

U.S. Army Engineer Museum

Fort Leonard Wood, MO

THE HISTORY OF THE CORPS OF ENGINEERS

On 16 June, 1775, the Continental Congress resolved, "That there be one Chief Engineer at the Grand Army... That two assistants be employed under him..." This marked the beginning of the Corps of Engineers. In the following year a number of individuals were given appointments as engineers or assistant engineers in the Continental Army. Three years later, the Congress authorized the recruitment of three companies of engineers, generally referred to as miners and sappers. The organization of these companies and the officers having engineer responsibilities into a "Corps of Engineers," came on 11 March 1779. During the Revolution, these miners and sappers worked on field fortifications and roads. At the Battle of Yorktown, they joined in the assault on Redoubt No 10 in their secondary capacity as infantrymen. At the close of the Revolution, the Corps was mustered out of service.

Because of a recognized need for a regular military establishment, Congress took a number of steps in the early 1790s to reconstitute the American Army. One of these was the establishment of the Corps of Artillerists and Engineers in 1794. During the crisis with France four years later, an additional regiment of artillerists and engineers was formed. However, it was soon recognized that the duties and functions of the artillery and engineers, while connected, were distinct. In 1800, a movement began to separate the two branches. On 16 March 1802, Congress authorized the President to establish a separate Corps of Engineers. The law also stated, "That the said corps when so organized shall be stationed at West Point, in the State of New York, and shall constitute a military academy..." By this action, the Congress recognized that military engineering was a science, and therefore required formal education and training.

Initially, the Corps consisted primarily of officers and cadets. However in 1803, the commanding officer of the Corps was authorized to enlist 18 men and 1 artificer to aid in making experiments at West Point, and for other purposes. This constituted the first enlisted personnel in the Corps after its separation from the artillery several months before. During the War of 1812, a company of bombardiers, sappers, and miners served on the Northwest Frontiers. For the next 40 years, the Corps' responsibilities centered around the construction of coastal fortifications and the exploration of the American West.

In 1838, Congress authorized the creation of a separate Corps of Topographical Engineers. Individual topographical engineers had been serving under the Chief of Engineers since 1816, and the topographical engineering mission dated from the appointment of Mr. Robert Erskine to be geographer and surveyor of the roads. Much of the effort on the nation's internal development, such as roads and waterways, was done by the "Topogs."

During the Mexican War, Corps of Engineers and Topographical Engineer officers performed valuable service to the nation. Captain Robert E. Lee, Corps of Engineers, received several brevets for heroism and gallantry as General Winfield Scott's staff engineer. Significantly, Congress authorized the creation of a company of miners, sappers, and pontoneers for the Regular Army. Interestingly, these enlisted men were to be called engineer soldiers. Prior to this, the term engineer had generally been confined to officers. Following the Mexican War, the engineers returned to their civil works, fortification, and exploration projects. In the 1850s, engineers surveyed several routes for the proposed transcontinental railroad.

In the first days of the American Civil War, Congress added three additional companies of engineers and one of topographical engineers. Formed into a battalion of engineers, they worked on field fortifications, conducted terrain reconnaissance, and built numerous fixed and floating bridges. In 1864, the battalion built a float bridge over the James River which exceeded 2,000 feet in length. This constituted a record which would stand until 1945. The efforts of the regular battalion of engineers were supported by numerous volunteer engineer regiments such as the 15th and 50th New York Volunteer Engineer Regiments.

Following the war, the Corps returned to its peacetime missions. All of the work of the Topographical Engineers went to the Corps when the "topogs" merged with the Corps in 1863. Waterways, coastal fortifications and lighthouses were the most important peacetime responsibilities. The structure of the Corps remained relatively constant until 1901, when the companies were enlarged and reorganized into three battalions of regular engineers. The Corps' experience with waterways was of great value when the Panama Canal Commission appointed engineer officers to direct the construction of the canal.

In the years immediately preceding our entry into World War I, the Army and the Corps underwent expansion and reorganization. The Army adopted the divisional system which constituted the combined arms structure used today. Key to this was the creation of divisional engineer regiments which numbered almost 1500 officers and men. When the country entered the war, additional engineer regiments appeared. Many of these worked on specific missions, such as railway construction, forestry, and harbor development.

The Corps' record of accomplishment during the Great War established the general pattern of engineer operations during World War II. General Service and Combat Regiments built every conceivable structure or facility in the various theaters of operation. Combat regiments and battalions supported the maneuver forces with roads, bridges, and mine warfare. At home, the Corps supervised the \$15.2 billion defense construction program. Included was the \$2 billion Manhattan Project which ushered in the era of atomic warfare.

The end of the war against the Axis powers ushered in the Cold War between the free world and the communist states. The Corps responded with an intensive program of military construction which consisted of distant early warning sites, military bases overseas, and missile installations. The Cold War turned hot in Korea between 1950 and 1954 and in Southeast Asia a decade later. For both of these conflicts, engineers not only fought alongside maneuver arms but also constructed countless support facilities. In the seesaw battles in Korea, combat engineers demolished, rebuilt, and destroyed the same bridges as the tide of war moved across the Korean landscape. Vietnam posed an even greater problem due to the nature of that insurgent conflict and the lack of support facilities for troops in the field. Fire bases, airfields, heliports, harbor facilities, and major highways were among the tasks of builders and fighters. All of this occurred while the civil works side of the Corps continued with navigation, flood control, hydroelectric, and military construction projects in the United States.

The end of the Cold War did not bring the dividends of peace that so many Americans desired. Contingency operations in Granada, Panama, and Kuwait brought combat engineers into action. Humanitarian efforts such as Provide Comfort and Restore Hope constituted yet another mission for the Corps. Rebuilding Kuwait, providing for relief of displaced refugees, and supporting United Nations efforts in Somalia called for both combat and construction skills. Disaster assistance for victims of hurricanes, floods, and earthquakes continues to be a peacetime challenge of the Corps.

For more than 200 years, miners, sappers, pontoneers, topogs-engineers, have contributed to the development of this nation and of developing nations. In war, engineers have been fighters and builders of those things needed to sustain the battle. If the past is simply a prologue of the future, engineers must continue to hone their ability to build, and if necessary, fight.