

**A Brief History  
of the  
Quartermaster Corps**



# QUARTERMASTER CORPS

## U.S. ARMY

### *Origins*

In 1775, the American colonies were at the beginning of their revolution against British rule. Congress authorized the creation of a small Army on 14 June 1775. Two days later, on 16 June, Congress authorized the position of Quartermaster General. This action marked the beginning of today's Quartermaster Corps. The Army needed logistical support. The job of the Quartermaster General was to provide the shelter, transportation, storage, and other functions needed to sustain the Soldiers. Thomas Mifflin became the first Quartermaster General.

Unfortunately, the new nation lacked the means to pay for the Army. Sustainment suffered without enough money. Hardships suffered by the Soldiers at Valley Forge in 1777 are well known; but other winters were equally bad. It took time for the Quartermaster Department to develop the logistical organization. Over time, the sustainment support to the Revolutionary War Soldiers did improve.



*Valley Forge was only one example of hardships endured during the American Revolution*

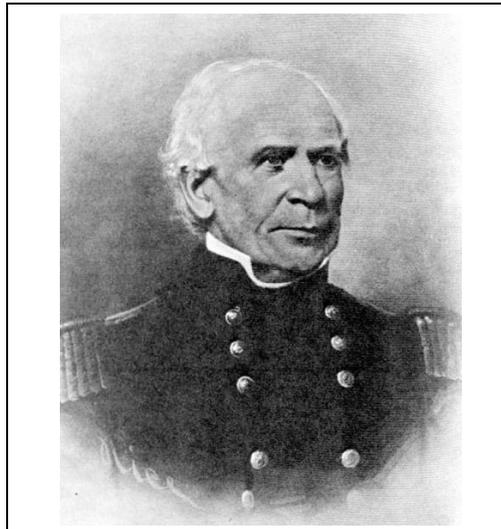
After the American Revolution, Congress eliminated the job of Quartermaster General because the position was considered unnecessary in peacetime. The Army tried several alternatives to a military Quartermaster General, but none of them worked. Shortly before the United States entered into another war with Great Britain in 1812, Congress again authorized a Quartermaster General. The Army also made some improvements to its supply system. Unfortunately, these were too little and too late for the wartime requirements. The poor logistical support during the War of 1812 resulted in a stronger Quartermaster Department after the war.

#### *Quartermaster Department 1818 – 1912*

In 1818, Thomas Jesup became the Quartermaster General, and he remained in that position until 1860. As a combat veteran, Jessup understood the importance of support to frontline Soldiers; and he instituted practices and policies that have lasted until this day. According to Jesup, a Quartermaster at any level was first a military position, which required Soldiers familiar with military requirements. Yet he also insisted upon strict standards in accounting. All Quartermaster Soldiers kept detailed records, which were subject to regular audits. He instilled a sense of purpose and professional pride within the Quartermaster Department. Because of his reforms, historians often call Thomas Jesup the “father of the Quartermaster Corps.”

During Jessup’s time, Quartermasters either hired civilians or used detailed Soldiers to do the actual work. There were no Quartermaster units. Finding men to drive the supply wagons was a vital part of the job. Unlike today the Army used a different agency, called the

Commissary Department to purchase food. The Quartermaster Department did provide for the storage and transportation of food.

