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Chewing Gum, Candy Bars, and Beer: The Army PX in World War II

James J. Cooke

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Veterans of World War II have long sung the praises of the PX—a little piece of home in far-flung corners of the world. Though many books on that war tell of combat operations and logistics in detail, this is the first to tell the full story of the Army Exchange System.

The AES was dedicated to providing soldiers with some of the comforts they had enjoyed in civilian life—candy, beer, cigarettes, razor blades, soap—whether by operating an exchange close to where they were fighting or by sending goods forward to the lines, free of charge. The beer may have been only “3.2,” but it was cheap and, unlike British beer, was served cold, thanks to PX coolers. And a constant supply of cigarettes and chewing gum gave GIs an advantage when flirting with the local girls.

In chronicling the history of the AES, James J. Cooke harks back to the Civil War, in which sutlers sold basic items to the Yankee troops for exorbitant prices, and to the First World War, when morale-building provisions were brought in by agencies such as the Red Cross. He then traces the evolution of the PX through World War II from the point of view of those who ran the service and that of the soldiers who used it, blending administrative history with colorful anecdotes and interspersing letters from GIs.

Cooke views the PX as a manifestation of American mobility, materialism, and the cultural revolution of mass consumerism that flourished in the 1920s, serving soldiers who were themselves products of this new American way of retail and expected a high level of material support in time of war. He emphasizes the accomplishments of Major General Joseph W. Byron, chief PX officer from 1941 to 1943, and his deputy, Colonel Frank Kerr. He also tells how the PX dealt with the presence of large numbers of women in uniform and the need to meet their demands in exchange offerings.

By 1945, General Byron could boast that the Army Exchange Service operated the world’s largest department store chain, serving the grandest army the United States had ever put in the field, and today the PX is still a central factor of military life. Yet as Cooke shows, the key to the AES’s importance was ultimately the way it bolstered morale—and helped give our fighting men the will to keep fighting.

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