The United States Army Veterinary Corps, a small, select group of veterinarians and their support staff who provide a most essential and important function for our military forces world-wide “ unofficially” started with the Revolutionary War when General George Washington directed the establishment of farriers to serve in the regiments that utilized the horse as a mode of transportation for both soldiers and supplies. Horses were the main source of moving artillery, ammunition, food rations, water and men from one point to another. These early “veterinarians” were not specifically trained in medicine; however, through vast experience with the horse they were the best the fledgling country had to offer for the well-being of the horse in battle. In 1834 the U.S. Government began to use the term “veterinary surgeon” interchangeably with “farrier.”

In the early 1800’s, throughout the United States, there was a recognized need for better veterinary training. This urge came mainly from prominent physicians like Dr. Benjamin Rush and Dr. James Mease, who saw veterinary medicine as a unique scientific branch of medicine.

In 1854, the first college of veterinary medicine in the United States was opened at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. Others soon followed. At the opening of the Civil War in 1861 and during the first two years, the Union Army lost 284,000 horses primarily to disease. In those early years not a single veterinarian served in the Union Army. President Abraham Lincoln was deeply offended at this appalling mistreatment of these animals and immediately authorized a veterinary surgeon/farrier to serve as the supervisor of the animals. That person held the rank of Sergeant of the Cavalry and earned a pay of $17.00 per month. By the spring of 1863, the Union Army employed a force totaling 4.7 million horses. As a result of tremendous animal losses and to obtain better qualified individuals, the United States Government enacted legislation that established one veterinary surgeon per regiment (1,000 to 4,000 soldiers). These first veterinarians were given the Rank of Regimental Sergeant Major and earned $75.00 per month. During this time, the Confederate Army had 2.8 million horses; however, they were having a difficult time feeding these horses and resupplying new horses as the war moved along. Most of the Confederate Army’s losses of horses were due to non-battle injury, primarily due to a contagious disease that was communicable to man called glanders. In 1879, the Army put out a general order that required all veterinary surgeons in the cavalry be graduates of reputable veterinary colleges.

During the Spanish American War of 1898, there were 14 veterinary surgeons attending to the needs of ten cavalry regiments. It was near the end of that war that a political scandal, known as the “Embalmed Meat Scandal” occurred where untold numbers of soldiers were sickened and/or died after eating adulterated beef. This incited the public to the extent they demanded greater safeguards to be put in place to prevent such disasters. The result of this uproar was the Army Reorganization Act of 1901 that established that a United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)
veterinarian be appointed as Meat Inspector, Subsistence Department, of the United States Army. This was the beginning of the meat inspection function that veterinarians perform for all branches of the service all over the world.

As the unrest in Europe with the German Armies invading neighboring territories and World War I seemed inevitable, the United States Congress planned for the worst by creating the National Defense Act of 1916, which was signed by President Woodrow Wilson on June 3, 1916. This act bolstered the United States military in many ways, including the official establishment of the United States Army Veterinary Corps. America’s entry into World War I came in April 1917, after more than two and a half years of efforts by President Woodrow Wilson to keep the United States out of the war. U.S. troops began arriving on the Western Front in large numbers in 1918. The selective service legislation (Overman Act) of 18 May 1917 gave the President full authority for expanding the Veterinary Corps beyond the provisions of the National Defense Act. Under this authority, War Department General Orders No. 130, section III, 4 Oct 1917 established the Veterinary Corps, National Army as follows: “...there be organized for the period of the existing emergency a Veterinary Corps, National Army, to consist of the commissioned and enlisted personnel hereinafter specified. The total number of commissioned officers and enlisted men may be approximately equal to, but shall not exceed, 1 commissioned officer and 16 enlisted men for each 400 animals in service; the veterinarians and assistant veterinarians of the Regular Army, National Guard, drafted into the Federal Service, and Officers' Reserve Corps in active service, shall be considered as a part of the total commissioned personnel herein authorized.”

Some years after WWI, when the Army began to abandon animal transport in favor of motorization and mechanization, many observers felt the Veterinary Corps would gradually be relegated to a place of minor significance in the military organization. Obviously, these observers were thinking only in the terms of the veterinarian’s duties with animals; they did not consider the growing need for Army food inspection or anticipate the tremendous demand that would be made on the veterinary service in meeting that need. After World War I, the wartime military establishment was replaced by a more permanent peacetime organization under the provisions of the act of 4 June 1920, which amended the National Defense Act of 1916 to the degree that a new law seemed to emerge. This act, as further amended by the appropriation act of 30 June 1922, the act of 14 July 1932, and the act of 31 July 1935, markedly influenced the development and authorizations of the Army Veterinary Corps.

