



# NEWS RELEASE

## Defense Commissary Agency

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## DeCA publishes commissary history

*By Benjamin Rouse,  
DeCA public affairs intern*

**FORT LEE, Va.** – The Defense Commissary Agency has published “The Illustrated History of American Military Commissaries,” a two-volume set that is the first comprehensive history ever compiled about the commissaries that serve the U.S. armed forces.

“It’s exciting,” says Philip E. Sakowitz Jr., DeCA director and CEO. “The book provides a wonderful history of this great benefit, which goes back 234 years and is interwoven with the histories of agriculture, business, economics, marketing, technology, the United States itself and the nation’s armed forces. It will bring about an awareness of what the commissaries do today, as well as what they have gone through since their creation. It helps us realize that today, more than ever, the commissary is worth the trip.”

The history of the commissary benefit stretches back to the establishment of the Army’s Subsistence Department in 1775. The department began selling items “at cost” from its warehouses to officers in 1825, to officers’ families in 1841, and to enlisted men in 1867. The last date is considered to be the birthday of the modern commissary system.

Research for “The Illustrated History” began 22 years ago when DeCA’s historian, Dr. Peter Skirbunt – who at the time was the historian of the Air Force Commissary Service – began assembling data and information for what he thought would eventually become a history of Air Force commissaries. The creation of DeCA in 1991 merged the stores of all the services, and Skirbunt adjusted the scope of the book to include the Army, Navy and Marines. He also included Coast Guard stores in his research, even though most of them are under the direction of

the Department of Homeland Security, not DeCA.

In 2002 Skirbunt began putting all that information together and writing the text. His research continued even as he wrote, so portions of the book were revised to include newly discovered information. Editor Kevin Robinson – like Skirbunt, a member of DeCA’s office of corporate communications – joined the project and provided the book’s editing, design and layout. Together, Skirbunt and Robinson sorted through thousands of photographs and chose nearly 800 to place in the book. “The photos really tell a great story,” Robinson says. “Many of them have never been published, and others were last published 50, 60 or 70 years ago. Even longtime commissary employees will be pleasantly surprised by the visual archives presented in this book.”

“The book is large but very reader-friendly,” says Skirbunt. “The photos are terrific all by themselves, but they are accompanied by a tremendous amount of written information. There are chronologies to help place events in a logical sequence, 17 appendices full of detailed information, a big bibliography and a large, detailed index that makes things easy to find – all to make life easier for the reader and researcher.”

Skirbunt and Robinson expect to receive additional information and photos once people have had a chance to read the book. Skirbunt says, “I’m sure some readers will be surprised at how long ago, and where, commissaries originated. But others who are more familiar with the system may wonder why we didn’t mention one store or another, or they may realize that we could have used some of the old photos they have stashed away in their attic. We’ll wait a while and accumulate new information and photographs, the best of which we’ll include in an updated edition. We anticipate publishing that second edition some time before the 150th anniversary of the modern commissary system – July 1, 2017.”

Anyone wishing to obtain a personal copy can order online from the Government Printing Office Web site, [bookstore.gpo.gov](http://bookstore.gpo.gov). By typing the word “commissaries” into the search prompt, they will be taken directly to the page from which the book can be ordered. If asked, they should refer to ISBN 978-0-16-081785-4. Proceeds from the book’s sale go to the Government Printing Office.

**- 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. Authorized patrons purchase items at cost plus a 5-percent*

*surcharge, which covers the costs of building new commissaries and modernizing existing ones. Shoppers save an average of more than 30 percent on their purchases compared to commercial prices – savings worth about \$3,400 annually for a family of four. 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.*