



The front of the new National Museum of the United States Army at Fort Belvoir, Va., can be seen in this artist's rendering. (Photo courtesy of the Army Historical Foundation)

# NCOs' Help Needed to Make Army's National Museum a Reality

*By Michael L. Lewis*

NCO Journal

**T**he Navy has had one for more than 50 years. The Air Force's draws more than 1.3 million people to it every year. And the Marine Corps opened its version to great fanfare in 2006. But when it comes to a national museum to highlight the history, sacrifice and contributions of the U.S. Army, there has never been one, despite Congress appropriating funds to construct one — in 1814. But with luck, and the help of NCOs past and present, that will change before this decade is over.

On what used to be part of the golf course at Fort Belvoir, Va., the Army has set aside 45 acres to build a state-of-the-art, \$175 million showcase that will finally tell the full gamut of stories of America's Soldiers. And a large part of the future National Museum of the United States Army will be the stories of the Army's noncommissioned officers, said retired Brig. Gen. Creighton W. Abrams III, the executive director of the Army Historical Foundation, which is in charge of fundraising for the museum.

"There aren't a lot of armies that have relied as much on NCOs as ours has over the years. So, there will be a lot of NCO stories in the museum," Abrams said. "It's long overdue. It's going to tell a lot of different stories that no current Army museum does."

"We're the only service right now that does not have a national museum," said retired Sgt. Maj. of the Army Kenneth O. Preston, a member of the museum's board of directors. "We've got lots and lots of little museums in posts, camps and stations all across the country. But at the national level, we need this. For us to have a museum here within the Washington, D.C., area, I think, is very, very important. This is the nation's capital, and there are literally millions and millions of Americans who come here every year. So we need a museum that tells the Army's story."

Because many Americans don't understand the outsized contributions of NCOs in the U.S. Army, the museum can be an unparalleled opportunity to educate the public, Preston said.

“When you talk to most civilians out there, they know privates, they know sergeants, they know colonels and they know generals. For the most part, those are the ranks they know in the Army,” he said. “But they don’t understand the roles and responsibilities that noncommissioned officers play in the Army and, of course, the accomplishments that they’ve had throughout history. When you look at the Army, 85 percent of the Army is enlisted. And specifically, when you look at the breakdown of enlisted soldiers, 50 percent of them are non-commissioned officers. By far, we are the largest part of the Army, and [NCOs] should have the largest representation when it comes to the museum.”

Indeed, the museum — from its design to its interactive exhibits to its educational programs — is being built to do just that, Abrams said.

“The idea of this museum is really to be the Army’s national landmark, the one place where every Soldier and former Soldier, their families, and other relatives can come and see the whole Army story told in a very interactive and interesting way,” Abrams said. “Gen.

[Martin] Dempsey (the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) wrote an editorial recently about the importance of an all-volunteer force staying connected to the American people. Well, the museum is also going to help with that.”

### The missing piece

Once constructed, the Army museum will, at last, fill a gap among the national museums devoted to each service, Abrams said. The Navy’s, at the Washington Naval Yard in the capital, opened in 1961. The Air Force’s, at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, opened in 1971. And the Marine Corps’, just south of Washington at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., opened in 2006.

The Army’s new museum will also improve on the lack of public Army destinations in the national capital region, Abrams said.

“As an Army guy, it’s somewhat galling to realize that, when you come to Washington, flanking Arlington National Cemetery is the Air Force Memorial and the Marine Corps War Memorial (popularly known



The Soldier’s Gallery will feature 41 individual displays, each telling the remarkable story of a Soldier in history. The majority of those depicted will be NCOs, museum officials said. (Photo courtesy of the Army Historical Foundation)

as the Iwo Jima Memorial), and downtown, you have the Navy Memorial,” he said. “Then there’s the Navy Museum in the Navy Yard, and just south of here in Quantico, they have a terrific new museum for the Marine Corps. But there’s nothing here for the Army — not a landmark, not a museum, nothing.”

Yet, if the success of the Marine Corps’ museum is any indication — the 100,000-square-foot facility attracts more than 500,000 visitors annually — the new Army museum will more than compensate, presenting the Army story to hundreds of thousands of people each year, Abrams said.

