Experiencing the 'Smithsonian of the Army'

Built to educate visitors about the owners of the 'last hundred yards,' the new National Infantry Museum is unlike any other in the Army system

Story and Photos by Michael L. Lewis

As the elementary schoolers hesitantly made their way up the 100-yard-long ramp, the shouts of infantrymen in the midst of battle pierced the din of gunfire and the notes of a somber symphonic score. Around each maze-like turn, the determined faces of Soldiers, the walls of ruined buildings and the shiny exteriors of vehicles and equipment were sporadically illumined by the glow of simulated explosions nearby. If these young visitors were ever curious what it was like on the front lines of battles from the American Revolution to the present conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, these sights and sounds gave them a sample of the experience of infantrymen and their ownership of the "last hundred yards" in battle.

The students, on a field trip last December from nearby Smith Station Intermediate School in Smith Station, Ala., were among the more than 250,000 visitors who have wended their way through the new National Infantry Museum in Columbus, Ga., since its opening last June. Often referred to as the "Smithsonian of the Army," the new $110 million, 190,000-square-foot structure erected just outside the gate of Fort Benning is like nothing the Army has ever built in terms of its size, its high-tech sophistication and the unique public-private partnership that operates it.

While the Army maintains ownership and continues to preserve the collection of more than 1,600 artifacts, the National Infantry Foundation raised the money to construct the building, design its myriad exhibits and is paying off the mortgage. The plan is for the foundation to gift the structure back to the Army once fundraising is complete.

"The Army builds museums, but they don't build anything fancy," said David Stieghan, Fort Benning's command historian. "To them, it's just a storage location, because the museum is a training aid to help train the heritage and history of the branch to its Soldiers. This is how I liken it: The museum that the Army can build is like a cardboard box. But, what an association like the infantry foundation can come along and do is put a nice wrapping and a bow on it. Then, it's not just better for Soldiers; it's better for visitors who can come in and enjoy the story. That's what we have here."

The branch's museum previously was housed in a 1925 hospital building on Fort Benning. However, that was not an ideal location.

"There's only so much you can do to an old building like that," Stieghan said. "Old buildings, believe it or not, don't make good museums because of temperature and climate issues. It was crammed with artifacts and was too small for the huge collection. The story of the American foot Soldier's contribution to our history was far too important to have in that crumbling building."

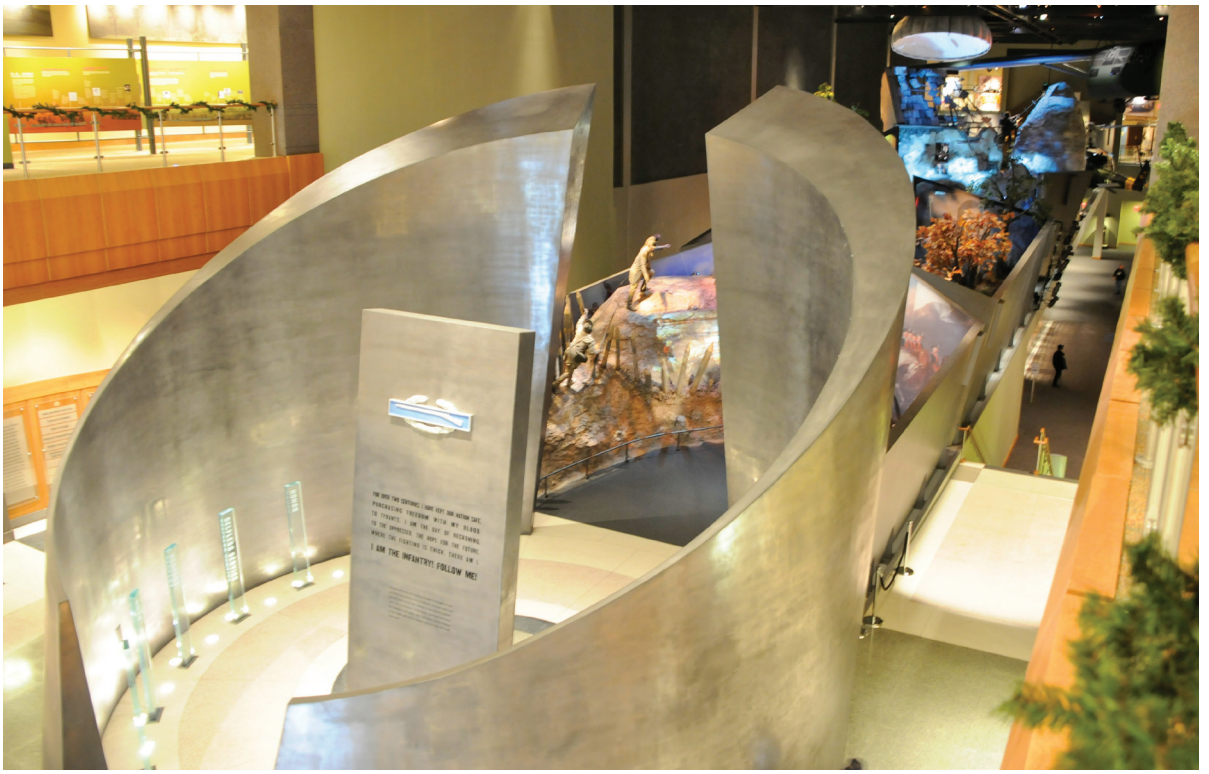
It was also staid and static, not in keeping with exhibit design trends or technology, said Mike Criscillis, the museum's chief curator.

