



NCO Part of National Infantry Museum's Brisk March to Success

By Pablo Villa

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It's been six years since a "ground-shaking" kicked off construction at the site of the National Infantry Museum & Soldier Center in Columbus, Ga. Since then, the jewel of the National Infantry Foundation has made waves across the Army and throughout the country. It has done so with the help of its in-house noncommissioned officer.

About 1.3 million people have walked through the doors of the museum, which sits just outside the western gate of Fort Benning, since it officially opened in June 2009. The 190,000-square-foot museum celebrates the accomplishments of the Army infantry throughout U.S. history in 60,000 square feet of exhibition space.

Travelers ranked the facility the No. 1 attraction in the Columbus area on TripAdvisor.com this year. In 2011, the Themed Entertainment Association bestowed the museum with a Thea award for its outstanding quality. The museum's Memorial Walk of Heroes — an outdoor path that winds past the on-site parade ground and is lined with markers dedicated to various infantry units — played host to hundreds of guests July 18 as the National 4th Infantry Division Association dedicated its monument, the largest of the 33 at the museum. Most of those in attendance, including Army Chief of Staff

Gen. Raymond T. Odierno along with Medal of Honor recipient and former NCO, Staff Sgt. Clinton L. Romesha, toured the museum as well.

Inside is housed a shining collection of military artifacts, some of which were previously held in storage at Fort Benning for more than six decades. But the museum isn't solely about preservation and displays. It tells the story of the infantryman throughout history and emphasizes the tenets by which he lives by (loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity and personal courage). The heart of the museum features a multimedia experience dubbed The Last 100 Yards, which offers an unprecedented walk through the last 238 years of warfare. Visitors get a more in-depth look at the infantryman from the Revolutionary War to the present day throughout four stunning galleries on the lower level of the museum that feature more than 1,600 artifacts. An IMAX theater, combat simulators, a restaurant and gift shop round out the experience and provide revenue-generating sources for the museum, which does not receive government funding to operate.

The steady pace of visitors and accolades gives museum officials reason to be excited and stands as evidence of their hard work, the harmonious relationship between



The 4th Infantry Division Monument sits on the Memorial Walk of Honor south of the National Infantry Museum, which can be seen in the background beyond the parade field. The monument was dedicated July 18. (Photo by Pablo Villa)

the facility's private ownership and the Army, and the dedication of their in-house noncommissioned officer.

"I've been to several other museums. The National Infantry Museum is, in my opinion, the Smithsonian of all Army artifacts," said Sgt. 1st Class Anthony Riggins, liaison officer for the National Infantry Museum. "This is one-of-a-kind. Every Soldier, every family I interact with, they say the same thing. They're always telling us how great it was — the professionalism of the docents, the staff, the Soldiers. It's an awesome place to be."

A 'seamless' partnership

Riggins has been the NCO in charge at the museum since May 2009. His duties consist of coordinating museum tours, graduation ceremonies and classes. He also helps with staffing and regulations for the museum. Early in his stint, Riggins had the task of implementing for the Army the unique partnership that makes the museum work. Though the museum is privately owned by the National Infantry Association, all the military artifacts housed within are owned by the Army.

Retired Col. Gregory C. Camp is the National Infantry Museum's executive vice president and chief development officer. He said working with the Army to present exhibits has been a "seamless operation."

"The relationship with the Army is great, it really is," Camp said. "The galleries in which there are government artifacts are under the control of the government employees. For example, all the historical galleries have gates that lock them, and we, the foundation, even though it's our building, we are not allowed in those unless there is an Army employee on the premises. But it works really well."

Camp said a big reason the partnership works is that most of the museum's private leadership consists of military veterans or spouses. The familiarity with one another's processes and jargon creates a level of comfort between employees and Soldiers that has bolstered the museum's exhibits since its inception.

"We jointly designed everything that exists in the museum," Camp said. "Although the foundation paid for everything, we did it with the input and approval of the Army staff, which would support those exhibits with Army artifacts. So it's been a collaborative effort that works quite well."

Riggins said the biggest challenge early on was working to accommodate designs set forth by the National Infantry Foundation that were decided before military personnel became involved in the project.

"It was challenging at first," Riggins said. "The foundation had already pretty much scheduled a lot of things.

We came in after the fact, so we had to work through some issues early on. But everything worked itself out. Now, everything is falling (in) like it's supposed to. The working relationship between the Army and the foundation is awesome. It's a team. In order for this place to be successful, we have to work together."

For Riggins, the museum is not only a point of pride. It is also a source of comfort. Riggins says he has emotional scars from living through a bomb blast while deployed to Iraq in 2007. He says that working at the museum, along with the support of his wife, Angelique, has helped him get through the difficult transition of returning home. He also says he feels at home and calls the civilian staff at the museum a second family. That family is augmented by the young basic trainees who tour the facility before they graduate. Riggins says NCOs can glean a newfound appreciation from the junior Soldiers and from the museum itself.

"An NCO, when he walks through the doors, is looking at his history," Riggins said. "When I come in this museum, I see the efforts of our senior leaders — the officers and the noncommissioned officers — and it just gives you a sense of pride as a Soldier to see your history.

"As NCOs, we're supposed to coach and mentor these young kids. The Army gave me the opportunity to be a good leader. I look at my leaders and how professional they were in everything they did, and I try to emulate

that. I've been blessed. To have 24 years in this Army, it's the best decision I ever made in my life."

Thinking big

The quest to create the National Infantry Museum began with a problem.

