



Historian Richard E. Killblane interviews 1st Lt. Matthew Beal during Operation Iraqi Freedom 19 March 2007 at Camp Speicher, Tikrit, Iraq.
(Photo by David S. Hanselman)

Creating a Resource

Helping U.S. Army Central Establish a Historical Document Collection Program

Michael Yarborough

Military history is a form of combat power. Writing and reading military history form the foundations for training, esprit de corps, and decision making. The benefits accrue to the Army at every echelon, from individual soldiers to senior leaders. However, in order for the Army to benefit from studying its own history, the basic sources for what happened during combat operations must be collected.

In the summer of 2014, the United States increased military assistance to the Iraqi government to fight the Islamic State (IS). From the beginning, U.S. Army Central (USARCENT) played the principal role in providing American military assistance to Iraq. In mid-August, USARCENT commanding general Lt. Gen. James L. Terry asked the U.S. Army Center of Military History (CMH) for help establishing a historical document collection program to help preserve the command's experiences. In response, CMH temporarily assigned two of its civilian historians (Erik B. Villard and myself) to establish a collection program that we would hand off to a military history detachment (MHD). To accomplish this mission, we worked at USARCENT's forward headquarters in Kuwait from 28 August to 3 October 2014. We also conducted the first field use of the Army military history doctrine that was updated June 2014, Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 1-20, *Military History Operations*.¹

This article summarizes our efforts and discusses some challenges we faced. We hope that our experiences will be helpful to future Army historians, MHDs, and soldiers appointed as unit historians as an additional duty. Given current geopolitical uncertainties and budgetary constraints, it is reasonable to assume that Army historians will again be asked on short notice to help establish a historical collection program for another theater Army providing land component support.

Commanders should also find this article of interest. Document collection programs are needed because during wartime, operational records are considered permanent. Their preservation is a statutory and regulatory command responsibility. A useful resource in this endeavor is the Center for Army Lessons Learned Handbook No. 09-22, *Commander's Guide to Operational Records and Data Collection: Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures*.²

Based on our experience, we can attest that ATP 1-20 is clearly written and accessible, and it provides

the framework for building a document collection program. Our rapid deployment (we had less than two weeks' notice) prevented us from attending standard MHD training. Nevertheless, we easily used ATP 1-20 to guide our efforts. We also benefited from support by CMH, the greater Army historical community, and the USARCENT staff. Finally, familiarity with the Army's organization and structure, ability to function on a staff, and proficiency with the Army's information technology systems helped us achieve our objectives and overcome obstacles.

Our CMH leadership sent us to Kuwait with the mission to help USARCENT record its experiences by collecting documents and establishing procedures for a follow-on MHD. Immediately upon arriving in Kuwait, we met with Terry. He directed us to save USARCENT's key operational documents in order to help record lessons learned, write narrative histories, and facilitate soldier care in the future.³ In prior assignments with USARCENT, Terry had seen the command expand to meet the requirements of contingencies (Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom), and thus he knew the importance of initiating the preservation of historical documents during the early stages of operations. Now that the fight against IS has become a full-scale operation (Operation Inherent Resolve), and it shows every indication of being a protracted campaign, his early actions have helped ensure the Army's experiences will be preserved for posterity.

We distilled Terry's guidance into four objectives: (1) establish collection procedures, (2) begin collecting documents, (3) establish coordination procedures with key staff, and (4) prepare a transition plan for the MHD.

Accomplishing these objectives also required resolving a number of issues, mostly related to travel, computer and network access, and security. These challenges were part of the friction of operating in a wartime environment, but they would have led to our failure had they not been resolved.

Michael Yarborough is a historian in the U.S. Army Center of Military History's Force Structure and Unit History Branch at Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, D.C. He holds an MA in American history from George Mason University and a BA in history from James Madison University.