"The old museum, there was nothing going on. It was dated, but it served a purpose for what it was intended to be used for. But, they were using 60-year-old technology, largely because they didn't have a budget to work with."

In the mid-1990s, officials from the National Infantry Foundation, the private fundraising association connected with the museum, teamed with city leaders from Columbus to design a state-of-the-art replacement that would not only better house the museum's massive collection – among the largest in the Army – but would also become a must-see tourism destination.

"The good folks of Columbus said:

Background: The exterior of the National Infantry Museum just before dusk last December. The flag-lined walk at left leads to the parade field behind the building.



The "Last 100 Yards" ramp is the centerpiece exhibit at the museum. Visitors enter the gallery through the giant, round, metallic entrance, built to evoke a drum. Visitors then encounter several life-size and life-like recreations of scenes from key battles in each of the major wars American Soldiers have fought in. The sounds of battle, swelling music and archival film footage surround visitors as they make their way through.

Let's think big. Let's build something that is first and foremost appropriate for the legacy of the infantry," said Greg Camp, a retired colonel who now serves as the executive vice president of the foundation. "Secondly, we wanted something that will become the iconic, signature facility for this community. This will become for Columbus what the Baseball Hall of Fame is for Cooperstown, N.Y., or the Riverwalk is to San Antonio, Texas."

Indeed, the facility is larger than any other in the Army museum system, comprising three floors of galleries, an Imax theater, a rifle range simulator, a full-service restaurant and a large gift shop. The signature exhibit, the "Last 100 Yards" ramp, is a 360-degree multimedia feast in which visitors walk through full-size dioramas of signature battles from each of the Army's major wars. Planes, helicopters and parachuting troops hang from the ceiling amid lifelike mannequins that were created from full-body casts of Fort Benning Soldiers, and archival video footage is projected on rocks, walls, floors and even the underside of a parachute.

"This is a 21st century idea of what an Army museum can look like, what the potential is," Stieghan said. "For that reason, it expands on what the possibilities are. It's kind of an incubator, an experimental museum. It's very large, very modern, and we're working out the kinks of what we think is an example for other museums in the Army system."

Yet, the museum's reach isn't confined to the building. The entire complex sits on 200 acres and includes as its centerpiece a parade field where the majority of Fort Benning's course graduation ceremonies are now held. Soldiers march through a neighborhood of historic World War II buildings toward a stadium filled with cheering family and friends.

"It's hard to beat, walking out there and seeing the families of these young Soldiers just swept up in what their son has committed to," Camp said, his voice filling with emotion. "The families now have a much, much deeper appreciation for the significance of this than they did before; now they can put it into a context."

