock list which was comparable to goods found in civilian dry goods stores at the time. By contrast, today many commissaries carry over 15,000 items.

At the turn of the century, the subsistence warehouses were replaced by Army-run stores called sales commissaries.

The first overseas commissary stores opened in the Philippines and in China in 1899 and 1900, respectively. They were followed by stores in Panama and in the Caribbean in 1904 and France in 1918. All of the services adopted the Army’s concept of commissary operations but tailored their own stores to meet their individual customer needs. Commissaries always proved to be especially important to the quality of life of troops and their family members living overseas.

By the end of World War II, commissaries were being run by individual military services. The Troop Support Agency (TSA) operated Army commissaries. Other military service commissaries were operated by the Navy Resale Support Office (NAVRESSO); the Marine

Corps Services Command and Air Force Commissary Service (AFCOMS). The U.S. Coast Guard operated some smaller stores located inside their exchanges.

In 1952 the Department of Defense (DOD) ordered an across-the-board 2 percent surcharge to help cover stores' expenses; this rate gradually increased until it reached the current level of 5 percent in 1983. The funds generated by this surcharge pay for the construction, maintenance and renovation of commissary stores, as well as equipment and supplies.

In 1989, Congress directed DOD to study the efficiency of operating separate military commissary systems. The study recommended that all of the separate systems be combined under one agency to improve customer service and save money. The Defense Commissary Agency was established on May 15, 1990, with Army Maj. Gen. John P. Dreska as DeCA's first director. On Oct. 1, 1991, DeCA officially assumed control of all U.S. military commissaries worldwide.

Today, commissaries continue to save soldiers and their families thousands of dollars annually on their purchases in comparison to similar products at commercial stores. Customers can also enjoy additional savings through special sales and coupons.

**-DeCA-**

**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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