121 Facts About Exchange History

1. On June 30, 1775, the American Articles of War set regulations for “sutlers,” merchants who wandered from military camp to military camp selling merchandise to Soldiers.  

2. Tired of the many corrupt sutlers, the War Department in 1867 established post traders at isolated frontier military camps. By 1876, post traders were at every military post, but some were as shady as sutlers.  

3. The first canteen—the forerunner of the post exchange—opened in 1880 at the Pacific Northwest’s Vancouver Barracks. Canteens spread throughout the developing West.  

4. In December 1888, then-Maj. Theodore Schwan’s report spells out the philosophy, concepts and principals for how canteens should operate.  

5. In 1892, the War Department changes the name “canteens” to “post exchanges.” Shown, a post exchange token redeemable at Utah’s Camp Williams PX.  

6. With the growing popularity of canteens coupled with the military’s dissatisfaction with crooked sutlers and post traders, the War Department on July 25, 1895, issued General Orders No. 46. Commanders were directed to open exchanges at their installations and follow Schwan’s operating recommendations.  

7. The first exchange in the Pacific opened in 1898 in a tent city garrison at Hawaii’s Camp McKinley for American forces fighting in the Spanish-American War.  

8. After tussling with prohibitionists, the War Department in 1901 banned the sale of beer, wine and liquor in post exchanges.  

9. As 2,000 American troops landed in France for World War I, the military was unable to serve them with post exchanges. Civilian agencies, such as the YMCA and American Red Cross, picked up the task. Shown, an exchange for American forces in France.  

10. During World War I, future U.S. president, 1st Lt. Harry Truman, served as PX officer at Oklahoma’s Camp Doniphan.  

11. After World War I, a committee recommended in 1919 that the Army, not civilian agencies, provide morale and exchange activities to troops overseas, but the committee’s report lay dormant for the next 22 years.  

12. The first documented use of the term “PX” was found in the book of exchange council meetings in 1919 at Fort McKinley, the Philippines.  

13. The first post exchange for troops in Alaska opened in 1940 at Fort Richardson/Elmendorf Airfield.  

14. With war clouds looming, an Army committee in April 1941 blamed the lack of centralized control over the many unit-run exchanges for the inability to serve Soldiers overseas during major conflicts.  

15. On June 6, 1941, the Army Exchange Service was created to provide centralized policy and financial assistance to post exchanges, but was not given
centralized management. Its first headquarters was in the Munitions Building in Washington, D.C. Lt. Col. John Grose was named acting officer-in-charge. Shown, a World War II AES ration card.

16. In 1944, the PX at Reykjavik, Iceland, right, introduced the first popcorn machine to the country. Three years before, the first post exchange in Iceland opened at Camp Tadcaster, followed by more than 63 sub-exchanges, for the first U.S. troops—4,000 Marines—to help protect the country from a possible Nazi invasion.

17. A temporary exchange is set up by AES at the New York Port of Embarkation serve American forces heading for Europe.

18. PXs at Hawaii’s Hickam, Bellows and Wheeler airfields sustain heavy damage during the Dec. 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor. Shown, Hickam Field.

19. PXs every 100 miles in 1942 serve 19,000 Army engineers building the 1,700-mile Alaska Highway. Shown, a train PX serves Soldiers protecting 500 miles of Alaskan railroad.

20. The first PX in the Middle East opens Nov. 22, 1942, in Cairo, Egypt, followed a month later by a PX in Iran. Shown, Camp Huckstep, Cairo, 1944.

21. The 34th Infantry Division opens the first PX in the United Kingdom (Belfast, Northern Ireland) to serve the first U.S. troops entering Europe.

22. In April 1942, AES opened a PX in Brisbane, Australia, the headquarters of U.S. Gen. Douglas MacArthur’s Pacific headquarters. Other PXs open throughout the country.

23. On Nov. 26-27, 1943, the “Battle of Brisbane” riots between U.S. military personnel and Australian servicemen and civilians rocked the city. When American MPs ran for cover in the Brisbane PX, an angry mob of locals threw rocks, stones and homemade bombs inside the facility. Shown, the Brisbane PX during calmer times.

