

Army Heritage Center Looking For NCOs to Gather Soldier Stories

By Jonathan (Jay) Koester - NCO Journal

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Army history is storied and vast. But that vast history really comes down to one thing: Soldiers telling their stories.

The U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, is working to collect and preserve as many of those Soldier stories as they can, but they need help from NCOs. Though the center has more than enough veterans ready and willing to tell their tales, there aren't enough volunteer Veteran Ambassadors to sit down and record those tales.

The heritage center's motto is 'Telling the Army Story ... One Soldier at a Time,' and the center has been gathering Soldier stories going all the way back to the Spanish-American War in 1898, said Karl Warner, the program and education coordinator at the center. But up until 2014, the center gathered those stories solely through surveys that they would hand out to veterans, asking them to fill them out. The surveys ran from 20 to 30 pages.

"In our World War I section of these surveys, we have an entire face of our archival stacks full of boxes that are full of these surveys, tens of thousands of them," Warner said. "You go to

World War II, and we have just as many, maybe even a little more. You get to Korea, and we only have one section of a face, so maybe only a few thousand from Korean War veterans. Then you go up to Vietnam War, and we've got only a few boxes. You get to Desert Storm and current operations, Global War on Terrorism, etc., you have even less than we have for Vietnam. So, we had to figure that out. What's the difference?"

The center studied the issue and talked to veterans about why the center was receiving so few surveys. They found several reasons for the problem. One, Vietnam War-era veterans sometimes didn't feel comfortable discussing their service with the government, especially in a written form. Meanwhile, more recent veterans and those currently serving said they didn't want to fill out a 30-page survey, not even online. They felt it would take too much time.

"So, we did some market research and we realized, if we are not going to get a huge number of surveys back, let's concentrate on the quality of the material we get," Warner said. "So, we started the Veteran's Ambassador Program, and the intent of the Veteran's Ambassador Program is to get out there to the veterans, get them to sit down for an oral history interview and collect the material that way. Instead of them getting a faceless sheet of paper that says, 'U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center' at the top — with the stress on 'U.S. Army' and that this would be official — instead they get me or one of my veteran ambassadors to come out, sit down with them, shake their hand, start a conversation, and then record an oral history with someone they can make a connection with."





Staff Sgt. Toni Miklesavage (right), a Veteran Ambassador for the U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center, does an on-camera interview with former Sgt. Maj. of the Army Jack L. Tilley in May in El Paso, Texas. (Photos by Jonathan (Jay) Koester / NCO Journal)

That connection is why the center wants more noncommissioned officers to volunteer as Veteran Ambassadors.

“The NCO corps’ mission is to take care of Soldiers, so they know how to deal with Soldiers, they know how a Soldier thinks, they know how an NCO thinks,” Warner said. “So, when they sit down to start talking to a fellow NCO or a veteran who was enlisted, this veteran knows ... they are talking to somebody who has been there, who has done that. ... It opens those Soldiers up. It opens those veterans up. It shows them that we really care about their history. An NCO has a special insight and a special ability to know how Soldiers think and how Soldiers talk, and it makes that conversation a lot easier and a lot more effective when you start to dig down into those details that are historically significant.

“There’s nobody who knows Soldiers better than NCOs, so that means there’s nobody who is going to be better at doing oral histories for us than NCOs,” Warner said.

During a short tour of duty at the center, Staff Sgt. Toni Miklesavage was one of the first NCOs to volunteer as a Veteran Ambassador. Miklesavage is now executive assistant to Command Sgt. Maj. Christopher Martinez at the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and continues her work gathering Soldiers’ stories for the center.

“The part that I enjoy the most is the fact that every Soldier has a story,” Miklesavage said. “Even though we have general things in common — like going through basic training, our initial individual training, that type of thing — each Soldier has their own individual story as far as what their personal experience was like. The Veteran’s Ambassador Program gives you that opportunity to get that individual story. And through the Army Heritage and Education Center, they tell the story of the Army one Soldier at a time. So, this gives you a chance to be up close and personal and to actually contribute to the oral history library and make that Soldier’s story a part of official Army history.”

Oral historians are able to gather more pertinent information than the surveys did in large part because of the research they do on the subject before the interview, Warner said. The process starts with a short survey.

“All the information that’s in this eight-page survey — it’s much easier to fill out than the old 20-

... All the information that's in the eight-page survey — it's much easier to fill out than the six- to 30-page surveys — when they send it back, those volunteers turn around and do a little research on the person. For example, if the guy was a tanker in Vietnam, we don't want to ask him about jumping out of airplanes, because tankers in Vietnam didn't jump out of airplanes. So, we do a little bit of research on who they were, what they did, where they were, that sort of thing, so that when we sit down we can guide the conversation to really get the best information that historians 150 years from now can use.”

The time and dedication it takes to do that research and then sit and record an interview with a Soldier or veteran means the center needs volunteers with a passion for Soldier stories and the Army's history, Warner said.

“I don't need folks to tell me they have a veteran who needs to be interviewed,” he said. “I've got people wanting to be interviewed coming out of my ears. My issue is that I need people who have the dedication and the wherewithal to conduct the interviews.

“We're looking for people who can make the time, who are passionate about it and who realize they are working for a greater good to save our Army's history through these interviews,” Warner said. “It's not an easy job. It definitely takes some dedication. You have to go out, you have to press that flesh and shake those hands to get somebody to buy into the idea of sitting down with you for an interview. Vietnam War vets, especially, are sometimes a little bit hesitant to sit down for an interview with the Army. So they have to be able to sell the program properly and make sure that the potential interviewee understands what we're doing here. We're not trying to catch anybody; we're not trying to do an investigation. We're simply recording their version, their history, from their point of view.

“A lot of folks who we get in here, they do a little bit of it and realize that it does take some dedication and they don't continue with us,” Warner said. “But those who do, like Staff Sgt. Miklesavage who keeps coming back to do more ... these are folks who have become very, very passionate about it and they're really biting at the bit for their next interview. They really enjoy it.”

A unit with a desire to help record Army history can start a project that would help the unit, as well as the heritage center, Warner said.

“You have a command sergeant major, you have a lieutenant colonel, you have an S1 or an XO who are heading out the door: You sit them down, you do a two-hour interview with them about their time in your unit,” he said. “Now, you can send that back to me, and I have a recording of it, then I send you back a transcript and a recording. Now you have that in your own battalion archives. The next guy comes in and he's reading what the last XO did, or what the last command sergeant major dealt with. ... You start to get a unit history that's not only useful to the next person coming through the door, but also starts to lay down a legacy from that unit

here in the Army's collections.”

Join in

If you have the passion for this mission and want to become a U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center Veteran Ambassador, please contact Karl Warner, the center's program and education coordinator, at usarmy.carlisle.awc.mbx.ahec-ves@mail.mil (mailto:usarmy.carlisle.awc.mbx.ahec-ves@mail.mil) or (717) 245-3972.