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Using Playing Cards to Teach Unit History and Traditions

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"Military history serves to inspire soldiers and give them pride in their profession. Unit morale can only improve when the individual soldiers of a unit come to realize that they are part of a larger entity with a record of respected accomplishments" ("Organizational History," 1999, para. 1).

Learning unit history is an important part of being a Soldier. It helps keep the memory alive of those who came before and preserves their actions as

standards of bravery. But learning unit history doesn't always have to be from a textbook or handout. This article presents a way to create and include playing cards as a



U.S. Army Soldiers with the 175th Financial Management Support Center dressed in U.S. Army uniforms representing the time period of various conflicts the unit has supported during its recent history celebration at Fort Shafter, Honolulu, Hawaii, Nov. 3, 2017. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Michael Behlin)

nontraditional form of teaching unit history to Soldiers that can be done in any setting and location.

Organizational Identification

Organizational identification can be defined as an individual's emotional connection with an organization, when the beliefs, values, and principles practiced by the organization are part of the individual's identity (Ashforth et al., 2008; Pratt, 1998). Members of an organization can develop social identity at multiple levels in the organizational hierarchy (Ashforth et al., 2008; Vijayakumar & Padma, 2014). In the U.S. Army, Soldiers can build social identity in multiple ways, including by echelons (e.g., Army, division, regiment, brigade, battalion/squadron, company/troop) and branch (e.g., infantry, armor/cavalry, medical, transportation, signal). According to a Rand Corporation study, strong social identification is associated with positive organizational outcomes; Soldiers who strongly identify with their organization are more likely to be involved with, speak positively about, and remain in their organization (Helmus et al., 2018).

The Army recognizes the importance of shared identity:

“Units and organizations preserve their storied histories and proudly display distinctive emblems (regimental colors, crests, insignia, patches, and mottos). The campaign streamers on the Army flag remind us of our history of honorable service to the Nation. These symbols recall the sacrifices and preserve the ties with those who preceded us” (U.S. Department of the Army, 2019, p. 20).

Unit History

The Army is highly rooted in history and traditions and recognizes the importance of organizational history: “Organizational history is the institutional memory of a military organization. It should be used to increase individual morale and organizational esprit, as well as the public pride and respect for Army organizations” (U.S. Department of the Army, 2007, p. 15).

The resources assigned to preserve, present, and advance organizational and unit history exist at multiple echelons. However, recent evidence indicates few units are perceived to emphasize unit history and traditions. Specifically, an online survey of 523 Soldiers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) found that only 34.8% of respondents replied “Yes” to the question, “Is Army history and tradition a focus within your organization?” (Ellis, 2018). A second survey, collected in person from 375 junior NCOs (team and squad leaders) and junior enlisted Soldiers, found when asked to rate “I know the history and lineage of my battalion/squadron,” only 28% answered “Agree” and 8% answered “Strongly Agree” (Foo & Wisecarver, 2021).

The knowledge gap does not appear as a lack of interest or perceived value in unit history, rather, from investing too little time both by Soldiers to study and by leaders to teach unit history. (Foo & Wisecarver, 2021). As part of that research, we developed training resources like informational playing cards to assist NCOs and their units build Soldiers' knowledge on unit history and traditions. The reasons for choosing this medium are presented below, followed by template and example content plans units can use to create their own deck of unit history cards.

Playing Cards as Tools for Education

Since the early days of the U.S. military, playing card companies produced war-themed cards to commemorate famous events and people and to inform troops of enemy capabilities (Bicycle Cards, n.d.). During World War II, the U.S. military issued “spotter cards” as educational tools for military and civilian personnel to recognize allied and enemy aircraft, ships, and tanks (Malone, 2008). In 2003, the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) distributed the “personality identification playing cards” to help coalition forces identify the “most wanted” members of Saddam Hussein's regime (Burgess, 2003). Recently, the U.S. Army created playing cards depicting weapons of foreign nations (Correll, 2019).

There are multiple benefits to using playing cards as a teaching medium. First, their small size and light weight means they are easily-carried and can be used in indoor and outdoor settings. Second, they are not dependent on

technology or other equipment. Third, they can be used for independent, formal, and informal learning. Finally, they can be used in various innovative and engaging ways to facilitate learning (Gutierrez, 2014).

Playing Cards Content

The playing card content was organized by suit, with each suit having a theme (Eugene, 2008). The four themes were:

- Clubs: heraldry, lineage, campaigns, and decorations
- Diamonds: wars, battles, and other events
- Hearts: heroes and famous leaders
- Spades: higher headquarters

Table 1 (end of article) shows the themes for each suit and the topic for each card. Cards should cover the breadth of the unit's history, particularly when selecting content for campaigns (clubs), battles (diamonds), famous leaders (hearts), and division roles (spades). For some units, this might begin with the Revolutionary War, while for others it may be much more recent. Relatively new units would need to go into more detail regarding recent events.

Using Table 1's content plan, an example set of unit history and traditions playing cards was developed for the 1st Squadron, 7th Cavalry Regiment (Fort Hood, Texas). Table 2 (end of article) shows the content topic for each card.