In the mid-1990s, Fort Benning was asked to demolish its World War II barracks. The buildings had fallen into disrepair and had become expensive to maintain. A generous donor who had served in those buildings with Gen. George S. Patton wanted some of them preserved.

The initial plan was to reassemble some of the buildings next to the old infantry museum, which since 1976 was in Fort Benning's old post hospital. But there was a problem.

"As the folks looked at putting this new exhibit next to the old museum, they looked at it and realized that it was not a museum building at all," Camp said. "It was built as a hospital building in 1923. It wasn't big enough."

So the National Infantry Foundation stepped in. With the backing of the community leadership in Columbus, the foundation began work on securing money, hiring an architect and exhibit designer, and selecting a suitable site.

"We said, if we're gonna have this new exhibit, let's figure out where to put it, and let's build a facility that's appropriate to honor the legacy of valor and sacrifice of the American Soldier and, at the same time, will be an iconic



Sgt. 1st Class Anthony Riggins stands near the entrance to The Last 100 Yards exhibit inside the National Infantry Museum. Riggins, the NCO in charge of the museum, works with the museum's private ownership in displaying military-owned artifacts. (Photo by Pablo Villa)

signature facility for our community,” Camp said. “It was the good folks of Columbus, really, who were behind what you see here. They were the ones who said, ‘We want to identify with Fort Benning. We love being known as the community next to Fort Benning.’ So they said, ‘Let’s think big.’”

By 2002, a master plan for the museum was completed, and in 2004, reconstruction of World War II Company Street with the old barracks began. In June 2006, then-Georgia Gov. George E. “Sonny” Perdue joined other dignitaries in a “ground-shaking” ceremony, in which dynamite was used to clear trees and earth at the 200-acre site.

Three years later, the National Infantry Foundation’s big thoughts were realized.

“This is the best-kept secret,” Riggins said of the museum. “To me, Columbus needs this museum. The state of Georgia needs this museum. It’s a wonderful place to visit. We’ve got that Southern hospitality, and we love to welcome people.”

‘Part of something much bigger’

Travelers arriving at the National Infantry Museum, located at 1775 Legacy Way in Columbus, are indeed greeted in grandiose fashion. Brick facades flank an expansive rotunda. In its center, atop a granite pedestal, sits the “Follow Me” statue, an iconic monument that was cast from the likeness of then-Sgt. 1st Class Eugene Wyles in 1960.

Once inside the doors, the museum’s signature exhibit beckons immediately. Two striking curved walls draw you inside a circular room with markers identifying the seven Army Values that drive every infan-

tryman. The display stands as a tribute to the military adage that the infantry owns “the last 100 yards” of the battlefield. Visitors walk past the room and up a gently sloping ramp featuring life-size dioramas depicting significant battles in America’s history such as Yorktown, Antietam, Soissons, Normandy and Iraq. A musical score plays throughout the walk, keeping the mood somber. As you near the end of the ramp, the footsteps of marching infantrymen crescendo into an evocative display of Soldiers’ silhouettes and the American flag.

For Riggins, it is a fitting image for young Soldiers training at Fort Benning.

“Each basic trainee gets to come here before their graduation ceremony,” Riggins said. “When you hit the last of the 100-yard ramp, you hear the Soldiers march. I always tell the trainees, ‘The footsteps you hear are the footsteps that you all will be taking over for us.’ And just to look in the Soldiers’ eyes when you pass that torch, you can see that these guys really truly believe in the American dream.”

Upon exiting The Last 100 Yards exhibit, visitors enter a gallery featuring a historic look at infantry weaponry and equipment. From there, they travel to the Grand Hall in the lower level of the museum to view four galleries that offer an intricate look at infantry history from 1898 to the present day.

In the center of the Grand Hall sits the Hall of Valor exhibit. The display pays tribute to infantrymen who have received the Medal of Honor, the nation’s highest award for bravery. Army infantrymen have received more medals than all other military branches combined. Information and photos of more than

1,500 of these recipients are displayed inside the glass-walled exhibit putting faces to the names of heroes, many of who have made the ultimate sacrifice.

“The Army in general — and the infantry in particular — is incredibly selfless,” Camp said. “They go out, they do their job and, for the most part, they go back into the civilian world. Some of them made a career of the military. But most infantrymen, they serve their time and then they go back into the world. They don’t talk about it. They don’t beat



Infantry Soldiers and a modern humvee are depicted in this exhibit from the “The Sole Superpower (1989-Present)” gallery of the National Infantry Museum in Columbus, Ga. The gallery is one of four that presents the history of the infantry in detail. (Photo by Pablo Villa)



A diorama depicts Col. Lewis L. Millett's Feb. 7, 1951, bayonet charge in the Battle of Soam-Ni, Korea, as part of The Last 100 Yards exhibit at the National Infantry Museum. (Photo by Pablo Villa)

their chests. Because of that, there was never really any clamoring cry to have a museum. But it does need to be done. It is something that definitely needs to be recorded, to honor and preserve. We started to say, 'Somebody needs to step forward and create a legacy facility to honor this selfless service.' So the foundation took that upon itself to do that. We did it in conjunction with the Army, of course. But now I think it gives great pride.

"We just had a bunch of young Soldiers graduate and join the infantry. And those guys will have great pride in taking their families up The Last 100 Yards ramp that tells the story of the infantry from Yorktown all the way to Afghanistan and Iraq," Camp said. "Now they've joined that legacy. Now they're a part of that. I think it makes them really proud to think 'I'm part of something much bigger than any individual.'" ■

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