



UNIT HISTORY: SOLDIERS' PERSPECTIVES

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Unit History Soldiers' Perspectives

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"Our shared identity, as trusted Army professionals, derives from our shared understanding of and respect for those whose legacy we celebrate. We honor this cherished inheritance in our customs, courtesies, and traditions" (Department of the Army, 2019, p. 20).

Whether it's crossing the frigid waters of the Delaware River on Christmas for a surprise attack, storming the beaches of Normandy, or fighting house to house in the streets of Fallujah, the U.S. military has a rich history of bravery and tradition. It is important for noncommissioned officers (NCOs) to understand and appreciate their units' history in order to

instill a sense of pride within the unit. This article details an Army-wide study done by the U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences on modern Soldiers of all ranks and their views on unit history, breaks down the research collected, and offers recommendations to progress the Army forward.

Organizational History

According to *Army Regulation 870-5*, military history not only preserves the institutional memory of the Army, but also provides historical support in the decision-making process, supports leadership and professional development, and enhances unit pride and esprit de corps (Department of the Army, 2007). The importance of organizational history is evident across all domains of Doctrine, Organization, Training, Materiel, Leadership and Education, Personnel, Facilities, and Policies (DOTMLPF-P), and the resources assigned to preserve, present, and advance organizational and command history exist at multiple echelons. For example, the Chief of Military History serves as the principal advisor to both the Secretary of the Army and the Chief of Staff of the Army on historical matters and is also the Director of the U.S. Army Center of Military History. At the corps and division levels, an officer or civilian professional is assigned duties as historian. At lower levels, commanders of Modified Tables of Organization and Equipment (MTOE) organizations are responsible for establishing and maintaining their own organizational history programs (Department of the Army, 2007).

Current Perceptions of History

Despite the resources allocated to organizational and command history, some Army leaders express concern regarding whether contemporary Army units view military history as relevant and important (Ellis, 2018). In a recent survey, only a third of 523 NCOs and Soldiers indicated their units focused on Army history and traditions (Ellis, 2018). As part of a larger investigation into current perceptions of Army history, traditions, customs, and courtesies, the U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences conducted focus group discussions and a survey to learn about Soldiers' perspectives on unit history (U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, 2019).

Unit History Focus Group Discussions and Method

One objective of focus group discussions was to understand how company-grade leaders and junior enlisted Soldiers learn and perceive unit history. One hundred and seventy-one Soldiers from three Army installations in the continental U.S. (CONUS) participated in 41 focus groups made up of company commanders, first sergeants, platoon leaders, platoon sergeants, squad leaders, team leaders, and junior enlisted Soldiers. Participants in each group were of the same or similar rank/position, with no Soldier in the same chain of command. Soldiers then completed demographics forms asking them to answer a series of questions on customs, courtesies, traditions, and history. The question on unit history was: "What opportu-

nities have you had to learn about your unit history?"

Results

Where They Learned Unit History

New Soldiers had opportunities to learn unit history from materials provided in their incoming Soldier welcome packet when reporting in to their new command. In some cases, new Soldiers visited the post museum as an in-processing requirement. Soldiers studying for promotion boards were sometimes given information about their unit history by their units. A major challenge identified was finding the time to learn unit history.

Effective Ways to Promote Unit History

Soldiers were interested in learning unit history and showed pride in their unit when their leaders were knowledgeable about it and presented it in creative and engaging ways. For example, in order to replicate an attack on their unit over mountainous terrain during World War II, a battalion commander developed a board game. Players were asked to determine how to capture a strategic hill and were then given an account of what happened. This activity was considered highly conducive to the Soldiers learning their unit history. In general, Soldiers agreed learning unit history is highly positive and motivating when the experience is engaging and enjoyable.

Utility of Unit History

Most Soldiers agreed knowing unit history instills a sense of unit pride and respect for those who came before them. Almost all agreed learning and knowing unit history is important for promotion boards, certification programs, and awards like "Soldier of the Month." Some Soldiers liked unit history because of a personal interest in military history.

Unit History Survey

The survey's aim was to obtain more detailed and quantitative data on Soldiers' unit history perceptions. It was developed based on focus group findings and administered in person to junior NCOs and enlisted Soldiers.

