



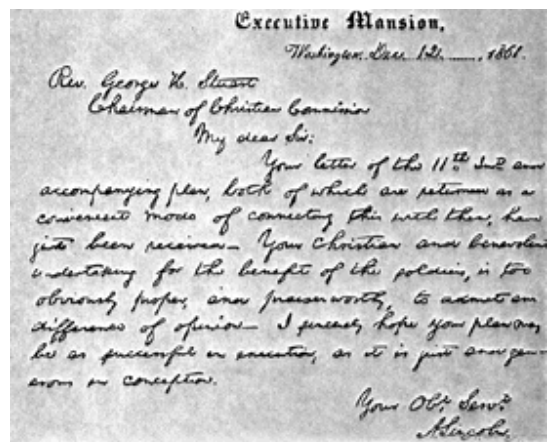
During the early part of the Civil War, volunteer members of the YMCA's Christian Commission received medical supplies and stores at White House Landing on the Pamunkey River in central Virginia. Operations such as this helped save thousands soldiers from both the North and the South.

The YMCA first supported soldiers on the fields of battle during the Civil War. In every war - and between them - YMCA volunteers have been where the military is, providing spiritual support, recreation, and education. The YMCA of the USA created the Armed Services YMCA in 1983 to manage the many branch programs around the world providing programs to the military. The year 1861 is usually considered the beginning of YMCA service to the military. Dedicated YMCA volunteers went to the battlefields of the Civil War beside America's uniformed young men. President

Lincoln praised YMCA leaders for their "benevolent undertaking for the benefit of the soldiers."

But that association can be traced back even further — several years **before** the Civil War — to a small peacetime effort on board a naval training ship in Portsmouth, Va.

Historian C. Howard Hopkins notes that in 1856 the YMCA's Portsmouth Association, with the government's endorsement, placed books in the ship's library and later received permission to hold meetings. This YMCA work with the Armed Forces occurred just five years after the YMCA general movement had taken root in this country, having been transplanted from England in 1851. Similar services were initiated by the Boston Association in 1859.



Lincoln's letter of Dec. 12, 1861, to Rev. George Stuart, Chairman of the Christian Committee. "I sincerely hope your plan may be as successful in execution as it is in just and generous conception."

The YMCA's broader volunteer service to the Armed Forces, however, dates from April 1861, when a handful of YMCA volunteers sought to assist soldiers and sailors. This initial group aided the soldiers in the encampments where they were stationed temporarily on their way to the front. Later, growing numbers of volunteers accompanied the soldiers to the battlefields.



A Christian Commission Station at the City Point, Va., General Hospital in 1864. Here, the YMCA's Christian Commission operated a chapel, reading room and special diet kitchen for sick and wounded soldiers. The hospital was also an operational base for 16 front-line YMCA Stations.

On Nov. 15, 1861, representatives of 15 YMCAs met to coordinate the YMCA's overall efforts to alleviate the suffering of the sick and wounded. They created the United States Christian Commission to provide spiritual and physical comfort to soldiers. President Lincoln wrote to YMCA leaders, "I sincerely hope your plan may be as successful in execution, as it is just and generous in conception."

During its four years of operation, the Commission recruited 5,000 volunteer "delegates" who served in every theater of the war. This was the nation's first large-scale civilian volunteer service corps.

Relief agencies such as the Red Cross had not yet been created, and the military chaplaincy was in its infancy. Therefore, volunteers were recruited from many fields, serving as surgeons, nurses, chaplains and chaplains' assistants. Others distributed emergency medical supplies, food and clothing. They served on the battleground with horse-drawn canteens, built and operated special-diet kitchens in hospitals, brought books and prefabricated chapels to soldiers and sailors, taught enlisted men how to read and write, maintained a hotel for soldiers on furlough and provided free meals.

YMCA prisoner-of-war work — undertaken on a massive scale later during World Wars I and II — began during the Civil War, when the U.S. Christian Commission ministered to Confederate soldiers in northern prisons and sent supplies to Union soldiers in Confederate prisons.

Throughout the Civil War, the Commission distributed more than 100,000 cases of food, clothing and medical supplies, and 12 million books, magazines and pamphlets. Its volunteer delegates wrote more than 90,000 letters for the sick and wounded, and distributed \$1,000 a week in postage for the soldiers' use. To get supplies to the delegates, the Commission created 111 YMCA Army Committees as auxiliary units.

The Commission's activities peaked in 1864, when cash receipts reached almost \$1.3 million and the value of contributed stores slightly less. Publications — Bibles, Testaments, tracts, books — were valued at \$103,000. The Boston Association added \$1,800 worth of hymnals. Delegates' services would have cost \$170,000 had they been paid, and railroad and other forms of transportation they used represented a gift of \$106,000. Telegrams worth \$26,000 had been sent free, and \$6,750 was donated as rent for storage and other facilities.

Civil and military authorities recognized the value of these services during the war and afterward. This cooperation was a unifying influence, overcoming much of the temporary staff shortages suffered by YMCAs during the war. This new cohesiveness was far stronger than that of the Confederation, which was sloughed off without much regret.



The YMCA tent was a popular place for recreation and relaxation in Army campaigns during the Spanish-American War. More than 200 of these giant tents served men in State and National Camps. In Cuba, one canvas "center" was filled with wounded men an hour after being set up.

In the three decades of peace following the Civil War, the YMCA movement continued its services to soldiers and sailors, generally in state militia camps. Through its Militia Camp Program, the YMCA established the nation's first recreational, sports and counseling services for military personnel. In 1889, the YMCA established its first permanent Army YMCA, Fort Monroe, Va.