Background

USARCENT has functioned as the Army service component command for U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) since 1982.⁴ Its main headquarters is at Shaw Air Force Base, South Carolina, but a forward headquarters is also maintained in Kuwait. USARCENT's mission is to provide the USCENTCOM combatant commander with land-power options and strategic depth, and to set conditions for improved regional security and stability. The command's efforts help ensure regional access and develop relationships with nations in the region.⁵

During our assignment, USARCENT was coordinating land operations for America's assistance to Iraq's fight against IS. At the time, the command was operating as a joint force land component commander, and later as a coalition forces land component commander. It later formed the nucleus of Combined Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve, which is currently responsible for leading the coalition against IS.⁶

Since World War II, Army historians and MHDs have deployed in proximity to wartime commands and operations in order to have the best access to leaders and documents. MHDs are separately numbered modified-table-of-organization-and-equipment units that consist of an officer and one or two additional soldiers. They are typically employed at the theater army, Army service component command, corps, and division levels to “carry out directed collection of historical material during combat and contingency operations for later use in writing the official history. They are trained and equipped to gather historical documents and materials, conduct oral interviews, photograph actions and events, and advise supported units on planning and conducting historical operations.”⁷

One lesson of previous military history operations is that they cannot be conducted remotely. Thus, our mission necessitated traveling to Kuwait. During our trip, most of USARCENT's principal staff were in Kuwait. This made Kuwait the right place to be because it was where decisions were made and key documents were generated (even though many documents were digitally stored at Shaw Air Force Base).

For our mission, we reported to USARCENT's deputy chief of staff, and we were supported by the secretary of the general staff. Our physical and

organizational location, close to the command's senior leadership, was ideal because it helped with gaining access to the staff, resources, and support. Many Army historians know from experience that other arrangements, such as being under the public affairs office, typically reduce the effectiveness of history programs.

Historical Collection versus Records Management

Before continuing, it should be understood that Army historians do not collect official records, but instead copies. Although CMH is responsible for, “collecting, maintaining, and making historical source materials and publications available to the Army,” it is not an official records repository, and the documents it holds are considered copies.⁸ The same applies to the documents gathered by command historians and MHDs. ATP 1-20 clearly states, “Historians are not records managers and do not perform these duties. Historical documents and materials do not constitute command or unit official records, although they may include copies of records.”⁹ These copies are used to write official histories, such as the CMH's *U.S. Army in World War II* series (known as “The Green Books”). Today, the Army's Records Management and Declassification Agency is responsible for records management, as governed by Army Regulation 25-400-2, *Army Records Information Management System*.¹⁰

Unfortunately, the Army's operational records management system is broken. The copies of official records collected by Army historians and MHDs often constitute the only preserved copies of wartime operational records. Soldiers and veterans use these records to write official histories, capture lessons learned, and help substantiate claims for benefits.

The breakdown of the Army's records management program first became apparent in the aftermath of the Gulf War (1990–1991), when researchers investigating unusual illnesses affecting returning soldiers could not locate basic documents listing where units were located on the battlefield. This breakdown stems from the disestablishment of the adjutant general's office in 1986 and the transfer of proponentcy for records management to the Headquarters, Department of the Army, Assistant Chief of Staff for Information Management and Information Systems Command (ACSIM). Traditionally, the adjutant



Above, a box contains historical records of the 1st Cavalry Division's 2006–2007 operations in Iraq, which were collected by the deployed 90th Military History Detachment. (Photo by Maj. Glynn Garcia)

Right, the Communications–Electronics Command (CECOM) Historical Collection is located in the Historical Office at Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland, and consists of documents, still photos, films, recordings (audio and video), and miscellaneous outdated media (e.g., floppy disks, safety films, slides, and microfiche). The collection also has a small military history reference library (approximately two thousand volumes). (Photo courtesy of U.S. Army CECOM)



general was responsible for records management, but by the 1980s, the field of information management “saw little distinction between communications and information.”¹¹ As communication became digital, the Army transferred responsibility for managing the data carried on the networks to those running the networks. Unfortunately, information management and records management doctrine proved difficult to integrate. Additionally, the Army eliminated many trained and deployable records managers as a result of Army-wide force structure changes that rebalanced the Army's tooth-to-tail ratio. The records managers who remained became isolated from the units they supported as their activities were consolidated at the corps level and above.

