Bullet'n Backstory

Joint Munitions Command

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20 Years of JMC — 250 Years of Munitions Support

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Revolutionary War era bullet mold.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the establishment of U.S. Army Command (JMC). For twenty years, JMC has been the logistics integrator for life-cycle management of ammunition. But the JMC era is only the most recent period in the United States Armed Forces rich 250-year history of munitions, a tradition that predates the government of the United States. In 1775, the first of 27 depots and arsenals was created to supply the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War. The Continental Congress relied on committees to manage logistics and supply during the War. Everything except small arms was purchased, mainly by contract, with the Secretary of War personally supervising those contracts. As the Army grew, the task became unmanageable, and new management strategies had to be applied. In June 1776, the Continental Congress established a five-member Board of War and Ordnance to manage the task of supplying the growing Army. One of the chronic problems throughout the American Revolution was a shortage of ammunition. Each of the 13 colonies sought supplies of ammunition, for their own needs and for the total war effort. The sovereignty retained by the states complicated the problem of acquiring munitions, and the level of foreign support needed to adequately supply the war was never achieved.

Small cannon shot and musket balls — War of 1812

In 1789, with the ratification of the Constitution, the United States established the War Department to organize and maintain the Army in times of peace and war under the command of the President. Congress supported the public manufacture of arms and powder by appropriating funds for the establishment of federal arsenals, armories, depots, laboratories, and magazines so that the United States would become independent of foreign nations for essential military items. In 1812, the War Department established the Ordnance Department (OD) to manage all ordnance items including weapons, combat vehicles, equipment, and ammunition. By the Civil War, the Army had built several permanent arsenals and depots in major cities such as Boston, New York and Philadelphia to support the nation's first Army of a million Soldiers. After the Civil War, the U.S. made critical improvements in ammunition development. An experimental lab at Frankford Arsenal was established to research ammunition development during the Civil War. Prior to the Spanish-American War, gun powder left heavy traces of smoke in the air after a shot was fired. Tactically, this was a great disadvantage. Several other countries acknowledged the need for a smokeless propellant and developed it within two years. The United States soon followed, thanks to the work of John Pitman, who as manager of the lab made notable contributions to the standardization and advancement of smokeless powder for the Ordnance and War Departments.

Civil War era cartridges

By 1900, the laboratory was explosives testing center of the United States for both government agencies and commercial firms. New explosives labs were modeled after the Frankford Laboratory. Between the Civil War and WWI, the OD made modest improvements, and scientific research continued, but the U.S. was not equipped for a major conflict. In the first half of the 19th Century, the OD played a crucial role in establishing the "American System of Manufacturing." During WWI, the War Industries Board (WIB) was created, under Bernard Baruch, to organize the procurement process for war materiel. The WIB built explosives, powder plants, and loading, assembling and packaging (LAP) plants, and drove companies to use mass-production techniques to increase efficiency through standardization. As a result, the ordnance mission operated on a scale never before experienced. By the end of WWI, 16 government ammunition installations and 76 commercial contractors produced powder and high explosives. An additional 93 LAP plants produced U.S. and foreign allies' ammunition requirements. World War II required the largest government ammunition industrial base buildup in U.S. history. In 1941, a network of ammunition plants was built around the country, a great cost to the government. The OD authorized construction of 112 ammunition plants, building 86 by the end of the war. The Corps of Engineers planned and managed the construction of all government-owned plants. Over time, smaller organizations like the Field Director of Ammo Plants were placed in charge of management. After World War II, 30 plants were shut down while 14 plants remained active, primarily engaged in demilitarization, renovation and production of fertilizer. To meet the requirements of the Korean War, the OD had to rehabilitate numerous plants. Due to long plant reactivation timelines, the industrial base didn't produce significant quantities of ammunition until 1952. Between 1953 and 1964, the Army ammunition industrial base was reduced to 26 ammunition plants. The need to retain more plants was considered unnecessary because of large stockpiles and advanced technology in production processes. During the Vietnam War, these 26 ammunition plants produced the needed munitions.

In 1962, the Army underwent a major reorganization. At this time, the U.S. Army Materiel Command (AMC) was established, consolidating the research and development (R&D), production, storage, and sustainment functions. The creation of AMC led to a series of organizational changes for ammunition management, culminating in the establishment of JMC. The Ordnance Special Weapons Ammunition Command (OSWAC) split into the U.S. Army Weapons Command (WECOM) at Rock Island Arsenal (RIA) and the U.S. Army Munitions Command (MUCOM) at Picatinny Arsenal. MUCOM absorbed the procurement and R&D mission of the old Chemical Corps. The procurement function at Joliet, Illinois, remained subordinate to MUCOM and became the Ammunition Procurement and Supply Agency (APSA). At the end of the Cold War, the munitions industry had excess capacity too expensive to maintain or modernize. Through the early 1980s modernization programs were implemented but often didn't come to fruition. A significant impact was the creation of the Single Manager for Conventional Ammunition (SMCA) in 1977. The Army became the central manager of conventional ammunition for all Services and three Navy ammunition installations were transferred to the Army. Thirteen plants actively produced ammunition for Gulf War requirements. After the Gulf War, the Army closed several installations in accordance with Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) laws. During Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, the Army operated 15 ammunition installations and three ammunition depots. After decades of reform in the organizational structure, management of ammunition, and size of the industrial base, we are proud to honor our heritage and celebrate 20 years as the Joint Munitions Command.

JMC Historical Document Collection

The JMC Public and Congressional Affairs Office (PCA) maintains the JMC Archives, which collects and maintains historically significant records, including: emails, manuscripts, letters, reports, studies, images, videos, films, photographs, oral history interviews, briefings, SOPs, policies, decision papers, memoranda, statistics, newspapers, newsletters, brochures, maps, blue prints, drawings, artifacts, and more. Such records are pertinent to the Army's institutional knowledge of active and predecessor installations, the ammunition industrial base, and JMC missions. JMC regularly uses these materials to research command history, and to answer research queries. When JMC workers leave positions or make physical moves, it is vital that their records be assessed before disposal. If employees are uncertain about the historical value of materials, the best policy is to make the items available to Command Historian Keri Pleasant (keri.j.pleasant.civ@army.mil) or Archivist Paul Ferguson (paul.t.ferguson14.civ@army.mil) in Room 661.

This Month in Military History

December 1, 1640: A revolution led by nobles ends with Portugal regaining its independence from Spain after 60 years.

December 8, 1776: The American Continental Army, under Gen George Washington, retreats from New Jersey by crossing the Delaware River.

December 15, 1916: The French launch a major offensive against German lines after a six-day bombardment at the Battle of Verdun.

December 22, 1590: The Moroccan army of Pasha Ahmad al-Mansur begins a grueling 135-day march across the Sahara Desert to defeat the Songhai Empire along the Niger River.

December 29, 1835: The United States and a minority faction of Cherokee sign the Treaty of New Echota. Although the Cherokee National Council does not approve the agreement, it becomes the legal basis for removing the Cherokee from the southeast, establishing the Trail of Tears.