Method

Respondents were 416 Soldiers from five CONUS Army installations. Each group was made up of individuals of the same or similar rank/position, with no one in the same chain of command. Soldiers completed the survey, which had nine demographic questions on areas such as current grade, gender, military occupational specialty (MOS), and leadership position. The 12 statements on unit history were related to knowledge, pride, interest, value, and time. The response options were: "Strongly disagree (A)," "Disagree (B)," "Neither agree nor disagree (C)," "Agree (D)," "Strongly agree (E)," and "N/A or Do not know (F)." The other 70 questions on the survey were



New York Militia Soldiers of the 8th Regiment, one of the ancestors of the New York Army National Guard's 1st Battalion 258th Field Artillery, pose for a photograph in 1857. (U.S. Army photo by Eric Durr)

on customs, courtesies, and traditions.

Results

Position/Rank Groups

Participants ranked from E1 to E6 and were from diverse MOSs. When sorted into position/rank groups of squad leaders, team leaders, E3/E4s, and E1/E2s, a total sample of 375 remained. Two sub-groups, NCOs not in leadership positions and junior enlisted Soldiers and NCOs in “another leadership position,” were excluded from the analyses because group sizes were too small.

Perceptions of Unit and Military History

On the knowledge statements of the survey, there were significant differences for: (a) I know more about the history and lineage of another unit than the history of my current unit, (b) I know the historical critical missions performed by my battalion, and (c) I have seen my battalion's historical artifacts. Test results revealed squad leaders had significantly higher average responses than E1/E2s on these statements. The average response for squad leaders was also significantly higher than E3/E4s on knowing more about the history of units other than their own.

On the statement “It is valuable for Soldiers to know the history of their unit,” squad leaders had significantly higher average ratings than team leaders and E3/E4s, and E1/E2s had significantly higher average ratings than E3/E4s. The main effect for “My battalion values its history” was also significant. Test results revealed E1/E2s had significantly higher ratings than E3/E4s.

Average responses on the two statements related to time were generally lower than the other statements on unit history. The statement “I make time to learn about my battalion's history and lineage” had no significant differences between the groups. An ANOVA revealed a significant overall effect and test results confirmed team leaders had significantly lower average

ratings than E1/E2s.

What it Means

Overall, findings demonstrate junior NCOs and junior enlisted Soldiers tend to agree they had an interest in unit and military history, they see the value of unit history for Soldiers, and learning a unit's history creates unit pride. However, they were less likely to agree they knew their unit history and lineage, knew the meaning of their unit insignia, and knew the critical historical missions accomplished by their units. They were also less likely to agree with statements about setting time aside to study history and the time leaders took to educate them on unit history. This is consistent with the finding that only 34.8% of NCOs and Soldiers affirmed their units had a focus on Army history and traditions (Ellis, 2018).

Most of the group differences between NCOs and junior enlisted Soldiers were not surprising. For example, squad leaders tend to agree more strongly that they knew their unit history and lineage and have seen their unit artifacts, compared to E1/E2s. These differences are predictable because NCOs are expected to teach their Soldiers unit history and are more likely to visit the battalion headquarters building where unit history and artifacts are displayed. Squad leaders were more likely to agree they knew more about the history and lineage of other units than their current unit, compared to junior enlisted Soldiers, most likely because squad leaders were in prior unit(s); whereas, all or most junior enlisted Soldiers are on their first unit of assignment. Squad leaders were also more likely than team leaders and E3/E4s to agree it was valuable to know unit history.

Conclusion

It's important for NCOs to understand and appreciate their units' history in order to instill a sense of pride in their Soldiers. Findings confirm unit history is still considered relevant and important among junior NCOs and junior enlisted Soldiers. To further foster the interest and development of current and future junior NCO leaders, keep in mind the following recommendations:

Recommendations

1. Establish NCO development plans focusing on unit history and traditions.
2. Employ innovative ways to study and teach unit history (e.g., board games, playing cards). Read our upcoming companion article providing a template and example content for developing unit-specific history and tradition playing cards (Foo et al., In Preparation).

3. Integrate unit history into daily activities (e.g., physical training, opportunity training) to make

training time more efficient.

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