

# **The Elks and Veterans- A Concise History**

In 1917, the world was at war. The Order of Elks was only 49 years old. In April of that year, Grand Exalted Ruler Edward Rightor appointed a committee to study what the Order of Elks should do in this crisis. The Committee was ordered to present its findings to the Grand Lodge Session in Boston that July.

At the session, this committee, headed by Past Grand Exalted Ruler John K. Tener, recommended to the membership that "the Elks give first consideration to the sick and wounded on the battlefields of France and equip base hospitals for their care," and that "the Order create a fund for war relief work."

The membership enthusiastically and unanimously approved a resolution appropriating \$1 million dollars for the War Relief Fund. This money was raised by our Brothers at the subordinate Lodge level.

GER Fred Harper, who was elected Grand Exalted Ruler at the Boston convention, appointed an Elks War Relief Commission, with PGER Tener serving as chairman. This commission evolved into the organization we have today: the Elks National Veterans Service Commission.

During World War I, the Elks, under the auspices of the War Relief Commission, helped the nation to victory. Through the patriotism and generosity of our members, the commission organized and equipped the first two base hospitals to reach France -- Unit 41 staffed by faculty and alumni from the University of Virginia, and Unit 46 with University of Oregon faculty and alumni.

In 1918, to accommodate the maimed and wounded, the Elks built a 700-bed Reconstruction Hospital in Boston and gave it to the War Department. That was the only veteran's hospital after World War I that was donated by a private entity. It was transferred to the US Public Health Service that same year, and then to the Veterans Bureau in 1922. The hospital closed in 1928. Another facility was scheduled for construction in New Orleans when the government decided it was not needed. Also in 1918, the Order built a 72-room Community House to take care of families visiting the 40,000 soldiers stationed at Camp Sherman, Ohio.

During the war, the Salvation Army was severely handicapped in its great work for the servicemen by lack of funds. To make sure this work continued, the Elks War Relief Commission and the subordinate Lodges of the Order undertook campaigns to raise funds for the Salvation Army, and on many occasions assumed the entire cost of these undertakings. In addition, the commission, at Christmastime 1918, gave the Salvation Army \$60,000 to continue its work.

The Commission made 40,000 rehabilitation, vocational and educational loans to disabled veterans who were ineligible for government help or were waiting approval of their applications for assistance. This service was so effective that the federal government followed the Order's example; they set up a revolving fund and took over this activity. The GI Bill, which makes funds available to veterans for education, had its genesis from this Elk program.

More than 70,000 Elks served in the armed forces during World War I. The supreme sacrifice was paid by more than 1,000.

In 1940 it was becoming quite apparent to many people that war was quickly approaching our shores. At the Grand Lodge Session in Houston that year, the Elks unanimously voted to establish the Elks National Defense and Public Relations Commission. The primary focus of this commission was to establish a patriotic program that placed the power of the Order behind the United States National Defense Program. All Elks were called upon to help preserve and defend our democratic way of life.

Right after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, GER John S. McClelland sent a telegram to President Roosevelt placing the Order of Elks at the nation's disposal. McClelland then called a special session of the Elks National Defense and Public Relations Commission in New York City. From this meeting on January 4, 1942, was born the Elks War Commission.

With an initial war chest of \$35,000, the War Commission set about its work. They also appealed to the subordinate Lodges for financial aid and manpower. Once again, our Brothers, with their families, responded as they always have in times of crisis. Their support was overwhelming.

The United States Army asked the War Commission to recruit 45,000 young men for the ground crews of the Army Air Corps. The commission, with the help of the Lodges, recruited 97,000.

During its first session, the War Commission decided to set up a program in cooperation with Lodges that were close to large military camps. They wanted to provide Brother Elks with the benefits of their membership in the spare time available to them. The commission also wanted to provide members of the armed forces who were not Elks with some of the comforts of home while away for their families.

Throughout the United States, 155 Elks Fraternal Centers were established. They were supported by the Elks National War Commission, and in many instances, by individual Lodges.

Because of their record of accomplishment, the Elks were asked to help recruit men skilled in construction for the Army Corps of Engineers and the Navy Construction Battalions. With the enthusiasm and efficiency of our Lodges, the requested numbers were met three months ahead of schedule.

The president of the American Merchant Marine Library Association reported to the commission that 600,000 books were needed to provide reading material for the seamen of the Merchant Marine Service. The Order responded by providing 650,000 books, one per every member at that time of our great organization.

When the Philippines and Guam fell to the Japanese, the Elks provided aid for members and their families of Manila Lodge No. 761 and Agana Lodge No. 1281.

