



# USASMA To Host Grand Opening For New NCO Heritage And Education Center

By Meghan Portillo — NCO Journal

Veterans have been moved to tears as exhibits conjure memories of the battles of their past, and future leaders have been inspired during school field trips to the Museum of the Noncommissioned Officer at Fort Bliss, Texas. The nondescript building has preserved and displayed the grand history of the U.S. Army NCO Corps since the museum opened in 1981, and it has recently been transformed into something greater. Now reflagged as the NCO Heritage and Education Center, it has been revitalized and will be used as an extension of the classroom for students attending the Sergeants Major Course, as well as the other courses executed at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy.

“As the Museum of the Noncommissioned Officer, the facility did a great job of chronicling the NCO story, but the facility needed some improvements and the dis-



An original copy of the Blue Book, written by Baron Friedrich von Steuben and published in 1782, is one of the prized artifacts on display at the NCO Heritage and Education Center at Fort Bliss, Texas. The book was the first attempt to outline what NCOs' duties and responsibilities were. (Photos by Meghan Portillo/NCO Journal)

plays needed updating,” said Command Sgt. Maj. Tedd Pritchard, deputy commandant of USASMA and the lead for the changes taking place at the Heritage and Education Center. “So we knocked down some walls, rebuilt some displays and changed the name to reflect its new mission – that of heritage and education.”

As a drill sergeant in the early 1990s, Pritchard helped construct new walls within the museum. He remembers when they were proud to have nearly 100 artifacts. Now, the center boasts more than 2,500 artifacts, with about a third of them on display at any time, highlighting NCOs’ role as small-unit leaders. The exhibits complement the history curriculums within the Sergeants Major Course, the Battle Staff Course and the Warrior Leaders Course, Pritchard said, and the center is equipped with an open classroom space to host lectures as well as promotion and induction ceremonies.

“We talk about customs, honoring our traditions. It’s important for all of our students to understand those who served before us: their legacies, their battles, what they have done. We must continue to honor them,” Pritchard said. “It opens up students’ eyes to the way they will have to adapt to the future. It broadens their perspective and their understanding of what this education is all about and what it is to be a student here at the Sergeants Major Academy.”

## Lessons steeped in history

Courses at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy are designed to develop agile, versatile and broadly-skilled NCOs, and lessons on the history of the NCO Corps have always been an integral part of the curriculum.

“One of the semesters that all of the Sergeants Major Academy students go through is the Department of Training and Doctrine,” said Command Sgt. Maj. Dennis Defreese, USASMA’s commandant. “About half of that curriculum is about NCO history and the effects of our NCO Corps on the military as a whole and different wars and campaigns ... and also about how it’s evolved over time to where it is now known as the premier NCO Corps of any army in the world.”

History classes can be taught anywhere, Defreese said, but it is difficult to tie lessons together and convey the big picture. The NCO Heritage and Education Center is an ideal location for lectures, he said, because the exhibits bring the lessons to life in chronological order – from the establishment of the Continental Army in 1775 to the present.

“Really seeing the history of our NCO Corps from what it was in 1775 to what it is now, it is clear that our NCO Corps has had to continue to professionalize over the last 240 years,” he said. “The world has always been



The walls separating displays along one side of the NCO Heritage and Education Center were rebuilt on a 45-degree angle to open the space and help show the changes over time.

an increasingly complex world and continues to be that way, and [this center provides] a visual and tangible way to demonstrate how the NCO Corps has had to adapt over the years and why it is important, as we move forward, to continue to be adaptable like that.”

### A refreshing change

The musty, old smell associated with museums and ancient artifacts has been replaced with the smell of clean, new carpet and fresh coats of paint. Visitors are greeted with vibrant colors and an elegant display of the NCO Creed.

“When [Pritchard] came in here, the first thing he said was, ‘When I walk through this door, I want things to pop. BAM! I want people to get excited, refreshed, when they walk in the door,’” recalled Sgt. 1st Class Skeet Styer, curator at the NCO Heritage and Education Center.

When the doors closed Dec. 22 to begin the construction, approximately 45 students and spouses from the Family Readiness Group joined the effort. Styer and Staff Sgt. Brandon Burkhart – the history NCO assigned to the center – were the only ones to handle artifacts, but the bulk of the work was done by volunteers.

