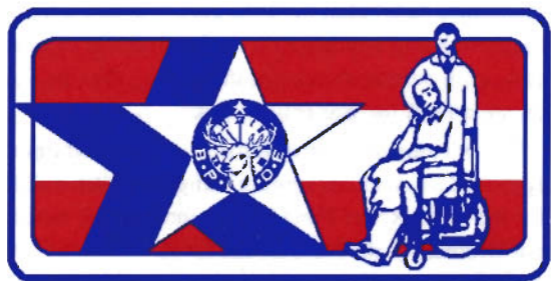


**Elks National  
Veterans  
Service Commission**



*"Serving Our Nation's Veterans"*

*A Concise History*

# ELKS NATIONAL VETERANS SERVICE COMMISSION

## — 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 July.

During the July Grand Lodge Session held in Boston, this Committee, headed by Past Grand Exalted Ruler John K. Tener reported to the membership and recommended, "That the Elks give first consideration to the sick and wounded on the battlefields of France and equip base hospitals for their care; that the Order create a fund for war relief work."

The membership enthusiastically and unanimously approved a resolution appropriating one million dollars for the "War Relief Fund." This money was raised by our Brothers at the local Lodge level.

Grand Exalted Ruler Fred Harper who was elected at the Boston convention, appointed an Elks War Relief Commission. With Past Grand Exalted Ruler John K. Tener serving as Chairman, this Commission began evolving toward the organization we now 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 federal government. This hospital was the forerunner of the VA Medical Centers we have today. Another facility was scheduled for construction in New Orleans when the government decided it was not needed. That same year, the Order built a 72 room Community House to take care of families visiting the forty thousand soldiers stationed at Camp Sherman, Ohio.

During the war, the Salvation Army was severely handicapped in its great work for the servicemen by a lack of funds. To make sure this work continued, the Elks War Relief Commission and the local 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 Christmas time 1918, gave the Army \$60,000 to continue its work.

The Commission made forty thousand 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 seventy thousand Elks served in the Armed Forces during World War I. The supreme sacrifice was paid by over one thousand Brothers.

In 1940, it was becoming quite apparent to many people that war was quickly approaching our shores. At the Grand Lodge session held in Houston, Texas 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 which 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, Grand Exalted Ruler 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 to be held 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 ladies, responded as they always have in times of crisis. Their support was overwhelming.

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

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 some of the comforts of home while far away from 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 of Army Engineers and Navy Seabees 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 for (at that time) every member in our great fraternity.

Aid was provided for members of Manila Lodge No. 761 and Agana, Guam Lodge No. 1281 and their families after they had been captured and devastated by the Japanese.

Thousands of gift boxes containing smokers' supplies, candy 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 were returned to the States for recuperation at government hospitals, the Elks again stepped forward offering their services helping entertain these veterans. In addition to radios, phonographs, playing cards, books, magazines, games, musical instruments and craft items, they also provided comfort care items for bedridden patients.

Our 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 the 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 main goals of the new Commission 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: "*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 \$26,000.00 were distributed to 21 veterans hospitals who had requested these items. This was the beginning of our Leather Program. We still actively promote and support occupational and recreational therapy programs with leather provided from hides donated by Elks.

The Elks National Veterans Service Commission began working with Help Hospitalized Veterans in 2001. HHV takes the leather we donate and makes them into craft kits which are supplied to VA Medical Centers worldwide. These kits are embossed with our Elks logo and information about our Order as well as a self-addressed postcard paid for by HHV. Thousands of kits have been distributed to deserving veterans and thousands of heartwarming postcards have been received from these appreciative recipients.

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 our 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 Conflict.

In 1951 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 over a half million pints.

During the Vietnam War, the Defense Department was concerned with the morale of our 400,000 troops fighting communist aggression because of the anti-American sentiments being reported on the home front. After much discussion, it was decided that a "Letters from Home" campaign would help counteract all 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 wounded veterans from Vietnam were sweltering in Tripler Army Medical Center that 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.

During Operation Desert Storm 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.

In 2002, the Elks and Bugles Across America joined together. The mission of this dedicated group is to make sure that all veterans will make their final journey home in dignity. We are proud to be associated with this outstanding patriotic organization. For more information about this program, contact [www.buglesacrossamerica.org](http://www.buglesacrossamerica.org).

During the 2003 war with Iraq, the Elks once again stepped forward to meet the needs of those who were fighting to protect us. In addition to helping these defenders of freedom, our Army of Hope also assisted the families of these individuals. Special emphasis was given to the families of those members of the Military Reserve and National Guard units that had been deployed to active duty which caused their families to usually lose their primary bread winner which resulted in severe financial distress for those left at home.

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. Three and one-half million dollars were raised by the Elk Lodges to pay for the new building.

The cornerstone was laid on June 7, 1924. Upon completion two years later 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.

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

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 over \$5,000,000 for this purpose. On July 3, 1994 the building was rededicated to peace and to those who served in Grenada, Panama and Operation Desert Storm.

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. Then, at the National Convention in Philadelphia in 2001, the delegates voted to amend our pledge, which now reads: ***“As long as there are veterans, the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks will never forget them.”*** By removing the words “in our hospitals,” we have expanded our outreach to all veterans. 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.”***

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