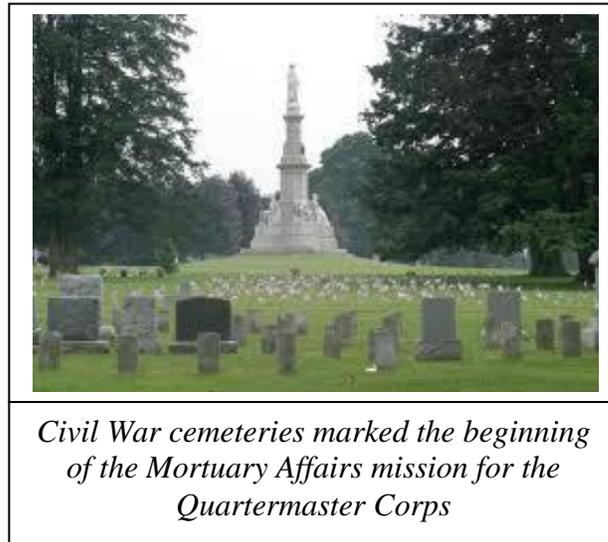


*Thomas Jesup  
Father of the Quartermaster Corps*

When the United States entered a war with Mexico in 1846, Quartermaster Soldiers again supported the effort. This war extended into Mexican territory. Logisticians supported the Army under these difficult circumstances, often purchasing their supplies.

From 1861 to 1865, the Civil War challenged the Quartermaster Soldiers in ways not previously imaginable. In a very short time, the Army grew from a few thousand soldiers in 1860 to over half a million in 1862; by the end of the war, the size exceeded one million Soldiers. In its haste to provide equipment to the new Soldiers, the Quartermasters often paid excessive prices or accepted shoddy merchandise. Over time the Quartermaster Department established procedures for efficient purchase and distribution of supplies.

Moving these huge armies was a difficult task. The mules used to pull the wagons consumed so much food that Armies could not move far from their bases. Once again Quartermasters learned how to adapt to the scale of the Civil War. They used a system of depots to support armies on the move. They also learned how to use railroads and steamboats whenever possible.



During the Civil War, the nation began a system of military cemeteries under the Quartermaster Department. For the first time, the Army began to care for the remains of fallen Soldiers in an orderly manner. This marked the beginning of the Mortuary Affairs mission, which continues to the present time.

Unfortunately, the Quartermaster Department lost this experience in supporting large armies after the Civil War. Instead of large operations, the Army conducted smaller campaigns against the Indians.

In 1898, the United States declared war on Spain in support of the Cuban revolt against Spanish rule. The American Army invaded Cuba to eject the Spanish and help the Cuban rebels. This invasion revealed a lack of experience at major operations.

Logistical support encountered serious problems. Once again, the Army was mobilized faster than the Quartermaster Department could purchase supplies. New units often lacked proper equipment, or else the Army paid too much for shoddy merchandise. The leadership did not understand how to load the ships for the invasion force, nor did they understand the importance of forward depots. Soldiers suffered terribly from the lack of support and their plight received widespread public attention. The lessons from this conflict had an important influence on the Army and the Quartermaster Corps.

#### *Quartermaster Corps 1912 – 1962*

Learning from its bitter experience in the Spanish American War, the Army instituted wide ranging reforms covering most aspects of its organization. One of these reforms was to convert the Quartermaster Department into the Quartermaster Corps. In 1912, Congress authorized the combination of the Quartermaster, Commissary (subsistence), and Paymaster Departments into the Quartermaster Corps. The Paymaster function became the Finance Corps in 1920, but the management of subsistence supplies has remained a core mission of the Quartermaster Corps.



*The Philadelphia Depot was home to the first Quartermaster School.*

With this reorganization, the Army created entire Quartermaster units for the first time. Previously, the Army relied upon contracted services to do much of the actual work, especially moving supplies. Performance of contractors was irregular, especially overseas or in war. Now, the Army believed that trained military units were the most reliable means of providing vital supplies and services.

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, these reforms proved their value. The mobilization was not perfect; but it was far better than previous mobilizations, especially considering the scale of the effort. Overseas, the use of trained Quartermaster units provided better logistical support than previous conflicts. In France, Quartermaster units operated ports and advanced depots.

Modern warfare began in World War I. Armies began to use trucks, tanks, and aircraft on a large scale. New weapons used larger amounts of ammunition. Logisticians adjusted their support to these changes. Now Quartermaster units provided petroleum and repair parts. Another new mission came when the Quartermaster Corps began to provide shower and laundry services. Cleanliness not only improved the Soldiers' morale, but it reduced the spread of

disease. The effectiveness of this logistical support was largely a result of the reforms after the Spanish American War.



