



THE
QUARTERMASTER
CORPS AT
250

STILL SUPPORTING VICTORY!

■ *By Tim Gilhool*



Before there was a nation, there was the Army. The United States Army began on June 14, 1775, as the Continental Congress authorized enlistment of riflemen to serve the United Colonies for one year. Just days later they realized that someone must sign for the military equipment and supplies. In all seriousness, the Congress, and more importantly the Continental Army's commander, LTG George Washington, recognized the need to appoint an individual to plan and coordinate logistics. The first Quartermaster General (QMG) was Thomas Mifflin of the future commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Unfortunately, the unvarnished truth is that the mission of QMGs did not start off as smoothly as one would hope. Mifflin's tenure in the position came under intense scrutiny for his poor handling of the department, particularly its financial affairs. Multiple accusations of fiscal misconduct against Mifflin were made by Soldiers and civilians alike. He resigned his commission in February 1779.

Thankfully, he was replaced by more competent successors, including MG Nathael Greene, who is credited with significant reforms of the Continental Army's supply situation. By the time of the Yorktown Campaign in 1781, Quartermaster officials were positioned across the 13 colonies. When LTG Washington and his French allies made the 680-mile march from New England to Virginia to confront Lord Cornwallis and his British troops along the York River, the Allied armies were well supported by experienced battlefield logisticians and more than adequate levels of supply.

Following the Revolution and formal establishment of the U.S. Army, the Quartermaster department was significantly reduced in size and scope. Intermittent combat against various First Nations tribes and even renewed conflict against the British during the War of 1812 did not significantly alter its methods or organizational structure.

This changed in 1861 with the coming of the American Civil War. The Army grew from a force of less than 17,000 regulars to approximately 1 million active Soldiers. The Quartermaster department, under the able leadership of MG Montgomery Meigs, greatly expanded its duties and responsibilities. Union logistics played a decisive role

in ultimate victory over the Confederacy, with the Army incorporating the large-scale use of military railroads for distribution. Massive supply bases, such as the famous bastion at City Point (modern-day Hopewell, Virginia) supported LTG Ulysses S. Grant in the final campaigns against Richmond and Petersburg. These bases granted Union Soldiers logistical boons that far outshined those of their gray-clad foes.

The mismatch between the lethality of the weapons and asymmetrical tactics employed during the conflict also bestowed on the Quartermaster department another sacred responsibility. With over 110,000 battlefield losses and an additional 200,000-plus dead due to disease and other causes, graves registration became a significant task. The Quartermaster department, still under the leadership of MG Meigs until 1882, established federal cemeteries at Fredericksburg, Petersburg, and the largest in Arlington, Virginia. The fact that the Arlington National Cemetery was on land previously held by the family of their principal wartime foe, Robert E. Lee, held its own sense of both irony and closure. Quartermasters have continued to oversee this task to this day.

A critical point of understanding how Quartermasters did their jobs during the 19th century is that although there were Quartermaster officers and NCOs assigned to tactical formations, there were not necessarily separate Quartermaster units. Quartermaster depots existed, including across the American West and a large supply arsenal in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, but the majority of supply activities were physically executed by a combination of contractors and Soldier details.

This teaming of a small number of Army logistics professionals augmented by external elements was the norm during the 19th century. This arrangement faced a major test near the end of the century with American involvement in Cuba and the Philippines. For Quartermasters, the 1898 Spanish-American War was far from a shining moment in our martial history. Army units suffered numerous supply challenges, from maintaining stockpiles to managing distribution, as we fought our first expeditionary campaign. Though ultimately winning in both the Pacific and the Caribbean, the Army's experiences

in fighting for the first time overseas prompted significant reforms in doctrine, organization, and force structure over the next several decades.

Those changes came to our branch in 1912. The Army's Quartermaster department was converted into the Quartermaster Corps, reflecting a broader, more battlefield-focused orientation. In addition, it consolidated proponentcy for all quartermaster, subsistence, and paymaster functions under the leadership of the QMG. Paymaster separated again in 1920 with the establishment of a separate Finance Corps. The first formal Quartermaster School was also established at the Philadelphia depot in 1916. All these reforms came together just in time for the largest and most complex challenge to date: U.S. involvement in World War I.

American involvement in "the war to end all wars" came late in the conflict. The Allied powers around Great Britain and France had been engaged in vicious combat against Imperial Germany and the Central Powers since August 1914. Warfare involving massive armies and new technologies, including machine guns, poison gas, and fast-firing artillery, had produced both significant casualties and tactical stalemate across much of the Western Front. This was the situation when the U.S. Army received orders to deploy to France in early 1917, and it fell to the newly reformed Quartermaster Corps to receive, equip, and deploy the hundreds of thousands of people rapidly entering federal service.

