



# NEWS RELEASE

## Defense Commissary Agency

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## ‘Happy Birthday DeCA!’

Oct.1 marks 20 years of service for commissary agency

*By Dr. Peter Skirbunt,  
DeCA historian*

**FORT LEE, Va.** – Twenty years ago, to improve efficiency and increase taxpayer savings, Congress and the Department of Defense created the Defense Commissary Agency by consolidating the military services’ retail grocery operations into one organization.

“With annual sales of nearly \$6 billion, our agency continues to save taxpayer dollars while delivering a vital military benefit,” said DeCA Director and CEO Joseph H. Jeu. “To our customers, this benefit is more than groceries sold at cost without a profit markup; it’s important to their quality of life, and the recruiting and retention of military personnel.

“DeCA is well-known within the Department of Defense for leading change and achieving results,” he added. “We’re proud of what we have accomplished, which is especially noteworthy when you consider how much has been done since our inception.”

While Oct. 1 marks DeCA’s 20th anniversary, the commissary benefit itself is nearly 145 years old. While officers could buy food from military storehouses as early as 1825, the modern commissary benefit dates back to July 1, 1867. That’s when Congress authorized the Army to sell food items, at cost, to enlisted men as well as officers.

These sales were authorized at every Army post with a subsistence warehouse. Sales initially took place at a table or counter in the warehouse. The official stock list was only 82 items, but this was the start of the modern commissary benefit.

As time passed, commissary facilities gradually improved. By the early 20th century, they began to resemble civilian grocery outlets both in layout and in the number of items offered for sale. By 1991, commissaries were far better than they had been a century earlier.

Since DeCA's 1991 opening, store facilities have been further upgraded, more people have become eligible to enjoy the benefit, and customer savings have increased. In 1991, commissaries provided average customer savings of 20 percent when compared with local grocery chains; today, average savings are more than 30 percent.

Commissaries are particularly valuable in high-cost-of-living areas of the country, and overseas they bring a morale-building "taste of home" by providing familiar American food products.

"Commissaries have become increasingly important in the military community," said Jeu. "There is a growing recognition that the commissary benefit serves our people in uniform, wherever they are stationed. When forces go overseas, the families left behind depend upon their local community services, including the commissaries, to help them make it through the loneliness and worry deployments bring about."

A Congressionally mandated surcharge – which has remained at 5 percent since 1983 – has enabled the agency to provide military families with a shopping experience comparable to civilian sector stores, without a further expenditure of taxpayer dollars.

DeCA has opened 94 new stores, and remodeled, renovated, upgraded and modernized 150 more. Four more new stores, replacing older facilities, are scheduled to open by the end of 2012. The number of items stocked by commissaries has increased from about 13,000 in the largest stores in 1991 to more than 22,000 today. National Guard and Reserve personnel, always key components of the military, were granted full-time commissary benefits in 2004.

Keeping commissaries "state of the art" has come to mean a lot of things. DeCA has a truly cosmopolitan clientele, since its customers have, literally, been stationed around the world. Many of them adopted some of the foods they have discovered while stationed overseas or in different parts of the United States.

Having experienced both commissary and private-sector stores worldwide, commissary customers have come to expect not only particular foreign foods, but also conveniences such as self-checkouts, fresh sushi to go, salad bars, hot foods, deli-bakeries, credit and debit card acceptance, and "Grab 'N' Go" sections. All of these have appeared in numerous commissaries since 1991.

“We’re also involved in our communities,” Jeu pointed out. “Since 2001, we’ve been involved with a program called ‘Scholarships for Military Children,’ which is largely funded by manufacturers and brokers that sell groceries in our commissaries. That program has awarded nearly 6,100 scholarships to deserving military children worth over \$9.3 million.”

The Defense Commissary Agency now has 20 years of experience and is part of a legacy of nearly 145 years of commissary operations. The agency itself is now a 20-year success story in its own right, Jeu said. “The people of our agency are prepared to continue providing this highly valued military benefit for years to come,” he said. “More than ever, your commissary is worth the trip!”

**-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 amounting to thousands of dollars annually. For current savings figures for various groups – single member up to a family of seven – visit <http://www.commissaries.com>. 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.*