24. Throughout 1942 to 1944, the Army Exchange Service opened exchanges around the world to serve American forces during World War II. Shown, the PX on Kwajalein Island in the South Pacific. The Exchange still operates facilities on the island.

25. An independent exchange system begins operating at the U.S. Army’s Kagnew Station in Ethiopia in September 1942.

26. In June 1943, the Army Exchange Service tested the use of mobile PXs for the 29th Infantry Division’s tactical field maneuvers in Europe. Shown, a typical World War II-era mobile PX, 1942.

27. In June 1943, the Army Exchange Service opens a central headquarters in Puerto Rico to oversee 23 field PXs on the island.

28. With Guam’s liberation in July 1944, exchanges in trucks traveled jungle trails and beaches to serve troops. By September, 73 field exchanges were operating in Saipan, Iwo Jima and other locations. Shown, a PX on Guam, late 1940s.

29. The first post–WW II PX opened on March 11, 1945, in Manila, the Philippines. Forty-five opened in two months throughout the country. Shown, the main PX in Manila on grand-opening day.
30. By 1947, in Europe, the Army Exchange Service was operating 1,450 PXs; breweries; soft drink, ice cream, laundry plants; photo labs; shoe-repair centers; snack bars; soda fountains; and repair shops. Findings come from the first survey of Europe operations. *Shown, the PX in Caserta, Italy, 1946.*

31. On July 26, 1948, the Army Exchange Service is renamed the Army & Air Force Exchange Service after the Air Force was created the previous fall.

32. In 1948, PXs open in Tokyo, Yokohama and elsewhere in Japan to serve a growing post-World War II U.S. military presence in the country.

33. From 1948 to 1949, the Berlin Exchange's mobile trucks delivered sandwiches and drinks to American and British pilots participating in the Berlin Airlift.

34. The independent Air Forces Europe Exchange (AFEX) is created in Bordeaux, France, to serve U.S. Airmen in Europe, North Africa and the Middle East.

35. While stationed with the Air Force in Germany during the early 1950s, an unknown singer named Johnny Cash bought his first guitar at the Landsberg AB's BX.

36. In 1954, Vice President Richard Nixon toured the BX at Morocco's Nouasseur AB.

37. The first Air Forces Europe Exchange snack bar opened in France in June 1955. By year's end, AFEX snack bars had opened throughout Germany, England and Morocco. *Shown, snack bar at France's Orly AB.*

38. The first Exchange Post rolls off the press on Sept. 1, 1955, for associates at HQ in New York and five regional CONUS offices.

39. In 1956, AAFES shipped a 23-horse carousel complete with calliope music to Newfoundland's Harmon AFB after a colonel there requested it for military children.

40. In 1956, exchanges at Camp Kilmer, N.J., supported 15,000 Hungarian refugees fleeing repression in their country.

41. AAFES' first fully automated cafeteria opened in 1957 at Fort Benjamin Harrison, Ind., dispensing everything from coffee to lunches for a nickel to a quarter. *Shown, the automated cafeteria at Camp Evans, N.J.*

42. When stationed with the Army in Germany in the late 1950s, Elvis Presley met his future wife, Priscilla, who used to buy his records at the Wiesbaden PX. *Shown, the Wiesbaden PX, late 1940s.*

43. Mobile exchanges packed with 153 tons of merchandise from Europe were sent to Lebanon in 1958 to serve U.S. Soldiers, Airmen, Marines and Sailors deployed to the country to help quell a Lebanese political crisis.
43. The Exchange New Car Sales program began in 1960 with AAFES selling AMC automobiles to exchange customers in Europe. Other American car makers hopped on board in the early 1960s.

44. The Japan Regional Exchange begins catering chartered military flights at Tachikawa AB. Thirteen years later, the catering operation moved to Japan’s Yokota AB, where it remains today.