“We associate four verbs with the mission of the museum: engage, educate, honor and inspire,” Abrams said. “Engage because if you don’t engage, you don’t get to do the other three. Educate is really the overall mission of the museum. We think if we do the first two well, we cannot help but honor those who’ve served and inspire those who might want to serve.”

To accomplish this mission, the Army hired the same firm that designed the state-of-the-art exhibits at the Marines’ museum; the National Infantry Museum outside Fort Benning, Ga.; and the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History in Washington. As in those places, designers had to figure out ways to tell stories while capturing the attention of visitors young and old alike.

They were also tasked with selecting and showcasing priceless artifacts from among the Army’s collection of millions, some more than 200 years old.

“It’s amazing to see what we have — everything from weapons to books to manuscripts — very important pieces of our history that not only tell the Army’s history, but also tell America’s history,” Preston said. “If you’ve ever seen the Indiana Jones movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, at the end, they’ve got this crate and are carrying it off with the ark in it. They put it in this warehouse, and all you see are boxes and crates for as far as the eye can see. Well, that’s kind of what the Army museum looks like right now — it’s all in a big warehouse.”

Once built, however, the Army museum won’t look anything like a warehouse, nor a museum of yesteryear with its endless rows of static display cases. Rather, interactive and immersive galleries will engage visitors with audio, video, light and sound. And the experience will start before visitors even enter the 185,000-square-foot building, Abrams said.

“We’ll have a gallery that we call the Soldier’s Gallery. There will be, at the beginning, 41 Soldiers represented, and the preponderance of those will be NCOs,” Abrams said. “Each one is kind of a monolith, a plinth, that will have an image of an individual Soldier and a brief synopsis of that Soldier’s experience in the Army. Each story will reflect in some way one

or more of the Army Values. I always think that Army Values are better caught than taught. So, if you tell a story about an individual Soldier that reflects one or more of the Army Values, that’s a better way of doing it. We’ll have about half a dozen of those Soldier Stories as you’re walking up to the door, so that the experience begins before you actually get inside. I think it’s kind of neat having visitors march into the front door alongside those Soldier stories.”

Once inside, visitors will encounter a two story-tall representation of the Soldier’s Creed and a listing of the 187 campaigns Soldiers have fought in since Lexington and Concord in 1775. Beyond, in the largest section of the museum, visitors will learn the Army’s history of fighting for the nation in six galleries, each devoted to a particular segment of time:

- “Founding the Nation” explains the birth of the U.S. Army during the Revolutionary War — the transformation from a loose federation of state militias to the unified fighting force of a new sovereign nation.
- “Preserving the Nation” dramatizes the political, regional and philosophical tensions that led to the Civil War and the new tactics and technology that developed out of it.
- “The Nation Overseas” documents Army actions in the Philippines, Cuba and elsewhere as a prelude to America’s entry into World War I.
- “Global War” chronicles the epic conflict of World War II and the wide-ranging changes in Army infrastructure and doctrine that resulted.
- “Cold War” tells of the ideological war between the United States and the Soviet Union that simmered for 40 years.
- “Uncertain Battlefields” describes the Army’s reinvention after the Persian Gulf War, peace operations in the Balkans and Somalia, and 9/11 into a force prepared to defeat the threats of non-state adversaries, terrorism and asymmetrical warfare.

The museum’s other large exhibit gallery, “The Army and Society,” explains the interaction between the Army and the American public, Abrams said.

“There’s absolutely fascinating stuff in there,” he said. “For one thing, the Army invented a lot of stuff, and that crossed over into the civilian community. We aren’t going to have it in there — because it’s too darn big — but if we could, we’d include the first main-frame computer in America, the Electronic Numeric Integrator and Computer, built for the Army to do the tabular firing tables for the field artillery. It was part of what has truly been a technological revolution for this country and for the world.”

Other exhibits will include a replica of the 1908 Wright Flyer, which heralded the beginning of both Army aviation and civil aviation throughout the world (the original crashed, killing a lieutenant on board);



In the lobby of the new museum will be campaign ribbons and streamers from throughout the Army's nearly 240-year history. (Photo courtesy of the Army Historical Foundation)

the story of how Army surgeon Maj. Walter Reed beat yellow fever, enabling the Army Corps of Engineers to construct the Panama Canal, which changed worldwide transportation; and a re-enactment of George Washington's 1783 speech at Newburgh, N.Y., which calmed a group of officers intending to overthrow Congress and helped establish the foundational principle of civil control of the military.

