'Supporting Victory' throughout history

Photo by David B. Crozier

A display depicts Soldiers of an amphibious truck company unloading rations from a DUKW amphibious truck on Omaha Beach in Normandy to resupply Soldiers of an assault division who have just won a foothold in Europe. The Normandy invasion was the largest amphibious assault in history and DUKWs proved to be critical to the even flow of supplies from ship to shore.

By Spc. Samuel J. Phillips

From the moment you walk into the U.S. Army Quartermaster Museum at Fort Lee, Va., you feel like you are traveling through time. With displays that span the last 236 years – every turn puts you in another scene in time that depicts the vital role of the Quartermaster Corps.

"Since 1775, the Quartermaster Corps has been responsible for keeping Soldiers on the front lines supplied to complete their mission," said Sgt. Wilfurd Piper, museum operations NCO in charge. "Their role during times of war is often the key to the Army's success."

One of the most notable displays takes you to June 9, 1944 – three days after the Allied invasion of Normandy: Soldiers of a quartermaster service company unload rations on Omaha Beach to resupply Soldiers of the assault divisions who have just won a foothold in Europe. This shipment is only a small portion of the more than 750,000 rations of all sorts that have been brought to shore since the campaign began.

Through operations like the Normandy Campaign, where hundreds of thousands of tons of supplies such as clothing, fuel, equipment and ammunition were provided by quartermaster Soldiers to sustain combat Soldiers, it is easy to recall the efforts of the Quartermaster Corps. However, other contributions of the corps are not always as straightforward.

Another exhibit at the museum depicts some of the remaining members of the 7th Cavalry Regiment attempting to gather water from the Little Bighorn River after being besieged by an

A display illustrates volunteers from what remained of the 7th Calvary Regiment after Custer's Last Stand as they attempt to gather water from the Little Bighorn River after being besieged by an estimated 3,000 Sioux and Cheyenne warriors for three days on the bluffs above the river. Four men were selected to provide covering fire, including blacksmith Henry Mechlin and saddler Sgt. Otto Voit, both quartermaster Soldiers. Mechlin and Voit both received Medals of Honor for their actions at the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

Photo by David B. Crozier

estimated 3,000 Sioux and Cheyenne warriors for two days on the bluffs above the river in 1876. Seventeen men volunteered for the mission, including blacksmith Henry Mechlin and saddler Sgt. Otto Voit, both Quartermaster Corps Soldiers.

Mechlin, Voit and two other Soldiers were selected to provide covering fire and were vital in the success of the operation that provided water for the rest of the survivors of Custer's Last Stand. One of them later described the situation: "The sun beat down on us, and we became so thirsty that it was almost impossible to swallow." Later, 19 Medals of Honor were presented for heroism at the Battle of Little Bighorn, including to Mechlin and Voit.

"There are a lot of heroic men and women in the Quartermaster Corps," said John O'Gorman, museum director. "The museum is dedicated to telling those Soldiers' stories, as well as those of the corps. The rich history of the corps brings a sense of pride to those within its ranks."

In fact, the U.S. Army Quartermaster School at Fort Lee uses the museum to educate Soldiers coming into the corps by having them tour it as part of their rites of passage, Piper said.

Photo by David B. Crozier

Another display portrays Gen. George S. Patton standing in his jeep waiting for it to be refueled. Patton learned to rely on the guidance from his quartermaster Soldiers when his race across France during World War II was brought to a halt when gasoline had to be diverted to another sector.

Insignia, uniforms and equipment used by quartermaster officers, noncommissioned officers and Soldiers are on display. One of the more interesting items found in the display is the coat of Brig. Gen. Thomas S. Jesup, "father of the Quartermaster Corps." Jesup was the quartermaster general from 1818 to 1860 and developed the first set of regulations, procedures and forms.

Photo by David B. Crozier

"The new Soldiers come in, watch a video history of the Quartermaster Corps and are given a guided tour of the museum," O'Gorman said. "Often, you can glimpse a change in the Soldiers as they realize the importance of the jobs they are about to undertake in the Army."

O'Gorman said fuel handlers might take notice of the petroleum and water exhibit with Gen. George S. Patton standing in his jeep waiting for it to be refueled. When Soldiers read the information that accompanies the display, they find out that Patton's race across France during World War II was brought to a halt when gasoline had to be diverted to another sector.

"This is a prime example of how the Army cannot move without the support of the Quartermaster Corps," Piper said. "Gen. Patton moved so fast through France that his supply lines were not able to keep up with him."

Patton himself realized the error and made quartermaster operations a priority. Relying on guidance from his quartermaster Soldiers, he began rationing supplies and ordered that a supply of reserves be stored within the Third Army until the unit became fully operational again.

Photos by David B. Crozier

At first, the job of the Quartermaster Corps was to provide Soldiers with the food they needed. When, the Commissary Department was absorbed by the corps in 1912, quartermaster Soldiers became responsible for procuring, developing and cooking food as well.

However, Quartermaster Corps Soldiers are not just responsible for fuel. In 1950, the corps became responsible for training the Army's parachute riggers and aerial supply personnel.

The aerial delivery and field services exhibit is dedicated to these Soldiers who literally have the lives of airborne Soldiers in their hands. Among the units highlighted in the exhibit are the 8081st Quartermaster Air Supply and Packaging Company, which rigged supplies during the Korean War; the 109th Quartermaster Company, which packed supplies during the Vietnam War; and the 5th Quartermaster Detachment, which rigs the loads dropped over Afghanistan.

The display shows a variety of aerial delivery containers used since World War II and traces the evolution of aerial supply rigging techniques. One of the key features is a simulated cargo hold of an aircraft with a projection screen showing how equipment is deployed in flight.

Another notable exhibit features a flag-draped coffin in front of two stained glass windows with a plaque that reads, "Show me the manner in which a nation cares for its dead, and I will measure exactly the sympathies of its people, their respect for the laws of the land and their loyalty to high ideals." The quote is by William E. Gladstone, the four-time British prime minister who served between 1868 and 1894.

The display is part of the mortuary affairs exhibit. The Quartermaster Corps has been responsible for the care of the dead since the Civil War. Army mortuary affairs specialists deploy around the world in war and peacetime to conduct the important mission of ensuring that fallen Soldiers are properly identified, returned to their families and buried.

"Quartermaster Soldiers are the ones who take care of Soldiers not only when they're alive, but also after they have passed on," Piper said. "Though mortuary affairs is a sad and dark mission, it is no less important. The Soldiers feel they owe it to the fallen and their families to ensure that no one is left behind."

Walking through the 20,000-square-foot museum, which was completed in 1963, visitors are pulled further and further into the world that is the Quartermaster Corps. From providing fuel to keep vehicles running, food and water to keep Soldiers healthy, and mortuary affairs to care for the fallen, the corps is always there supporting Soldiers on the front lines.

"The major thing that visitors need to know is the history of the Quartermaster Corps is still in the making," O'Gorman said. "Though we honor the past with remembrance, we can never forget that Soldiers are out there today carrying out missions that will become the history of tomorrow."

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Photo by David B. Crozier

A flag-draped coffin stands as a symbol of one of the Quartermaster Corps' darker tasks: mortuary affairs. The corps has been responsible for the care of the fallen since the Civil War.