



EDUCATION INSTITUTE - BASIC TRAINING

History & Organization

In late January 1919, Roosevelt Jr. and three other line officers of the American Expeditionary Forces met casually in Paris to discuss their imminent homecoming, the Bolshevik revolution and its threat to the United States, along with the need to form an organization of veterans specifically to help those who had served in the Great War. The four in attendance were Roosevelt Jr., Lt. Col. George S. White, Col. William Donovan and



Paris Caucus, March 1919

Maj. Eric Fisher Wood. Gen. John Pershing, commander of the AEF, later called a personal meeting with Roosevelt Jr. to discuss low morale among the troops still occupying postwar Europe. Roosevelt's solution was to call a morale-building conference in Paris, an event that would be the first caucus that gave birth to The American Legion. To set up the conference, Pershing authorized a meeting of 20 officers in mid-February 1919 and, following that, granted travel orders for the March gathering. Officers and enlisted personnel alike would be invited from their duty stations across Europe. The number of those in attendance is unknown. Only a fraction of those who came to Paris for the caucus signed attendance sheets.

St. Louis Caucus, May 1919

While other founders were organizing and running the Paris Caucus, Roosevelt Jr. returned to the United States to promote a follow-up gathering of veterans in St. Louis in May. At what would become known as the St. Louis Caucus May 8-10, 1919, The American Legion's Constitution was drafted. On Sept. 16, 1919, the fast-growing veterans organization received a federal charter from Congress. By the time of the first American Legion National Convention in Minneapolis in November, the organization numbered more than 684,000.



Lemuel Bolles, left, and Franklin D'Olier

Franklin D'Olier of Pennsylvania was elected to serve as the first national commander, and Lemuel Bolles of Washington was appointed as the first national adjutant.

Indianapolis won the bid in a competition with four other cities - Minneapolis, Detroit, Kansas City, Mo., and Washington, D.C. - to become the permanent home of The American Legion National Headquarters.

In less than a year, The American Legion had emerged from an idea built on a few general values into a federally chartered and fast-growing force of patriotic veterans.

Among the founding principles that have guided The American Legion since its birth include

- Military rank in the service would be irrelevant for American Legion membership and officer positions.
- Wartime veterans who served stateside duty were eligible for membership.
- Gender and race were not to be considered for membership eligibility, nearly a year before women had the right to vote and 45 years before the Civil Rights Act was passed.
- Policies and positions of the organization would come from the grassroots level upward, through a resolution process designed to begin at the local post and move through the department and then to the National Executive Committee and/or National Convention.

The four pillars of American Legion service began to take shape under National Commander D'Olier's leadership:

- Veterans
- Defense
- Americanism
- Youth

These words are now engraved on the limestone pillars of National Headquarters in Indianapolis.



The original National Headquarters building in Indianapolis



Foremost on the minds of the founders was the organization's need to help veterans and their families. Those who fought in World War I had been exposed to combat tactics never before encountered. They faced chemical warfare in the trenches of Europe. Tanks, heavy artillery, air combat and machine guns had changed the face of war.

Such innovations also produced new types of veteran disabilities. Those who survived the war often came home physically or mentally afflicted, frequently as a result of chemical warfare.

The war also had created a massive number of widowed spouses and fatherless children. At the time, the U.S. government had no comprehensive health-care program to address the unique needs of service-disabled veterans, and the need for a unified system to treat them became profound.



Vocational training and employment assistance for veterans also were not available at the time. In short, federal benefits and health-care services for veterans and their families were scant, and Veterans Rehabilitation became a pillar value and urgent priority.

One of the first organizations to address the problem, The American Legion immediately began reaching out to veterans and their families directly to help them understand what few government benefits they were due and how to apply for them.

A precursor to the modern-day network of American Legion-accredited service officers that assists veterans today, a national American Legion War Risk Insurance Division helped thousands of veterans and their families file for disability claims, insurance payments and other benefits in the organization's earliest months.

The Legion also offered vocational training for those whose ability to support their families had been compromised by physical or mental conditions related to military service.

The American Red Cross provided financial assistance as the Legion established a service division, performing outreach through a fast-multiplying galaxy of local American Legion posts, and the era of the service officer began.



Next month we will continue the HISTORY & ORGANIZATION section of Basic Training.