Perhaps the most forward-thinking part of the museum will be the Experiential Learning Center, where middle-schoolers will use smart tables, touch displays and other multimedia tools to creatively plan and execute a mock rescue mission that will integrate the GSTEM — geography, science, technology, engineering and math — skills that are used so often in Army occupations.

"They'll have to work collaboratively and collectively to accomplish the mission," Abrams said. "We picked middle-schoolers because educators say that's the perfect age to capture their interest in GSTEM. But there will also be stuff for kids of younger ages, too."

On the uppermost floor of the museum will be the rooftop Medal of Honor Garden, an area of quiet reflection that will feature a wall with the name of every recipient, with stations to learn more about the gallantry and valor that earned each the nation's highest military award.

## Bringing forth the vision

Yet all the exhibits, artifacts and stories won't have a home without the help of NCOs, Preston said.

"I think it's important that noncommissioned officers support the Army museum," he said. "Particularly now, as we're coming out of a war that we've been involved with for more than 13 years, it's important right now to help educate the American people. With the museum strategically located here with all the other museums, it will be an opportunity to capture and tell the Soldier's story. The Army needs that right now. Soldiers, noncommissioned officers and leaders across the force need that right now, because we need the support of the American people. If we want to continue to have a strong Army for the defense of the nation, then we have to be able to showcase all that Soldiers have accomplished over 239 years."

Though major corporations have donated a large chunk of the \$175 million total cost, there's still a large shortfall — more than \$30 million — that must be raised before construction can begin, Preston said.

"We're at the point right now when a lot of the big donors have given a lot of money already. But it's going to take more than just the big corporate donors out there to fund this project," he said. "It's going to take fundraising at the individual level. Historically, with

a lot of these projects, 50 percent to 70 percent of the money comes from the individual level.”

Preston said it will take support from individual Soldiers of every rank to make the museum a reality for the Army they have served or currently serve.

“I would hope that all noncommissioned officers out there look at it from an individual perspective, but also take a step back and look at it from an institutional perspective, that we tell the Soldier’s story for the American people.”

With individual donors in mind, the Army Historical Foundation asked the museum’s architects to include commemorative bricks in the building’s design.

“We knew all along that we wanted to do something that would be accessible — in terms of contributions — to the largest group of people,” Abrams said. “So from the very beginning, we told our designers, ‘Design in bricks — lots of bricks!’ So the museum and the campus accommodate 30,000 bricks. They’re granite, and they’re part of the design — they’re not something extraneous.”

The bricks, along with replicas for display in a home or office, may be purchased at <https://armyhistry.org/bricks/>.

“For noncommissioned officers out there, it’s an opportunity for them to contribute,” Preston said. “You can have your name, your unit, the time you served out there for generations of Americans to see.”

But Preston stressed another museum program that’s not soliciting money, but rather stories. Soldiers, former Soldiers, family members or friends may submit

their reminiscences at the Registry of the American Soldier — accessible at <https://armyhistry.org/the-registry-of-the-american-soldier/>. What is collected will be on display at the museum and online.

“One of the neat things that this museum can do — and you can do this right now online — is you can register and send in Soldiers’ stories. You can capture your own personal experiences from your deployments, from your time in service. Regardless of when you served — if you are World War II private who was part of the Normandy beach landings, or you served in Korea, or you served most recently in Afghanistan or any of the peacekeeping roles that have Soldiers deployed now in more than 80 countries in the world — we want to capture that piece of history; we want to tell the Soldier’s story as part of this museum.”

Ultimately, the entire point of the project is encapsulated in its name, Preston said: to provide a museum for the entire nation to learn about its Army. And the best way for that to happen is through the experiences of the millions of Soldiers who have formed its ranks over nearly 240 years, he said.

“This museum is important, because not only do we want to get a lot of those artifacts out where they can be seen and enjoyed by the public, we also want to capture and tell those personal stories from each individual who served,” Preston said. “I think it’s important. We need this. We need a museum that tells the Soldier’s story, that tells the story of the noncommissioned officer.” ■



<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/>

<https://www.facebook.com/NCOJournal>

<https://twitter.com/NCOJournal>

**Disclaimer:** The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NCO Journal, the U.S. Army, or the Department of Defense.