World War II saw the significant expansion of veterinary services throughout the Pacific-Asiatic, American, Middle East, Mediterranean, and European theaters. In 1939-40, the oversea veterinary strength totaled 17 to 19 officers; during World War II, 700 Veterinary Corps officers were distributed among at least 23 theater commands. The Veterinary Corps focused less on Army animals and more on force protection by providing higher quality rations for troops, as well as more space for armaments on
cargo ships by thoroughly trimming meat products and freezing them in compact containers. The Veterinary Corps officer had a better understanding of the impact of the environment as it related to animal and food sanitation. Veterinary Corps personnel had the responsibility for assuring the quality of food our military men and women consume was standardized and wholesome. They perform food and water risk-based assessments when approved sources are not available or practical. They perform commercial sanitation audits to insure quality assessment of food and purification of water. Veterinarians and their support staff manage food programs in both garrison and deployment situations.

During WWII, research and development within the U.S. Army Veterinary Corps entailed many facets of research. Development of drying technology for foodstuffs and agricultural produce was accelerated during WWI and WWII. Intensive research was conducted on vacuum drying of various foods, including meat and fish, during WWI. Other methods were investigated and developed before WWII. The first woman installed into the U.S. Army Veterinary Corps was a California woman named Dr. Thais de Tienne. She enlisted in the Army in 1945 at the rank of 1st Lieutenant after practicing small animal medicine since graduating from veterinary college. Lieutenant de Tienne was instrumental in the development of dehydrated foods, particularly dehydrated egg products.

The Officer Personnel Act of 1947 raised the rank of Chief of the U.S. Army Veterinary Corps to the rank of Brigadier General; however, in 1990 due to fiscal constraints, the Corps lost that rank of General and the leader of the Corps held the rank of Colonel. This left the highest ranking American officer subordinate to the Generals of most all of the other participating attendees at this and many other meetings and strategy sessions. So, in 2004, congress restored the rank of Brigadier General to the Chief of the U.S. Army Veterinary Corps.

Stability operation activities began for US Forces in 1946 after South Korea gained her independence from Japan and have continued to the present time. During the American occupation of Korea Veterinary Corps officers acted as military government advisor on veterinary affairs. Actually, other veterinary officers had arrived in December 1945 for assignment with American Military Government in the Public Health and Welfare Bureau. These officers were interested in civil veterinary education facilities, meat and dairy hygiene, laboratory activities and research, supply of veterinary materiel, and control of animal diseases. Little then did these veterinary officers realize that the whole rehabilitation effort for Korea would be renewed following the United Nations peace truce with North Korea after the Korean Conflict in 1953.

An outstanding example of accomplishment with only a few people all working toward a common goal in a key stabilization effort is depicted by the US Army veterinary team forming the group for the Participating Agency Support Agreement (PASA) in conjunction with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)
during the Vietnam war. A Department of Defense and US State Department agreement in 1967 set the team into motion at the modest facilities of the National Institute of Bacteriology and Animal Pathology (NIB) in Saigon, South Vietnam. The mission at NIB was simple, the task immense, to improve the capability of the government of Vietnam to provide an adequate supply of food for its people. It was felt the impact of a successful vaccination program could provide a significant increase in quantity of animal protein available for the total population. As early as 1961, USAID assisted the Ministry of Agriculture in establishing a modest facility for animal vaccine production and animal disease diagnostic services but the program had moved slowly. In 1967, the PASA team was organized and was composed of US Army veterinary officers made up of a microbiologist, virologist, pathologist, diagnostician and team leader. The team immediately found the Vietnam domestic animal population had little disease protection based on existing immunizing agents and programs.

For the last 80 years, military officials believe dogs are the most effective and cost-effective detection system helping the military to detect and locate explosives of all kinds. Today, veterinarians on many military bases across the globe operate animal hospitals for military working dogs as well as treating pets owned by military personnel assigned to the base. Veterinarians in the Veterinary Corps treat all military service dogs whether they are attack dogs, therapy dogs, detection dogs or search and rescue dogs. The epicenter of dog training and treatment are the facilities at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas. Veterinarians and support staff at Lackland breed and train dogs for the Department of Defense. Most of these dogs are purchased from breeders in Eastern Europe, and most are German Shepherds or Belgian Malinois. These breeds are best for attack and detection dogs; however, some agencies use other breeds for detection purposes.

The Army Veterinary Corps currently has just over 800 personnel including 550 active-duty Veterinary Corps officers and 280 officers in the Army Reserve. All graduate veterinarians go into active duty as Captains or equivalent rank. Almost all of the new active duty Captains either entered the military having received a three-year scholarship that pays all fees, plus a monthly stipend; or they are eligible for loan repayment of up to $125,000.00 for a three-year commitment to the Veterinary Corps. Supporting the veterinary officers are approximately 1,600 enlisted food inspection specialists. There are also about 560 animal care technicians and somewhere in the neighborhood of 425 civilians that work for the Corps world-wide. All included, there are about 3,400 members that constitute the U.S. Army Veterinary Service.

On June 3, 2016 the U.S. Army Veterinary Corps held a centennial celebration of the 100 years of service of the Veterinary Corps. Through veterinary medical care, public health, food protection, and a focus on research and development activities, the U.S. Army Veterinary Corps will remain dedicated to saving lives and enhancing the readiness of U.S. military forces.