In 1986, the ACSIM inherited an effort to replace *The Army Functional Files System General Provisions* (AR 340-18-1, now obsolete), the Army's paper-based, 1960s-era records management system. The Army Functional Files System had served the

Army reasonably well during Vietnam and itself was an update of the War Department Decimal Filing System, which helped preserve records from World War II and the Korean War. Excellent operational records from all three of these conflicts are available at the National Archives. The successor to AR 340-18-1 was AR 24-400-2, *The Modern Army Recordkeeping System (MARKS)* (now obsolete).¹² Unfortunately, MARKS was poorly conceived and only worked well at the Department of the Army and major Army command levels. It did not serve well the needs of field units during combat operations.

As units rapidly redeployed and in some cases inactivated after the Gulf War, the U.S. Army Information Systems Command issued a series of misunderstood and contradictory instructions that directed field units to ignore the guidance in MARKS and submit records directly to it. This confusion led to many operational records from the Gulf War being misfiled, misplaced, or simply never retired. It required

a massive effort in the 1990s, directed by President Bill Clinton and Congress and led by CMH, to recover the relevant records needed by Gulf War researchers.¹³

The Army's continued transition to digital systems has only compounded and magnified existing records management deficiencies. Since the beginning of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) in 2001, many wartime records have been irretrievably lost due to the ease of overwriting electronic documents, units' wiping computer hard drives before returning from deployments, and generally poor records management practices. However, during the Gulf War and operations conducted since 2001, deployed Army historians and MHDs have saved copies of many important records. Today, digital and paper copies of GWOT records are held at CMH. This includes copies of records from Operations Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan), Iraqi Freedom, New Dawn, Freedom's Sentinel, and Inherent Resolve. The collection is still being accessioned, but the National Archives and Records Administration and the Department of State have already characterized it as a "national treasure." It will eventually be used to help write the Army's official history of the GWOT.¹⁴

Objectives and Accomplishments

Army doctrine for field history operations is discussed in ATP 1-20, chapter 3, "Organization for Field History Operations." This doctrine includes command history offices at all echelons, and other Army field history organizations such as MHDs. Erik Villard and I deployed as individual historians, with our initial objectives and orders determined by CMH. Once in Kuwait, these were refined based on discussions with USARCENT leadership and the guidance found in ATP 1-20.¹⁵ As previously mentioned, our four objectives were to establish collection procedures, begin collecting documents, establish coordination procedures with key staff, and prepare a transition plan for the MHD.

Establish collection procedures. Establishing collection procedures was our most important goal because it guided all our efforts. This involved writing a collection plan and getting a fragmentary order (FRAGO) published by USARCENT. We wrote the collection plan first since "the collection plan is the heart of any field history plan or order."¹⁶ We based it on discussions with USARCENT's leadership, initial observations, guidance

in ATP 1-20, and discussions with CMH. The plan contained a statement of purpose and intent, collection tasks, methods of collection, types of historical documents to be collected, collection priorities, disposition instructions, and the final products owed to USARCENT.

To formally notify the USARCENT staff of our mission, objectives, and requirements (and those of the follow-on MHD), we needed a FRAGO.¹⁷ This could have been done as annex to an operation order, but the USARCENT staff wanted a FRAGO. We drafted the basic order, staffed it for comments, and worked with the command's operations staff officers to get the document formatted and published. Publication took several weeks and required our active participation throughout the staffing process, but it was our single most important achievement because it laid the foundation for our efforts and those of the follow-on MHD.

