BUILDING THE LEGACY

TOP: Soldiers of the 1321st Engineer General Service Regiment in a mobile workshop in eastern France

Sydney Williamson, Pacific Division engineer of the Isthmian Canal Commission, oversees the pouring of concrete at the Miraflores locks, Panama Canal, circa 1913. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS

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IN JUNE, THE CORPS MARKS 250 YEARS OF ENGINEERING EXCELLENCE

By Robin Roenker

The history of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) began with the fight for our nation's liberty. On June 16, 1775, the Continental Congress gave George Washington the authority to appoint Richard Gridley as America's first chief engineer. In that position, Gridley, 65 at the time, was tasked with overseeing construction of fortifications and other military infrastructure, a key step in preparing for the American Revolution.

Since that time, Army engineers have played crucial roles in every U.S. military conflict, from the War of 1812 and the Civil War to the war in Afghanistan and ongoing counterterrorism operations.

As the nation's needs have shifted and grown, so too has USACE's mission. In addition to providing continued military operations support, USACE teams have also been, for generations, the nation's go-to specialists for environmental restoration, flood risk mitigation, water supply management, infrastructure building and post-disaster cleanup and recovery.

"It's really important to hold the history of the Corps of Engineers in context with the history of the nation, because the Army Corps of Engineers has evolved in lockstep with the nation that we serve," says USACE chief historian John Lonnquest.

Members of the 1st Engineer Battalion building a trench revetment in France during World War I, circa 1918

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS

A U.S Army Corps of Engineers park ranger in the 1980s hangs a safety poster at a USACE-maintained lake recreation site.

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— JOHN LONNQUEST, USACE chief historian

LASTING IMPACT

President Thomas Jefferson established the Corps of Engineers as a permanent branch of the Army in 1802, when the nation was still largely penned in by the Mississippi River. But as the nation looked to grow, it turned to Army engineers to develop plans and infrastructure to support that development.

By 1824, USACE had been charged with improving navigation of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers — a role it has overseen ever since. The Corps also took a leading role helping to explore and map the U.S. frontier and to develop westward navigation routes.

In the 1850s, the Army Corps oversaw the development of the Washington Aqueduct to convey drinking water to Washington, D.C., from the Potomac River — and it continues to manage that water system today. USACE also managed the design and construction of many marquee buildings that define the nation's capital, from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial and, later, the

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Pentagon in neighboring Virginia.

Throughout the 20th century, various congressional Flood Control acts gave USACE the responsibility of federal flood management, leading to the agency's leadership role in dam, levee, reservoir and lock building across the country.

Today's Army Corps of Engineers includes roughly 40,000 employees. Together, these USACE team members operate and maintain more than 700 dams and reservoirs and more than 12,000 miles of inland waterways — providing flood control, water supply and hydroelectric power to millions of Americans each year.

Additionally, USACE now manages more than 150 million acres of public lands, where ongoing projects strive to preserve natural habitats as havens for local wildlife and plant life.

And, when disaster strikes — as it did in Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina, in North Carolina after Hurricane Helene and in California after recent wildfires — USACE crews help lead the charge in emergency response and post-event cleanup and rebuilding.

"The American public has come to depend on USACE for emergency operations assistance, environmental works project support and civil works project management," Lonnquest says.

Corps emergency operations at the World Trade Center in New York City in September 2001

"That includes oversight of hundreds of lakes and reservoirs all across the U.S. that so many people enjoy for recreation."

For its 250th anniversary celebration, USACE has developed videos and a dedicated website to "tell the fascinating story of what the Corps has done and what we hope to continue to do," says Kevin Ropp, chief of the Strategic Communication & Services Division, USACE Office of Public Affairs.

"As celebrations unfold this year, we plan to actively involve the 40,000-plus workforce at USACE in our messaging and activities," says USACE Chief Knowledge Officer Mark Hainsey. "Our goal is to ensure that both the general public and our internal staff understand the significant contribution that the Corps has made to our country's history and that it continues to make."