Thousands of gift boxes and personal hygiene items were sent to our fighting military personnel, while thousands of slippers were distributed to hospitalized members of the armed forces.

When thousands of wounded and disabled members of the armed forces returned to the States for recuperation at government hospitals, the Elks again stepped forward, offering their services to help entertain the veterans. The Elks provided the hospitals with radios, phonographs, playing cards, books, magazines, games, musical instruments, craft supplies and personal items.

The Elk volunteers also spent hours listening to these heroes. They heard their tales of horror and heroism during battle. They listened to the hopes and dreams of these young veterans who were far from home, family, spouses and sweethearts. Most of all, the Elks were there to lend support whenever possible.

It was through this work with hospitalized veterans during World War II that we continued our evolution of serving our nation's veterans.

In July 1946 at the Grand Lodge Session in New York, the Elks National Veterans Service Commission was created to replace the Elks War Commission. The commission's primary goals were to carry on the Hospital Program, the Peace Army Enlistment Campaign, and all uncompleted activities supervised by the Elks War Relief Commission. During this session, the Elks pledged that "So long as there are veterans in our hospitals, the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks will never forget them." Our commitment continues to this day. The Elks even provided funds and materials to build a recreational unit at the Navy Hospital in Guam.

At the Philadelphia convention in 1948, a delegate from each Lodge in California deposited a bundle of hides at the rostrum. These hides, valued at \$26,000, were distributed to 21 veterans hospitals that had requested the items. Thus began our Leather Program. We still actively promote and support occupational therapy programs with tooling leather

provided from hides collected and donated by Elks. The Elks National Veterans Service Commission became the Elks National Service Commission in 1949 at the Grand Lodge Session in Cleveland. This new commission was named the patriotic agency of the Order, in addition to continuing to work with veterans.

When a shooting war broke out in Korea in 1950, the Elks responded by sending gift packs as they had in World War II. The same was done in 1965 for those involved in the Vietnam War.

During the Korean War, the Secretary of Defense appealed to the Order for help in procuring blood for our wounded. Within a few months, the Elks Lodges obtained more than half a million pints.

During the Vietnam War, the Defense Department was concerned with the morale of our 400,000 troops. While these troops were fighting communist aggression, anti-American sentiment was being reported on the home front. After much discussion, it was decided that a "Letters from Home" campaign would help counteract the negative acts emanating from this country. The Elks again answered the call and flooded these fine young defenders of freedom with letters expressing our gratitude for the sacrifices they were making for our country.

When the commission learned that our wounded were sweltering in Tripler Army Medical Center, which lacked air-conditioning, they provided 24 air-conditioning units so that these military personnel might recover in relative comfort.

Since 1986, the commission has worked closely with Re-Creation, a group of young men and women who travel around the country visiting and entertaining our hospitalized veterans. This program helps brighten the days of those confined to VA medical centers.

As our fighting men and women were defending the sanctity of life from the sands of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to Iraq, the Elks once again mounted a letter-writing campaign thanking these patriots for their dedication to duty. Gift packs were also sent as in previous conflicts.

The Elks were among the first fraternal organizations to formally welcome home the returning veterans from Operation Desert Storm. Subordinate Lodges held appropriate functions recognizing the veterans' sacrifices and thanking them for their commitment to duty.

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That Elks hold veterans in high esteem is evident by their actions. During the Grand Lodge Convention held in Los Angeles in 1921, a proposal was made to establish the Elks National Headquarters in Chicago. The Committee also recommended that the Order erect a memorial building honoring those who served their country and gave their lives during the Great War. The Elk Lodges raised \$2.5 million to pay for the new building.

The cornerstone was laid on June 7, 1924. On June 14, 1926, the edifice was formally dedicated to those who served in World War I. The National Headquarters and Memorial Building was rededicated in 1946 to those who saw service in World War II. Again, in 1976, this honor was bestowed on those who answered the call in Korea and Vietnam.

In 1990, at their annual meeting in Las Vegas, the Elks voted to restore their National Headquarters and Memorial to America's Veterans. They raised more \$4.5 million for this purpose. On July 3, 1994, the building was rededicated to peace and to those who served in Grenada, Panama, Operation Desert Storm and other conflicts.

At the National Convention held in New Orleans in 1995, the delegates voted on July 13th to change the name of the Elks National Service Commission to the Elks National Veterans Service Commission, just as it was from 1946 to 1949. While our name has changed, *our mission is the same -- to provide aid and comfort to any veteran in need.*

Our story is long, our work is humble, our history is proud. The Elks National Veterans Service Commission will *continue serving our nation's veterans.*

-Excerpted from BPO Elks of the USA