Immediately upon arriving, we scheduled office calls with USARCENT's leaders, most of whom had deployed to Kuwait. We met not only with Terry but also with the deputy chief of staff and the command's principle staff (e.g., the deputy chief of staff for operations, G-3). The USARCENT deputy chief of staff briefed us on the command's recent activities and provided general guidance for how to go about accomplishing our mission. During the office calls with the other staff, we explained our mission, asked where we could locate the types of records we needed to collect, and outlined our requirements. All members of the USARCENT staff understood the importance of preserving operational records for posterity, and they were supportive. Through these office calls, we rapidly gained situational awareness, refined the collection plan, and made personal connections with individuals who would help open doors for us. The importance of networking and being personable cannot be overstated because otherwise we would have been isolated and ineffective. The office calls were also a productive use of time while waiting for network access. Attending routine meetings and social functions also enabled us to meet the command's staff in more informal setting.¹⁸

Begin collecting documents. Once we had met USARCENT's leaders, written a collection plan, and gained access to the network (which took about a week), document collecting began in earnest. In total, we collected over seventy gigabytes of digital documents (mostly classified SECRET). This established a baseline

upon which the MHD continued to collect. Our collection focused on USARCENT’s operations against IS, the Afghanistan retrograde, and activities throughout the USCENCOM area of responsibility. We collected from the command’s portal (SharePoint), network shared drive, and e-mail distribution lists. We collected briefing slides, orders (e.g., operation orders, FRAGOS, or execution orders), operational updates, messages, requests for forces, reports, key personnel lists, information papers, after-action reports, maps, and photographs.¹⁹

Collecting digital documents is a time-consuming, manual process that requires viewing thousands of

gather a large volume of documents in a short amount of time, the methodology needs to be simple and flexible. Therefore, we followed the convention most MHDs use, which is a hybrid approach of maintaining documents’ original integrity, but also reorganizing relevant documents together. We organized our collection first by the command generating the document, then by type (e.g., all FRAGOs of a command were grouped together) or by the staff section that produced the document.

Establish coordination procedures. Final disposition of our collection required sending copies to CMH and USARCENT.²⁰ Standard procedure calls

Folders	Data fields (with sample data)							
	Main section	Sub-section	Sub-subsection	Value (high, medium, or low)	Baseline date	Frequency (daily, weekly, or monthly)	Date last collected	Notes
1	Ops staff	G-3	G-33, products	High	23 Sept 2018	Daily	30 Sept 2018	
2	Ops staff	G-3	G-33, documents	High	18 Sept 2018	Daily	30 Sept 2018	On e-mail distribution
3	Ops staff	G-3	G-33, orders	High	18 Sept 2018	Daily	30 Sept 2018	

(Graphic by author)

Table. Basic Collection Matrix Example

individual files and deciding whether to add them to the collection. Because we were establishing a baseline collection upon which the follow-on MHDs would continue to build, we spent a lot of time mining USARCENT’s SharePoint portal and shared drives for relevant documents and reconstructing their file structure and metadata. Having access to e-mail distribution lists made collection maintenance easier.

To help build the collection and remember where, when, how regularly, and what types of documents to collect, we created a simple matrix in Microsoft Excel. Because the portal and share drive were sprawling, this enabled us to build the collection methodically and avoid duplication. The collection matrix also helped us identify and prioritize locations to revisit as new documents were generated. The table illustrates the basic metadata fields as column headings and sample data for three folders, or locations, listed on separate rows (the actual number would be much higher).

One methodological issue Army historians and MHDs face is whether to maintain documents’ original organizational structure or to reorganize them into specific collections. Because collection efforts often

for saving documents on external media (e.g., hard disk drives or DVDs) and mailing these via official mail.²¹ Mailing the collection, rather than transferring the data over a network connection, is done for several reasons. First, there is the volume of data. We collected seventy gigabytes in five weeks; the typical MHD collects many times this amount during a nine- or twelve-month deployment. Second, there are technical issues beyond a historian’s control: the bandwidth of Army networks is limited, moving data across Army network domains is difficult, and there are infrastructure limitations at CMH. Nevertheless, mailing the data imposed its own difficulties and required close coordination with the command’s security manager, information assurance office, and official post office to ensure we complied with security and information assurance requirements.