45. In 1961, AAFES begins popping up in popular cartoon strips, such as Beetle Bailey and The Sad Sack, to help explain PX/BX benefits.

46. A small exchange staffed by only two associates begin serving the new North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) deep inside Colorado’s Cheyenne Mountain.

47. As James Meredith tries to become the first African-American to enroll in the University of Mississippi in 1962, AAFES served troops sent to Oxford, Miss., to help federal marshals end the ensuing violence. Shown, troops at an AAFES refreshment stand underneath the football stadium seats.

48. As the United States and Soviet Union stood on the brink of nuclear war during the Cuban missile crisis, the PX at Homestead AFB, Fla., expanded to handle an influx of American troops to the installation.

49. In 1964, the Air Forces Europe Exchange (AFEX) merged with the European Exchange System (EES). Shown, a farewell dinner marking the end of AFEX’s 12-year history.

50. As more than 250,000 American combat forces prepared to enter Vietnam, AAFES on the day after Christmas 1965 took over the PXs in the country from the Navy. AAFES’ Vietnam Regional Exchange eventually operated more than 300 major retail facilities, 15,000 concessions and 145 food outlets.

51. In Oct. 20, 1967, AAFES’ new headquarters building opens in Dallas, completing the organization’s move from New York City, where it had been based since World War II.

52. As race riots broke out in Detroit, Washington and Chicago in 1967 and 1968, AAFES provided services to thousands of troops deployed to the cities to restore peace. Shown, troops at a mobile exchange sent to Detroit from Fort Campbell, Ky.

53. On Jan. 27, 1972, the European Exchange System merged with the Army & Air Force Exchange Service to create the centralized organization we know today.

54. Associates at Clark AB in the Philippines in 1973 serve former American POWs freed from North Vietnam prisons.

55. The last four AAFES managers and about 30 Vietnamese employees are airlifted out of Vietnam in 1975 with thousands of other Americans just before the fall of Saigon.

56. On June 28, 1975, AAFES merges with the Army and Air Force Motion Picture Service. AAFES began operating the service’s movie theaters in 60 countries.

57. In 1972, Pacific Northwest associates provide a mobile PX to Soldiers helping search for “D.B. Cooper,” the hijacker who jumped out of a passenger plane over the area with thousands of dollars in ransom money. He was never found.

58. In June 1974, AAFES takes over management of more than 30 Army and Air Force bookstores.
59. AAFES opened its first drive-in movie theater, the Captain McCarthy Theater, in 1977 at Fort Bragg, N.C.


61. On March 30, 1979 next to the original headquarters building in Dallas, AAFES leaders break ground for a 276,000-square-foot, $8.3 million Fashion Distribution Center. The center opened Dec. 16, 1981; 20 years later, it moved to the Dan Daniels DC.

62. In 1979, AAFES’ first credit program, the Deferred Payment Plan (DPP), begins overseas. The DPP card would be renamed the MILITARY STAR card in 2000 and spreads to all armed forces.

63. The 52 Americans freed in 1981 from Iran after being held hostage for 444 days enjoy one of their first tastes of freedom by shopping at exchanges in Germany. Shown, associates at the Hainerberg Exchange in Germany posing with the freed Americans.

64. AAFES supported an 11-nation group of multinational forces stationed in the Sinai to patrol a buffer zone between Egypt and Israel to help carry out terms of the 1979 Camp David Peace Accords.

65. In December 1981, AAFES wrapped up assuming management of all Army military clothing stores in CONUS. Shown, the military clothing store at Kirtland AFB, N.M., 1955.

66. AAFES supports U.S. troops who invaded in 1983 the Caribbean Island of Grenada to rescue Americans after a violent coup overthrew the government.

67. AAFES wins the ability in December 1985 from a House committee to start accepting credit cards. Shown, AAFES Commander Maj. Gen. John Long, center, watches one of AAFES’ first credit-card transactions occurred at the Dallas Naval Air Station.

68. AAFES awards its first fast-food franchise contract to Burger King to build up to 185 BKs around the world. The first one began cranking out the Whoppers four months later in Ansbach, Germany, right.