*Lessons learned from the Spanish American War improved the Quartermaster performance in World War I*

In December 1941, the United States again entered a global conflict. This time, World War II included the United States, Great Britain, the British Commonwealth, the Soviet Union and others fighting Germany, Japan and Italy. The fighting stretched from the Pacific Islands, to North Africa, to continental Europe. This war was unlike any previous conflicts in the size and scope of the fighting. The U.S. Army reached a size of over eight million.

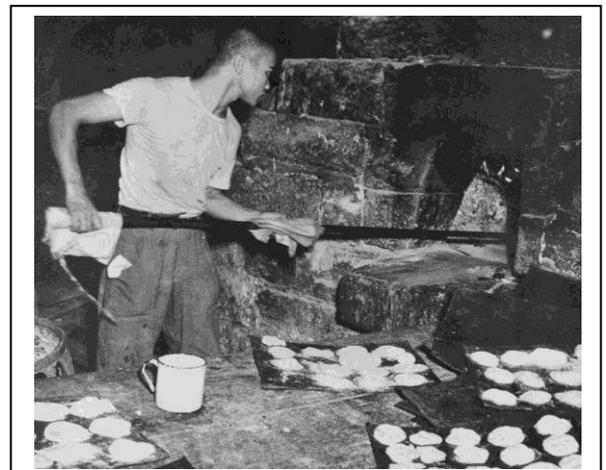
All of these Soldiers required some form of support from the Quartermaster Corps. Initially, the Quartermaster Corps managed the construction of new installations, both for training and ammunition factories. The Quartermaster Corps designed and purchased uniforms for climates ranging from arctic to tropical. Because the Air Corps was still a part of the Army, the Quartermaster Corps also provided air crews with specialized uniforms and equipment. Until

the Transportation Corps became a separate organization in 1942, the Quartermaster General also managed the movement of troops and supplies.

Across the conflict, logisticians learned how to support the Army's offensive operations. In Europe, the success of Allied attacks meant that supply lines steadily grew longer and the strain on the truck convoys increased. Eventually, the supply lines stretch too far and the Allied offensive paused to allow the supplies to catch up. Success in the Pacific depended upon delivering the correct quantity of supplies to the units on various islands.



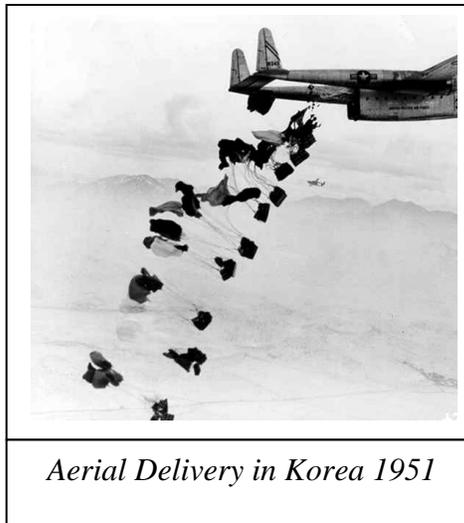
*Unloading supplies in Europe 1944*



*Baking biscuits in Bataan 1941*

Although Mechanization first appeared during World War I, it achieved far more importance by World War II. All types of modern equipment required logistical support. The Army needed large numbers of trucks to move all of these supplies. Quartermasters managed petroleum and repair parts in far larger quantities than before. During this time, the Army began using cargo parachutes to deliver supplies to isolated units, although aerial delivery did not become a Quartermaster mission until 1950.

After World War II ended, the American public hoped for an era of peace. That was not the case. The rise of the communist threat in the Soviet Union and China created a period of armed tensions known as the “Cold War.” Both the communist and the free world remained ready to go to war on short notice. The United States based troops in Europe and Asia, and remained ready to reinforce these forces. Quartermaster Soldiers supported the Cold War at almost all levels. This was the first time that the United States stationed units in Europe and Asia on a long-term basis, and Army logisticians learned how to support units overseas. They maintained depots with reserve supplies in case fighting broke out. Within the United States, they supported an enlarged Army.