Prepare a transition plan. Finally, we prepared a transition plan for the 161st Military History Detachment (Georgia Army National Guard). We had hoped to conduct a relief in place in early October 2014, but unforeseen complications meant they did not arrive until January 2015. Therefore,



1st Sgt. William Staude, retired, salutes the national colors being carried by soldiers from the 316th Expeditionary Sustainment Command as they march past him during the Veterans Day parade 11 November 2011 in downtown Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. (Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Michel Sauret, 354th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment)

The Importance of Maintaining Field Records

A ProPublica-*Seattle Times* investigative report indicates that field records from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were lost, destroyed, or never maintained in the first place. Authors Peter Sleeth and Hal Bernton discuss this critical shortcoming and detail its ramifications in “Lost to History: Missing War Records Complicate Benefit Claims by Iraq, Afghanistan Veterans.”

The authors write, “Since the 1990 Gulf War, a failure to create and maintain the types of field records that have documented American conflicts since the Revolutionary War [has plagued the U.S. military].... The recordkeeping breakdown was especially acute in the early years of the Iraq war, when insurgents deployed improvised bombs with devastating effects on U.S. soldiers. The military has also lost or destroyed records from Afghanistan, according to officials and previously undisclosed documents. The loss of field records—after-action write-ups, intelligence reports and other day-to-day accounts from the war zones—has far-reaching implications. It has complicated efforts by soldiers ... to claim benefits. And it makes it harder for military strategists to learn the lessons from Iraq and Afghanistan, two of the nation’s most protracted wars. Military officers and historians say field records provide the granular details that, when woven together, tell larger stories hidden from participants in the day-to-day confusion of combat. The Army says it has taken steps to improve handling of records—including better training and more emphasis from top commanders. But officials familiar with the problem said the missing material may never be retrieved. ‘I can’t even start to describe the dimensions of the problem,’ said Conrad C. Crane, director of the U.S. Army’s Military History Institute. ‘I fear we’re never really going to know clearly what happened in Iraq and Afghanistan because we don’t have the records.’”

Note

To read the entire article, see Peter Sleeth and Hal Bernton, “Lost to History: Missing War Records Complicate Benefit Claims by Iraq, Afghanistan Veterans,” ProPublica website, 9 November 2012, accessed 28 November 2016, <https://www.propublica.org/article-lost-to-history-missing-war-records-complicate-benefit-claims-by-veterans>.

we prepared a continuity book, mobilized the collection effort, and briefed the USARCENT staff. The continuity book listed basic reference information such as key network folder locations, e-mail addresses, and points of contact. It also contained information on our collection activities and advice on travel, in- and out-processing, automation and network support, and security.

Challenges

We faced some challenges related to travel, technical, and security issues. These were part of the normal friction of operating in a location like Kuwait, but they would have resulted in mission failure had they not been resolved. Official travel is full of unique challenges related to the Defense Travel System and obtaining official orders for travel. We flew through Kuwait City International Airport and made sure to coordinate ahead of time with USARCENT for transportation. Before departing, we contacted the USARCENT G-6 (office of the chief information officer) to initiate network and e-mail access, which sped access to the network upon arrival. Securing external media exemptions from the command’s information assurance shop required patience and persistence. Physical security imposed restrictions on movement and communications that necessitated careful coordination and preplanning. Because of limited office space, we moved three times in five weeks. By remaining flexible and coordinating with the staff ahead of time, we minimized the disruptiveness of these moves. Finally, mailing the hard drives was complicated due to the official post office’s limited hours and procedures.

Conclusion

Since Villard and I returned home, three MHDs have deployed to Kuwait, and the collection effort continues today. As an Army historian, I found helping USARCENT build a historical document collection a rewarding professional development opportunity. We demonstrated that Army civilian historians

can fill the role of a military history detachment for a short period. Historians rarely have a chance to witness firsthand history in the making and the creation of the records they use as the foundation of their research. The chance to observe a theater army in action was unique, and we witnessed the skill and professionalism of U.S. Army soldiers, civilians, and

contractors. I am proud to have had the privilege of working alongside them to help build a historical record of their accomplishments. ■

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not reflect the policy or position of the U.S. Army Center of Military History, the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or any agency of the U.S. government.