"Once the Soldiers are finished [at the graduation ceremony], they can bring them into the museum, take them up the ramp and say, 'This is what I do now, Mom and Dad,'" Stieghan said. "They can show that with pride, and their family can take great pride in it, too."

Still, the main mission of the museum remains to serve as a tool to teach Soldiers about their branch's legacy.

"Part of the program of instruction for all of these young Soldiers in their initial

A Soldier mannequin from the World War I exhibit peers around the corner at students on a field trip from Smith Station Intermediate School in Smith Station, Ala., last December. More than 50 custom-made mannequins can be found in the museum; each was made from a full-body cast of a Soldier assigned to Fort Benning.

entry training is to come here and spend at least half a day in the museum," Camp said. "They get a class from the command historian. Then, they get to tour the museum and get that class brought to life. That was high on our list; Soldiers were a top priority."

Students in other courses – from the Warrior Leader Course to Officer Candidate School – also study at the museum, Stieghan said.

"It's a history campus; that's the way we look at it. The museum maintains a phenomenal collection so Soldiers can see their heritage – a three-dimensional representation of the Soldier's profession. It shows, in real objects that you can associate with an event or a person, what came before you. Some learn through reading, some through lectures, some through battle drills – this is just another way, a hands-on way of learning, of absorbing their profession."

Another main goal was educating visitors about the courage displayed by infantry Soldiers, who have comprised nearly 80 percent of casualties in all the battles the United States has engaged in, Criscillis said.

"Our goal is to bring the people from the past to the present, while showing the valor and sacrifices that were made in the past. We want people to understand what a Medal of Honor recipient did to receive that medal, but also the story of the uncommon hero – the person who rose to the occasion at that moment."

"When you bring a Soldier up that ramp, you bring them from Yorktown to Baghdad," Stieghan said. "They walk through it and say, 'Okay, I can imagine what the sacrifices are, and what I'm going to be doing, maybe, in the next month.'"

While the museum is specifically dedicated to telling the story of the infantry Soldier, the complex was also designed to accommodate the move of the U.S. Army Armor School to Fort Benning, which began last year.

In February, Soldiers began moving the hundreds of armor museum macro-artifacts from Fort Knox, Ky., but the bulk of that collection will not be moved until a temporary storage facility is built on the other side of the parade field. Eventually, a new National Armor and Cavalry Museum will be built facing the existing infantry museum, Camp said.

Artifacts dot the wall in the World War I gallery, one of six devoted to the major conflicts U.S. infantrymen have fought in. The artifacts on display, however, are only a small fraction of the more than 60,000 in the museum's full collection.

On the eve of their graduation from basic training, Soldiers from Fort Benning practice on the parade field behind the museum. In the foreground, along the pass and review line, sits one of six granite pavers embedded with soil from the battles represented in the "Last 100 Yards" exhibit. This one features soil taken from the Civil War battlefield at Antietam, Md.

"You're really going to have two bookends – the infantry museum on the north end of the complex and the armor museum on the south end. In between, you've got the parade ground and you've got the World War II company street and you've got the memorial walk of honor. All three of those things are not infantry specific, they're not even Army specific; they're servicemen specific."

The new armor museum will be among the many features still to come at the complex, including the construction of a 250-foot-tall replica of a jump tower. Also to be completed are the last two galleries in the museum, which focus on the American Revolution and Civil War, a ranger exhibit and an Army-centric Imax film. All will be created by the foundation, with artifacts and expertise contributed by the Army museum staff.

"It's a world-class museum. We'll continue to improve on it and continue to work with the foundation to keep it on top," Criscillis said. "We want to continue this marriage. I think it's good for the Army, and it's good for our country, too, because we have to find other resources of how to maintain our culture."

"They've taken a lot of risks," Stieghan said of the museum. "They've thought big from the very beginning. And, you can see what they've created."

To contact Michael L. Lewis, e-mail michael.lewis73@us.army.mil.