69. The Dan Daniel Distribution Center opens in 1988 as AAFES’ first modern-day warehouse.

70. Nearly 365 Army and Air Force Class Six stores are transferred to AAFES on March 25, 1989.

71. Associates at Clark AB in the Philippines support relief and rescue operations after the eruption of Mount Pinatubo in June 1991. AAFES provided evacuation support at U.S. points of entry and for 18,000 evacuees at Guam’s Andersen AFB.

72. The first Exchange credit-call center opens at the Dallas headquarters building in 1992 to handle calls about the Deferred Payment Plan (DPP) when it expands from Europe to CONUS.

73. AAFES launches into cyberspace in 1996 with its new website, which then largely provided information about the organization. Online shopping didn’t come until two or three years later.
74. In 1998, the Waco Distribution Center opens in Texas, expanding further AAFES foray into modern warehousing procedures and technology.

75. From December 1989 to Jan. 3, 1990, associates supported more than 24,000 troops who entered Panama to protect American airbases from threatened attacks by Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega.

76. From late 1990 to early 1991, associates deployed to Saudi Arabia to build an extensive exchange and distribution center to serve nearly 540,000 American troops in Operation Desert Shield/Storm to oust Saddam Hussein from Kuwait.

77. AAFES associates got their first tastes of Eastern Europe when they opened facilities in Croatia in 1992 to assist in U.S. relief efforts focusing on refugees from ethnic fighting in neighboring Bosnia.

78. AAFES deploys to Somalia in December 1992 to support troops seeking to protect humanitarian workers engaged in famine relief efforts resulting from clan violence.

79. AAFES deployed to Macedonia in 1993 to serve a UN operation aimed at keeping Bosnian ethnic violence from spreading. Shown, associates at Camp Able Sentry.

80. AAFES first dental clinic opens in June 1994 at Fort Hood, Texas.

81. AAFES and the Defense Commissary Agency (DeCA) team to open three tactical field exchanges in Haiti for more than 20,000 American troops deployed to the country to help a transfer of power from the military to an elected leader.

82. AAFES associates still in Kuwait from the Operation Desert Shield/Storm days continue opening facilities in the country when Iraqi forces began moving toward the Kuwaiti border.

83. At Florida’s Walt Disney World Resort in 1996, AAFES opens a convenience store at the Shades of Green, an Army Forces Recreation Center located on the entertainment complex. Shown, the store today.

84. AAFES associates, beginning in January 1996, opened hundreds of stores, restaurants, concessions and services in Bosnia, Croatia, Kosovo, Hungary and elsewhere for 20,000 U.S. troops who were part of a NATO peacekeeping mission.

85. The first Exchange Starbucks opened Sept. 5, 1997, at Eglin AFB, Fla.

86. In June 1998, McChord AFB, Wash., is named the world’s best Exchange because of its high customer satisfaction ratings. Store Manager Mike Howard received a $2,000 check from AAFES leaders. This is the same Mike Howard who is retiring later this year as the Exchange’s chief operating officer. Shown, Howard from 2012.

87. The first Taco Bell in the Central Region opens at Sheppard AFB, Texas, on Dec. 11, 1998.

88. On July 28, 1992, AAFES expands its Deferred Payment Plan credit program throughout CONUS. The DPP would eventually become the MILITARY STAR credit card used by all branches of the armed services.

89. For the 1998 Christmas holidays, AAFES and Hollywood provide free first-run movies to U.S. troops stationed in Bosnia, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Shown, actor Arnold Schwarzenegger visits with associates at a premiere of his movie, “Collateral Damage.”
90. During the holiday shopping season in December 1998, AAFES announces new uniforms for store associates. The outfits, which associates began wearing the next month, included bright, red tops with the AAFES logo emblazoned on the right.

91. In 1999, AAFES operated three stores and a mobile exchange in Albania for NATO forces engaged in the bombing campaign to stop human rights abuses in Kosovo.