Notes

1. Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 1-20, *Military History Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], 9 June 2014).
2. Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) Handbook No. 09-22, *Commander's Guide to Operational Records and Data Collection: Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: CALL, March 2009).
3. Collecting operational unit records helps facilitate soldier care by preserving records useful for processing benefits claims or conducting research studies.
4. U.S. Army Central (USARCENT) perpetuates the lineage of Third Army, organized in 1918, which saw extensive combat in Northern Europe during World War II. In 2006, Third Army was redesignated as USARCENT. See "Lineage and Honors; Main Command Post and Operational Command Post Headquarters, United States Army Central," U.S. Army Center of Military History (CMH) website, 5 April 2011, accessed 2 November 2016, <http://www.history.army.mil/html/forcestruc/lineages/branches/army/usacentral.htm>.
5. "U.S. Army Central/Third Army History," USARCENT website, accessed 27 October 2016, <http://www.usarcent.army.mil/About-USARCENT/History/>.
6. Joint Publication 3-31, *Command and Control for Joint Land Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 24 February 2014), x. "The designation of a JFLCC [joint force land component commander] normally occurs when forces of significant size and capability of more than one Service component participate in a land operation and the JFC [joint force commander] determines that doing this will achieve unity of command and effort among land forces." A CFLCC [coalition forces land component commander] performs the same functions, but within a multinational force.
7. ATP 1-20, *Military History Operations*, 3-4. Additional information on the organization and employment of military history detachments can be found in ATP 1-20, chap. 4, and Army Regulation (AR) 870-5, *Military History: Responsibilities, Policies, and Procedures* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 21 September 2007).
8. ATP 1-20, *Military History Operations*, 1-2.
9. *Ibid.*, 5-7.
10. AR 25-400-2, *The Army Records Information Management System (ARIMS)* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2 October 2007). The U.S. Army in World War II series can be found on the CMH website, last modified 27 May 2011, accessed 2 November 2016, <http://www.history.army.mil/html/bookshelves/collect/usaww2.html>.
11. William M. Yarborough, "Undocumented Triumph: Gulf War Operational Records Management," *The Journal of Military History* 76 (October 2013): 1431-32; CALL Handbook No. 09-22 also contains a discussion on the breakdown of Army records management and its manifestation during the Persian Gulf War.
12. AR 25-400-2, *The Modern Army Recordkeeping System (MARKS)* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 15 October 1986, now obsolete). Subsequent editions of AR 25-400-2 were published before it was superseded by ARIMS.
13. For additional information on operational records management during the Gulf War, see Yarborough, "Undocumented Triumph: Gulf War Operational Records Management."
14. U.S. Army Center of Military History, *U.S. Army Center of Military History Strategic Plan, 2015-2019* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2015), 4. CMH has transferred a record copy of the Global War on Terrorism collection to the U.S. Army Records Management and Declassification Agency for accessioning to the National Archives and Records Administration.
15. For more information about individual historians and teams, see ATP 1-20, *Military History Operations*, para. 3-16. Additional guidance relevant to our mission is in ATP 1-20, chaps. 4, 5, and 6.
16. *Ibid.*, 6-5.
17. A fragmentary order is an abbreviated form of an operation order.
18. Raising situational awareness by meeting leaders and attending regular meetings was recommended by ATP 1-20, *Military History Operations*, and by former Army historians who had been deployed.
19. For a list of the types of documents Army historians collect, see ATP 1-20, *Military History Operations*, 5-1-5-2.
20. The requirement for military history detachments and field historians to send a copy of their collection to CMH is prescribed in AR 870-5, *Military History*, para. 4-7 c(3), p. 10; see also ATP 1-20, *Military History Operations*, 4-7.
21. Mailing records classified SECRET by official mail is authorized per AR 380-5, *Department of the Army Information Security Program* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 29 September 2000), para. 8-3.