

A History of the Knights of Columbus

Support for the U.S. Military

For almost a century, the Knights of Columbus, the world's largest Roman Catholic fraternal service organization with over 1.7 million members, has walked hand in hand with the men and women of the United States Armed Forces. Since before World War I, the Knights have provided for the spiritual and temporal well being of our servicemen and women, and that work has continued into the twenty-first century. Beginning in 1916 during the Mexican campaign commanded by General John J. Pershing, the Knights established recreation centers where the Knights could attend to both the physical and spiritual needs of the enlisted men.

The program was so successful that it was greatly expanded in World War I with the "hut program." The motto of these huts was "Everybody welcome. Everything free." The Knights – first at home and later abroad as well – established huts near the front, at or near military bases and in cities frequented by our soldiers and sailors. In November 1917, General Pershing signed General Order No. 63 allowing the Knights to provide services to the men in Europe. At the end of the war, Pershing said that, "of all the organizations that took part in the winning of the war, with the exception of the military itself, there was none so efficiently and ably administered as the Knights of Columbus."

The Order also provided Knights of Columbus chaplains to supplement the work of the military's Catholic chaplains in ministering to the spiritual needs of the servicemen. The huts served all branches of the military and were places that provided recreation and freely dispensed "personal items" to the members of the A.E.F. The Knights also used the huts to provide entertainment in a manner later emulated by the U.S.O. In addition to establishing the huts, the Knights of Columbus raised more than \$14,000,000 (in 1917 dollars) in the United States for war relief. The work for our troops did not end there. Following the war, the Knights established both a tuition-free education program for veterans and a job bank that placed more than 300,000 veterans with employers throughout the country.

During World War II, the United Service Organizations – in which the Knights of Columbus represented the Catholic Church – largely provided for the entertainment of U.S. troops. In addition to working with the U.S.O., Knights in the Philippines ran a program very similar to the World War I hut program for American servicemen before the fall of Manila and again after its liberation. During

the war years, the Knights were led by Francis P. Matthews, who later became Secretary of the Navy under President Harry Truman.

Under Matthew's leadership in 1944, the Knights also established the *Francis P. Matthews and John E. Swift Educational Trust Scholarships*, which provide scholarships to any Catholic college for the child or children of a member of the Knights killed in the line of duty during a conflict. This program has been open to the children of members killed in World War II, Korea, Viet Nam, Beirut, the Persian Gulf War, and the current war on terror in Iraq and Afghanistan. To date, 789 children have been eligible for these scholarships, 270 have completed their education through this program, and several others are currently studying. The first recipient of this scholarship was Paul X. Kelley, later General P.X. Kelley, Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps.

In the twenty-first century, the Knights of Columbus continues its proud tradition of service to the men and women of the armed forces through its scholarship program and several other programs for the military. More than \$500,000 was raised by the Order's Fourth Degree members for the World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C. Of particular note, since 2003 more than 400,000 Catholic prayer books, titled *Armed with the Faith* and printed on rugged paper to withstand the rigors of combat, have been produced for members of the armed forces. The concept for this prayer book originated with an individual Knight and Air Force veteran, and was developed in conjunction with the Archdiocese for the Military Services, U.S.A. All costs for this program, including printing and distribution, have been borne by the Knights of Columbus.

In 2005 the Order pledged \$1 million in support of a new program for the catechesis and spiritual support of servicemen and women, sponsored by the Archdiocese for the Military Services (AMS), U.S.A. The Knights of Columbus also provided major support to the Military Archdiocese for the purchase and refurbishment of a building in Washington, D.C., that now houses the headquarters, offices and residence of the AMS. Some of the financial support for the project (\$1.1 million) came from earnings produced by the Knights' Military Vicariate Fund, established in 1985. The Order's Church Loan program provided another \$3.4 million.

The Knights of Columbus is founded on four principles: charity, unity, fraternity and patriotism. The American veterans of every campaign since 1916 can attest to the Order's faithfulness to those principles while ministering to the spiritual and temporal needs of U.S. military personnel in an unprecedented and highly effective manner.