
Defense Report

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The Military Commissary Stores— A Vital Contributor to Good Morale

There are 392 military commissary stores scattered around the world providing affordable food for the men and women of the armed forces and their families. Taken altogether the commissaries are a big business, doing more than \$3 billion in retail sales annually and employing almost 25,000 people. Each time a military person or an authorized dependent uses a commissary they pay a surcharge and the money collected through those surcharges is used to improve the stores or, where necessary, to build new ones. Once those new stores are built they become government property, a gift from the commissary customers.

Most of the cost of hiring people to run the stores and the expense of shipping supplies to overseas stores is paid for by funds appropriated by Congress. This year that support totaled about \$350 million. It is this funding that Congressional opponents of the commissary system point to when asking their fellow congressmen and senators to make the stores totally self-sufficient. Fortunately this effort, spearheaded in the Senate by Senator Thomas Eagleton of Missouri and in the House by Rep. Les Aspin of Wisconsin, has been rebuffed each time it has come up in the past.

The military services point to the commissaries as one of the few remaining true fringe benefits connected with a military career. The availability of reduced prices (estimated as averaging between 12 and 20 percent lower than commercial supermarkets) in the commissaries makes a substantial difference in the standard of living achieved by military families. This is particularly true for the families of the younger soldiers who, despite claims of pay "comparability" with the civilian sector, are operating on budgets at or below the federal poverty level.

There has been some mismanagement of commissary stores and some abuses of the privilege of shopping in them but, over the years, the services have tightened controls to eliminate abuses and to reduce the need for the annual appropriated subsidy. Now the Department of Defense has completed still another study of commissary management which recommends that the stores belonging to all the services be consolidated under a single agency. The recommended plan would assimilate the strong points from all the individual service systems and establish a new agency, under the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to run the combined operation. It is estimated that this would reduce appropriated funds by \$7 million.

There is some nervousness about the magnitude of a consolidated operation and some sensitivity about the loss of service control but, if the plan will serve to stabilize the future of the stores and their value as a real benefit to military families, it should be given a try.