*Aerial Delivery in Korea 1951*

In June 1950, the communist led North Korean government invaded South Korea. The Cold War turned into a fighting war. The United States and its allies responded by sending forces to defend South Korea. Once again, Quartermasters supported the fighting. They located and used surplus World War II equipment, which was faster than waiting for new production. Aerial delivery became a vital means of resupply because of the poor roads. When the Marines

retreated from the Chosin Reservoir, they needed a bridge to cross a ravine. No one had air dropped an unassembled bridge before. Yet Quartermaster riggers completed the drop. The Korean Conflict also changed the way the Army handled the remains of fallen Soldiers. Previously, the Army temporarily interred deceased Soldiers in temporary cemeteries and returned them to the United States after the conflict. During the Korean Conflict, the Army began to return the remains of fallen Soldiers to the United States during the fighting.

*Present times 1962 – forward*

In 1962, another reorganization changed the way that the Quartermaster Corps functioned. Previously, the Quartermaster General was responsible for everything related to the Quartermaster Corps. This included designing clothing and equipment, purchasing equipment, operating depots, training, and personnel management. Now a new organization, called Army Materiel Command, assumed responsibility for the national level purchasing, inventory management, and depot functions (otherwise known as wholesale logistics). The Army assigned the training and personnel management functions to other commands and terminated the position of Quartermaster General.



*Mifflin Hall  
Home of the Quartermaster School  
1961-2010*

Despite these changes, the Quartermaster Corps remained a vital part of the Army. Quartermaster Soldiers continued to provide supplies and services. Increasingly, they worked in cooperation with the Ordnance and Transportation Corps. At Ft. Lee, the Quartermaster School remained the centerpiece of branch activities. In 1981, the Army re-instituted the title of Quartermaster General. The commandant of the Quartermaster School became the Quartermaster General, although without the same extensive responsibilities.

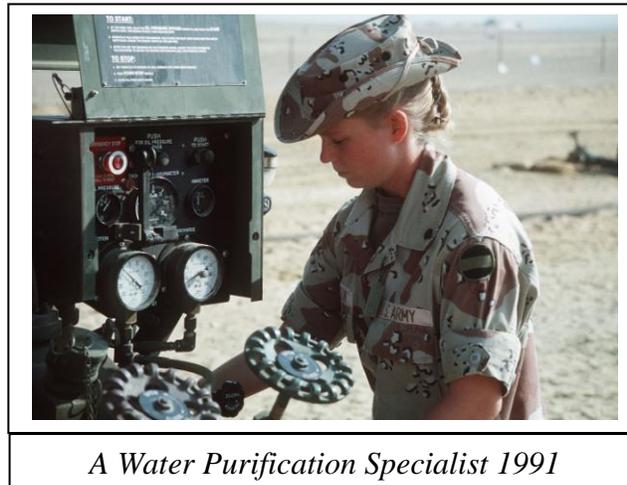
From the mid 1960s to the early 1970s, the United States tried to prevent the communist takeover of South Vietnam. During these years, the Vietnam Conflict overshadowed all other military activity. Although the sudden build-up created logistical confusion at first, the military developed a solid logistical structure over time. Quartermaster units provided subsistence, petroleum, other supplies, and field services on a steady basis. The excellent ports and short supply lines allowed for plentiful support to the soldiers.



*Depot Operations in Vietnam*

In 1989, the Cold War suddenly ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union. For over forty years, the United States and its allies deterred communist aggression. Quartermaster Soldiers provided the vital logistical support that allowed the free world to prevail.