It was during this conflict that the Army and the Quartermaster Corps became more recognizable to

modern readers. Most of our current division-sized units trace their lineage back to 1917, as do the first separate logistics formations. These distinct Quartermaster units were needed because the technology of warfare had evolved. World War I saw the large-scale use of motorized trucks, necessitating both formal training on their operation and the infrastructure to support them. It is here that we see the introduction of specialized duty positions. In the 19th century, a Quartermaster NCO oversaw a range of supply-related tasks, but in World War I they needed Soldiers who were experts at specific tasks, such as driving and/or refueling vehicles. Over the coming decades, these tasks evolved into the military occupational specialties (MOSs) that populate the Quartermaster Corps today.

Though American involvement in fighting overseas was brief compared to the other combatants, it had enormous consequences for how the Army trained, organized, and equipped itself. In the years between the end of World War I and World War II, the Quartermaster Corps continued to evolve, both at Army level and in tactical formations. Given their ubiquitous responsibilities of supply management and field feeding, there were literally Quartermaster

Soldiers in almost every type of unit in the Army, from infantry rifle companies to coastal artillery batteries. The Quartermaster Corps also found a new home, moving from the Philadelphia depot to a rapidly growing camp outside Petersburg, Virginia. Camp Lee, eventually Fort Lee, became the epicenter for all Quartermaster training and professional education.

To meet the needs of the huge armored and motorized force, the Army designed and fielded numerous specialized

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Quartermaster units, including service companies, depot companies, railhead companies, petroleum supply companies, truck companies, bakery companies, salvage and repair companies, laundry and bath units, and graves registration companies. By the end of World War II in 1945, the Army had over 3,000 Quartermaster units, from detachment to group level. It is estimated that almost half a million Soldiers served in the Quartermaster Corps during the war, managing over 70,000 items and providing 24 million meals a day at the height of the conflict.

Though it has not returned to the massive size and scope it became during the 1940s, the Quartermaster Corps has continued to evolve and serve in both war and peace. During the Cold War, it gained propensity for additional battlefield functions: aerial delivery and water purification. These skills were practiced and refined in wars in Korea during the 1950s and Southeast Asia during the 1960s, though the role and function of the QMG changed significantly.

Traditionally, the QMG was one of the most powerful and influential leaders in the Army, working directly for the Secretary of Defense at various times. At the start of the Kennedy administration in 1960, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara directed the establishment of U.S. Army Material Command as a central manager for sustainment and procurement. The chiefs of the technical services, including Ordnance, Transportation, and Quartermaster, were stripped of their responsibilities in research, development, and procurement, and the positions were abolished. The positions reappeared in 1983 under U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, but strictly in oversight for branch propensity. As of now, those positions have formally changed to school commandants with the rank of colonel instead of a general officer.

In the aftermath of Vietnam in the 1970s and early 1980s, the Army refocused on defending Western Europe from the Soviet Union. Throughout all these periods, Quartermaster formations and Soldiers continued to be present at all echelons. What was happening, though, was a trend toward grouping multifunctional logistics capabilities under brigade- and battalion-level formations. While there were still Quartermaster supply companies,

they were assigned to a corps support, main support, or forward support battalion headquarters. Strictly Quartermaster battlefield functions, like petroleum, water, mortuary affairs, and aerial delivery, were kept at corps- or even theater-level organizations. By the early 2000s, this trend accelerated with the introduction of multifunctional forward support companies attached to the combat arms battalions. Quartermaster Soldiers were organic to these units but worked alongside Ordnance and Transportation MOSs.

Over the last several decades, Quartermaster Soldiers and units have continued to serve with distinction in both war and peace, overseas and at home. From peacekeeping in the Balkans to fighting the war on terrorism, anywhere the Army goes, Quartermasters are there. Today, as the Army continues to transform for the challenges of large-scale combat operations, the essential tasks that can only be accomplished by a 92-series MOS remain in good hands. From their homebase at the redesignated Fort Gregg-Adams, Virginia, named for both retired Quartermaster officer LTG Arthur Gregg and former Adjutant General officer LTC Charity Adams, the fight to sustain continues. From 1775 to 2025, the Army and the nation know that Quartermasters are the key to supporting victory.

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Featured Photos

Top Left: C-119 delivering airdropped supplies in Korea. (U.S. Air Force photo)

Top Right: Then LTC Arthur Gregg, commander of the 96th Supply & Service Battalion, conducts a promotion ceremony for CPT Sandy Hertz while deployed to Cam Rahn Bay, Republic of Vietnam, circa 1967. (In The Leaven (COURTESY PHOTO.)

Bottom Left: Soldier from 11th Airborne Division conducting refueling operations, Alaska, circa 2024.

Bottom Right: Continental Army Soldiers at their winter encampment near Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, circa 1778.