Sources for Templates, Content Information, and Images

Templates of blank playing cards are available online, allowing users to develop their own unique set using Microsoft PowerPoint, Adobe software (e.g., Illustrator), or

even Microsoft Word. Once a content plan is approved by leaders, gathering the relevant information for each card can be done through basic research. Units maintain their individual lineage, campaigns, decorations, and other historical and relevant information. For more detailed research into history, lineage, heraldry, specific eras, events, and people, useful Army sites include the U.S. Army Center of Military History (CMH) (<https://history.army.mil/>) and the Institute of Heraldry (<https://tioh.army.mil/>). The Army Museum Enterprise (AME) (<https://history.army.mil/museums/index.html>), Army historians, museum personnel, and displays are also rich sources of relevant information. Other useful sites include the National Archives (<https://www.archives.gov>), the National Park Service (<https://www.nps.gov/index.htm>), and civilian organizations affiliated with the U.S. Army. Images or artwork for cards are available from multiple sites such as Defense Visual Information Distribution Service (DVIDs) (<https://www.dvidshub.net/>), the Army website (<https://www.army.mil/>), CMH, AME, and from a unit's own photographic collection. Any images/artwork used must be in the public domain or approved if copyrighted.

Conclusion

It's important for NCOs to understand and appreciate their unit history in order to instill a sense of pride within the unit. Unit history playing cards offer an alternative medium for presenting historical information to Soldiers. The versatility of playing cards provides Soldiers and NCOs with a resource to learn in a more collaborative, engaging, and time-efficient manner. ■

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Command Sgt. Maj. John Pulido was command sergeant major of the 1st Squadron, 7th Cavalry, from August 2017 to February 2020. He also served as operations sergeant major from August 2012 to October 2014. His work in preserving the unit's history and sharing its importance with fellow unit members will continue the legacy of a historic organization for generations to come. Pulido retired from the Army in October 2020 after 31 years of service.

***The research described herein was sponsored by the U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, U.S. Department of the Army (Contract No. W911NF-19-C-0065). The views expressed in this presentation are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.**



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Table 1
Themes for Each Suit and Topic for Each Card

Card	Clubs	Diamonds	Hearts	Spades
A	Coat of Arms	Battles	Medal of Honor	Division/Lineage
2	Distinctive Unit Insignia	Battles	MOH recipients	Division/ Unit Insignia
3	Song	Battles	Distinguished Service Cross (DSC)	Division: Shoulder Sleeve Insignia
4	Lineage	Battles	DSC recipients	Division Regiments
5	Campaigns	Battles	Silver Star	Division Role in War/Time Period
6	Campaigns	Battles	Famous leader	Division Role in War/Time Period
7	Campaigns	Battles	Famous leader	Division Role in War/Time Period
8	Campaigns	Battles	Famous leader	Division Role in War/Time Period
9	Campaigns	Battles	Famous leader	Division Role in War/Time Period
10	Campaigns	Battles	Famous leader	Division Role in War/Time Period
J	Campaigns	Traditional event	Famous leader	Division History
Q	Campaigns	Traditional event	Relevant Poem/ Song	Brigade/Battalions Unit Designations
K	Decorations	Identity with unit	Fallen Soldiers	Brigade Song/Poem

Table 2

Content for 1st Squadron, 7th Cavalry Regiment, Unit History and Traditions Cards

Card	Clubs	Diamonds	Hearts	Spades
A	Coat of Arms	Battle of Little Big Horn (1867)	Medal of Honor (MOH)	1st Cavalry Division (1 CD)
2	Distinctive Unit Insignia	Wounded Knee (1890)	MOH recipients: 2nd Lt. Marm Jr. 1st Lt. Fournet	1 CD distinctive unit insignia
3	Garry Owen	Battle of Guerrero (1916)	Distinguished Service Cross (DSC)	1 CD shoulder sleeve insignia
4	Lineage	World War II	DSC recipients	1 CD Regiments
5	Campaigns: Indian Wars	Korean War	Silver Star	1 CD: Early years
6	Campaigns: Mexican Expedition	Vietnam War	Brevet Maj. Gen. Custer	1 CD: South Pacific, Japan, Korea
7	Campaigns: WWII (Asiatic-Pacific)	Vietnam War	Sgt. Maj. Sharrow	1 CD: Vietnam
8	Campaigns: Korean War	Southwest Asia	Col. Forsyth	1 CD: Desert Shield/Storm
9	Campaigns: Vietnam	Baghdad, Iraq	Sgt. Maj. Corwine	1 CD: Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)
10	Campaigns: Southwest Asia	Baghdad, Iraq	Lt. Col. Moore Jr.	1 CD: Operation Enduring Freedom
J	Campaigns: Iraq	Gainey Cup	Command Sgt. Maj. Plumley	1 CD: 1ABCT
Q	Campaigns: Global War on Terrorism	Order of the Spur	Fiddler's Green	1 ABCD units
K	Decorations	Garryowen Trooper	OIF Fallen Soldiers	Spirit of the Cavalry