The end of the Cold War did not result in an era of peace. For the next twenty years, the U.S. Army, and its allies, engaged in a variety of operations, ranging from major combat, to peacekeeping, to humanitarian assistance. Quartermaster Soldiers supported the Army through all of these operations. Usually, they worked with other logistical branches or with other services and often worked with other nations.



*A Water Purification Specialist 1991*

In August 1990, Iraq invaded and annexed the nation of Kuwait. In response, the United States led a coalition force to liberate Kuwait. Once again, Quartermaster Soldiers supported the effort. By this time, modern tanks and other vehicles consumed an enormous amount of fuel. Total fuel consumption for this conflict exceeded two million gallons. In addition to using host nation petroleum facilities, the United States constructed and operated new facilities. The desert climate created unprecedented demands upon water purification units. Tragically, a water

purification unit suffered the highest proportion of casualties when a rocket hit their barracks during the closing hours of the conflict.

Other operations followed the liberation of Kuwait. Immediately after the fighting, the United States used parachutes to deliver supplies to Kurdish refugees who fled the fighting. Later during the 1990s, the Balkan nations of Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia engaged in very bitter fighting and the United States joined its allies in maintaining peace in this portion of Southern Europe. In 1994, the United States led the coalition force to restore a democratic government in Haiti. Hurricanes, earthquakes, and other natural disasters often resulted in military assistance to the affected areas. All of these operations challenged the logisticians to provide the best support with the least cost.

Even as the Quartermasters supported these operations, technology changed military logistics. The Quartermaster Corps began using computers during the Vietnam era, but these were large, clumsy machines. By the 1990s, information technology advanced considerably. Now smaller, faster computers could connect with each other. Quartermaster Soldiers could now know more about their supplies. They could provide better support without keeping large quantities on hand.

On September 11, 2001, the focus of all military activity changed with a terrible abruptness. Terrorists hijacked commercial airlines and crashed them into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, killing thousands of people. Soon Islamic extremists based in Afghanistan claimed responsibility for this attack. In response, the United States led a coalition force to topple the Afghan government. Later the United States also removed the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. Early successes in both operations were followed by prolonged guerilla warfare that lasted for the rest of the decade.

As part of the logistical community, Quartermaster Soldiers supported these operations under difficult circumstances. In Iraq, they faced the constant danger of convoy operations in support of distant bases. Other Soldiers operated an Inland Petroleum Distribution System, which was basically a pipeline system assembled in the combat zone. In Afghanistan, the high altitudes and poor roads made logistical support even harder. Aerial delivery once again became a principal means of resupply. Quartermaster personnel developed a low-cost, disposable parachute to reach isolated outposts. Once again they developed new solutions to tough problems.



*Using low cost parachutes to deliver supplies in Afghanistan*



*Convoy operations in Iraq*



*Petroleum Operations*



*Taking care of the fallen Soldiers*



*Distributing water in Afghanistan*

Other changes came to all of the logistical branches. Increasingly, sustainment units consisted of Quartermaster, Ordnance, and Transportation units performing multiple functions. Officers and senior non-commissioned officers needed to understand all the support functions. Starting in 2008, the Army created the Logistics Branch for senior captains and above. New lieutenants still enter the Army in one of the three branches, but after finishing the captains' career course they will change to the Logistics Branch. Enlisted and warrant officers still keep their Quartermaster Branch.

### *The Future*

We know that the nature of warfare will change but we cannot predict how. No matter how the Army changes, supply and services will still be essential to all military operations. Quartermaster Soldiers will provide food, supplies, petroleum, mortuary support, aerial delivery, laundry, showers, and perhaps other functions not even considered at present. They will work

with fellow Army logisticians. They will also work with logisticians from other services and nations.

Since June 1775, Quartermaster Soldiers have supported both combat and non-combat operations. Their dedication has been crucial to the success of military operations. No other branch has done so many functions throughout its history. Despite all these changes, the fundamental mission of support to the individual combat Soldier has remained constant. Future generations of Quartermaster Soldiers will uphold the regimental motto of “Supporting Victory.”