Walls were taken down to turn no-longer-needed office space into the open classroom area, which will seat more than 50 people. A podium stands in the corner and two video monitors hang on the bright yellow and black wall to enable lectures and presentations. The students have even built an archway for use during promotion ceremonies. New NCOs can walk through it as a symbolic “rite of passage,” Styer said.

The walls separating a large section of displays were rebuilt on a 45-degree angle to further open the space. The building must remain somewhat dark to protect the artifacts, but the colored walls and structural changes lighten the layout. Plans for more LED lighting that will not damage items on display are in the works, Styer said.

“The students and spouses have been phenomenal,” Styer added. “There is no way this center would be like it is now without their help. And nothing would have gotten done without the entire S-3 shop. They have all the connections. They know who to talk to. It has definitely been a team effort.”



An open classroom area will be used for lectures as well as NCO promotion and induction ceremonies, NCO professional development and other educational activities. To schedule a ceremony or event, contact the center at 915-744-8646.



The sergeant major of the Army exhibit includes a portrait of Sgt. Maj. William O. Wooldridge, the first sergeant major of the Army, as well as Sgt. Maj. Kenneth O. Preston’s desk, bookcase and locker. The items used by Sgt. Maj. Preston during his seven years as sergeant major of the Army were donated by former Sgt. Maj. of the Army Raymond F. Chandler.



Barracks life in the 1890s is depicted in this display recently redesigned by USASMA students and their spouses. A staple item at the time was the footlocker, which held the Soldier's materials and military possessions. Card games, dime novels, photos and baseball items could all be found in the room to fill idle hours.



Astrid Owens, an artist and the spouse of a USASMA staffmember, painted murals behind several of the displays. The one above depicts El Paso's own Franklin Mountains, which can be seen from the center's front door.

The volunteers' talents ranged from carpentry to theatrical set design. Astrid Owens, an artist and the spouse of a USASMA staff member, painted murals behind many of the displays, depicting far-away landscapes as well as scenes much closer to home. One sets the stage in the jungles of Vietnam, while another shows El Paso's own Franklin Mountains, which can be seen from the center's front door.

The work done on the center is a legacy project for Class 65 of the Sergeants Major Academy, explained Jennifer Wood, USASMA Family Readiness Group co-leader and chair for the center refurbishment committee. Because the students' academic responsibilities are so demanding, the FRG volunteered to help with the work, and Wood said it has been exciting for them

to see the project from start to finish.

"It's been incredibly exciting to watch it come to life," she said. "Each new thing that you put in place makes it a tangible experience or puts you inside that day of the NCO. It's so exciting to see other people come and say, 'Oh, I get it! I see what it was like now.' We want you to be able to look [at an exhibit] and put yourself in the place of the NCO.

"For example, World War I – it was really important for us to put in a trench, because when you think of World War I, it's trench warfare, and the majority of us don't know that experience and cannot relate to that. So that's what we wanted to portray. ... The important thing is to tell the story of the NCO."

At the grand reopening ceremony scheduled for May 28, the class president will present the commandant with a plaque to hang on the wall, stating the accomplishments of the students and their spouses.

"We will recognize the students and all of the spouses for what they have done, which has been tremendous," Pritchard said. "We can't be more proud or excited about what they have done. I praise the heck out of them every time I see them."

## Hard work paying off

“A lot of people are coming in here going, ‘Wow, this place has really changed.’ They are really excited about it,” Styer said. “So Sgt. Maj. Pritchard’s dream is coming to light. It’s pretty exciting to see where it was to where it is now.”

It is a work in progress, however. To care for the artifacts and to prevent the uniforms from fading, the exhibits will rotate, he said, and improvements to the center will continue.

“Every single day we are doing something to change the place. It just takes time,” he said.

Maintaining a refreshed and updated heritage and education center is important, Pritchard said, because it reflects the Army’s pride in its NCO Corps.

“I have done a lot of stuff here at USASMA,” Pritchard said, “and am getting ready to leave, but I take most pride in leading this project.

“We have revitalized it to be a place people will want to come back to. We should have the best heritage center in the Army because the noncommissioned officer has been out front and leading so many charges for so long. It is critically important that we keep it revitalized and maintained for future generations to come. It’s already been over there 25 years now, and it will hopefully be there 25 years after us.”

**Grand Reopening** The ceremony will take place at 9 a.m. May 28 at the NCO Heritage and Education Center, 11331 SSG Sims St., at Fort Bliss, Texas. ■

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