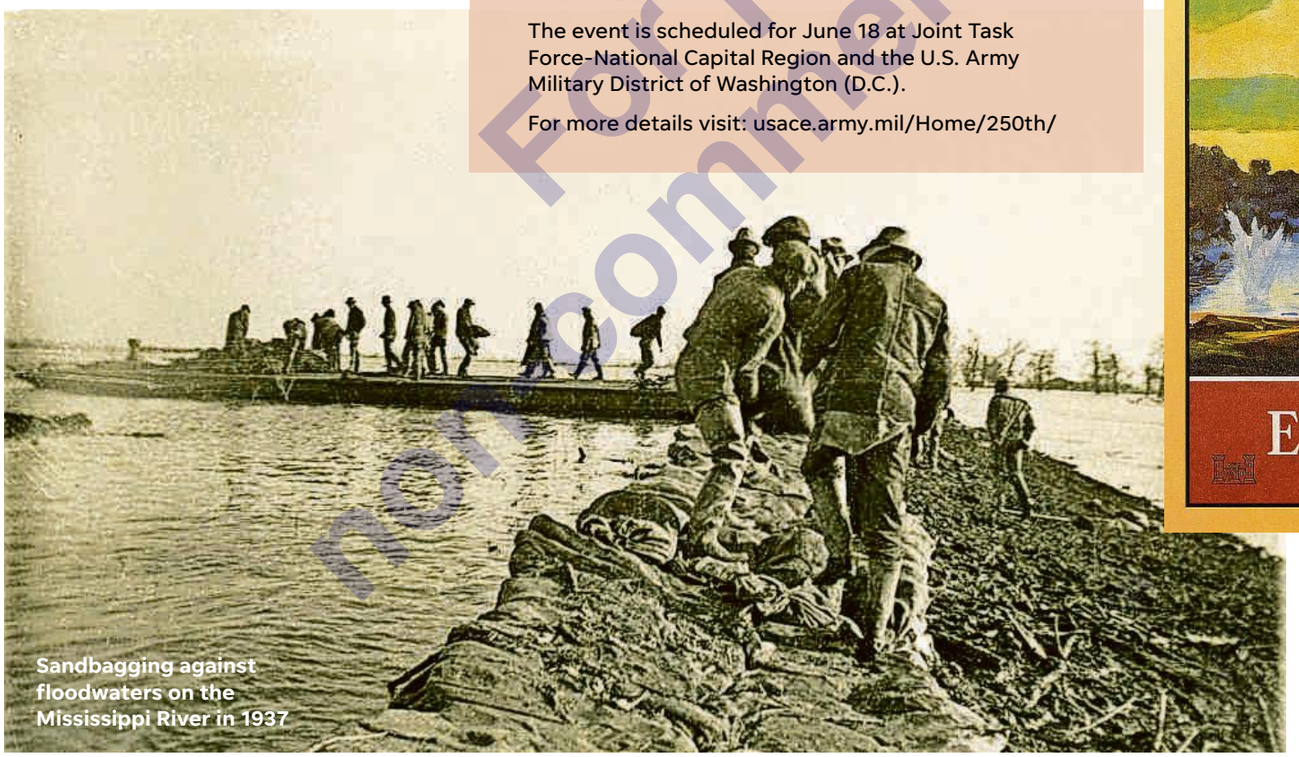
MARKING A MILESTONE

In celebration of its 250th anniversary, USACE plans to hold both national and branch-specific regional events and activities throughout 2025.

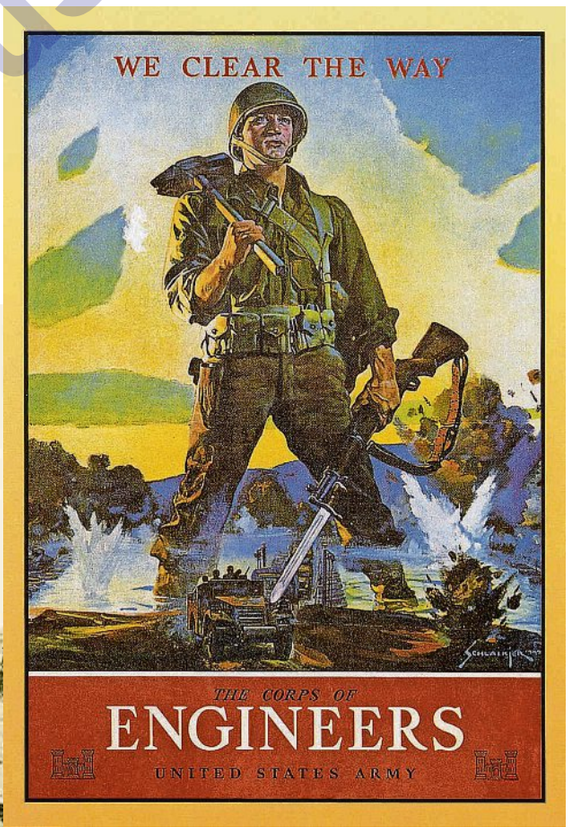
Anticipated keynote activities include the U.S. Army Twilight Tattoo — a ceremonial event performance — hosted by USACE commanding general, Lt. Gen. William "Butch" Graham.

The event is scheduled for June 18 at Joint Task Force-National Capital Region and the U.S. Army Military District of Washington (D.C.).