92. On 9/11, AAFES associates open mobile field exchanges at the Pentagon and World Trade Center for thousands of first emergency responders and troops responding to the terrorist attacks. Shown, an AAFES mobile exchange outside the Pentagon.

93. In response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, American forces invade Afghanistan for Operation Enduring Freedom. AAFES associates open facilities in 10 countries in Southwest Asia, the Middle East and Africa to support OEF.

94. During the 2001 Christmas holidays, Julia Roberts, George Clooney, Brad Pitt, Matt Damon and Andy Garcia, stars of the new movie, “Ocean’s Eleven,” appeared at Turkey’s Incirlik AB for the world premiere at the AAFES theater.


96. On Christmas Eve 2002, the new Exchange at Bagram AB, Afghanistan, opened to serve troops engaged in OEF.

97. AAFES continued expanding in 2003 throughout Southwest Asia and the Middle East after American forces invaded Iraq to begin Operation Iraqi Freedom.

98. AAFES opened its first Pizza Hut in December 2003, in a Department of Defense school cafeteria in Hainerberg, Germany.

98. The Burger King at Baghdad’s airport opened in June 2003 and began making 5,000 meat patties a day. In 56 days, the restaurant topped $1 million in sales.


100. Sarah Latona, store manager at Mountain Home AFB, Idaho, became the first AAFES associate in 2005 to receive the Department of Defense's Defense of Freedom medal for being wounded in the line of duty while serving in Iraq.


102. On Jan. 7, 2006, Darren Braswell from the Atlanta Distribution Center was killed in the line of duty while serving troops in Iraq. The Black Hawk helicopter in which he was riding crashed during a thunderstorm. He was the only U.S. associate killed in the line of duty during Operation Iraqi Freedom.
103. Mike Howard became AAFES' the chief operating officer in October 2006.

104. Brig. Gen. Keith Thurgood becomes the first AAFES commander in 2007 to come from the Army Reserves. He was later promoted to major general.

105. AAFES extends its footprint into all 50 states by opening a convenience store at the Rhode Island National Guard Air Base in June 2009.

106. AAFES opens the world's largest exchange at Germany's Kaiserslautern Military Community Center on Sept. 21, 2009.

107. The first branded Exchange opened on Sept. 17, 2010, at Tinker AFB, Okla. The event marked the debut of the “X” logo and a move away from the terms “PX” and “BX” to “the Exchange.”

108. The Freedom Crossing Lifestyle Center opens Nov. 4-6, 2010, at Fort Bliss as AAFES' first village-type shopping complex.

109. On June 8, 2011, the Exchange received the Secretary of Defense's Environmental Award for sustainability efforts to reduce its carbon footprint around the world. The award comes on the heels of other top energy awards from the Secretary of the Army and the Department of Energy.


111. On June 1, 2012, the Exchange at Fort Bragg, N.C., became the first on an Army post to undergo rebranding.

112. In mid-2012, Brig. Gen. Fran Hendricks became the last military commander of the Exchange after defense officials earlier that year converted the position of commander to one filled by a civilian.

113. In mid-2012, Tom Shull becomes the first civilian to occupy the senior leadership position—director/chief executive officer—at the Exchange.


116. In August 2013, the Exchange begins showing first-run Disney movies at 14 major CONUS theaters. Soon, Sony and Paramount join the CONUS initiative.

117. The Exchange in April 2015 begins rolling out an $80 million point-of-sale system that would bring the latest technology and replace more than 6,000 outdated cash registers.

118. From May to June 2015, AAFES combines the e-commerce and credit-call call centers into today's Customer Contact Center, where 200 associates today field about 6,000 calls a day about MILITARY STAR and shopmyexchange.com.

119. At two different times of 2015, the Exchange opens new shopping malls at Fort Hood, Texas, and Wiesbaden, Germany. Shown, the mall at Fort Hood.

120. In September 2015, the Exchange Post celebrates its 60th anniversary with a special issue packed with articles and pictures from the past.

121. On July 25, 2016, associates and customers around the world celebrate the Exchange’s 121st anniversary.