For more details visit: usace.army.mil/Home/250th/



Sandbagging against floodwaters on the Mississippi River in 1937



A World War II recruiting poster shows combat engineers as builders and soldiers. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS

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THE CORPS AT 250: A TIMELINE OF KEY MOMENTS IN ITS STORIED HISTORY

The history of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) begins during the fight for early America's liberty when Gen. George Washington appointed Col. Richard Gridley as the first chief of engineers in 1775. The Army engineers, including several French officers, were instrumental in some of the hard-fought battles of the Revolutionary War such as Bunker Hill, Massachusetts; Saratoga, New York; and the final victory at Yorktown, Virginia.

Nearly 30 years later, the Lewis and Clark Expedition explored the western lands via the Missouri River, the navigation of which USACE maintains to this day.

Source: Patrick Bloodgood, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

Kennedy Space Center, 1965

HERE'S A TOUR THROUGH SIGNIFICANT MOMENTS IN USACE HISTORY:

1824

USACE was given the mission of improving navigation on the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, which was the beginning of the overall navigation mission that USACE is responsible for to this day.

CIVIL WAR

During the war, USACE provided mapping and construction services as well as troop leaders. Army Engineers built pontoon and railroad bridges, constructed forts and batteries, demolished Confederate supply lines and conducted siege warfare.

1917

The Flood Control Act of 1917 was the first such act passed in the United States, and it authorized USACE to make improvements along the Mississippi and Sacramento rivers to control the flooding that had ravaged communities in prior years.

1940

USACE's military construction mission took on new life as the chief of staff, Gen. George Marshall, ordered the transfer of all air base construction in the United States to the Corps of Engineers.

1941

Congress transferred to USACE the responsibility for real estate acquisition, construction and maintenance for Army facilities, including training camps, government-owned munitions plants, air bases, depots and hospitals.

WORLD WAR II

Army engineers supported combat efforts by placing floating and fixed bridges in Italy, France and Germany. They prepared and developed beaches for assault landing, and they thwarted German advances by destroying critical bridges in the path of advancing Nazi troops.

1961

NASA turned to USACE to build launch facilities for the Apollo program. The centerpiece of that effort was the John F. Kennedy Space Center in Florida that launched the Apollo 11 moon landing in 1969.

1970s

Passage of significant environmental legislation, including the National Environmental Policy Act (1970) and the Clean Water Act amendments (1972), required the Corps to greatly expand environmental review and permitting programs and hire a new generation of experts on natural systems.

1990-1991

In response to Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, U.S. and international Coalition forces launched Operation Desert Storm/Desert Shield. USACE provided construction and real estate support to Coalition forces during operations and helped rebuild Kuwait after hostilities ended.

Kuwait oil fires, 1991

1993

The Mississippi River flood, one of the most devastating in U.S. history, affected nine states. Prolonged rains caused widespread flooding, leading to billions of dollars in damage. The Army Corps of Engineers coordinated the flood fight and provided critical engineering support during the crisis.

SEPT. 11, 2001

Al-Qaida terrorists attacked the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia, killing more than 3,000. In both locations, USACE provided its expertise and services. In New York, USACE floating plant boats immediately began evacuating people out of Manhattan. Later, the New York District removed 1.2 million tons of debris to Staten Island. At the Pentagon, USACE structural engineers examined the building's integrity to allow it to open for business the day after the attack.

2005

Failures in the levee system protecting New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina led to a growing awareness of the value of our infrastructure and one of the most complex risk analyses carried out by the Corps as part of an interagency task force.

2012

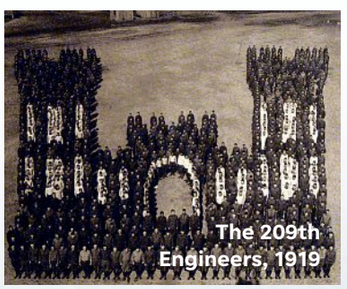
USACE responded to the devastation caused by Superstorm Sandy, which struck densely populated areas of New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania in October 2012. Coordinating with FEMA, they carried out critical missions, including power restoration, debris removal, reopening ports and pumping floodwater.

2020

In the spring, the Corps of Engineers responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by undertaking a nationwide construction program of alternate care facilities to address potential shortages of hospital beds. The Corps modified 38 existing buildings into facilities with the capacity of more than 15,000 beds.

2024

On March 26, the Francis Scott Key Bridge across the Patapsco River at the entrance to Baltimore Harbor collapsed when the cargo ship Dali rammed one of its piles. The destruction killed six maintenance workers and closed the harbor for all traffic. In 77 days, USACE recovered the human remains, removed the bridge debris and reopened the shipping lanes.


The 209th Engineers, 1919

2025

As in 2018, catastrophic wildfires in California cost human lives and destroyed thousands of private dwellings, schools and public offices. USACE helped remove debris, hazardous materials and contaminated soil to enable the affected communities to rebuild.

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