



Bootprints *through* History

U.S. Army Museum
of the Noncommissioned Officer

Story and photos by Cindy Ramirez





Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Typical Continental Infantry sergeant uniform, circa 1781; Infantry sergeant, War of 1812, with a mural of the Battle of Chipewa in the background; A Sergeants Major Course Class 61 student walks by a wall-size portrait of engineer NCOs from Fort Belvoir, Va., during the early 1900s. This page, from left: Class 61 students during a tour of the museum, with a Desert Storm exhibit in the background; NCO rank insignia, 1872 to 1884; Infantry sergeant from the Spanish-American War.

There's something striking about the expression on the small-unit leader's face. His eyes bulge. His skin creases deeply. His jaw opens widely, leaving one to wonder if he's barking an order or desperately warning a fellow Soldier of oncoming danger.

A nameless noncommissioned officer during the Korean War, the kneeling Soldier is one of numerous mannequins whose expressions are frozen in molded plastic at the U.S. Army Museum of the Noncommissioned Officer at Fort Bliss, Texas.

Strolling through the museum, thousands of visitors each year notice the expressions, the Soldiers' uniforms, insignia and weapons.

And then there are the boots: a reminder that since the 1700s, U.S. Army NCOs have led the frontlines and worked behind the scenes to accomplish their mission and protect the welfare of their Soldiers — leaving their bootprints across 235 years of our nation's history.

With new and updated exhibits, an expanded oral history collection and an online video tour, the NCO museum is

tion of artifacts, as well as new cooling and heating systems.

“These are the stories of NCOs through history — through their eyes and their experiences.”

taking visitors from across the globe on a journey through time, following the footsteps of the noncommissioned officer.

The museum was recently expanded and refurbished under a program of the Army's “Year of the NCO” initiative in 2009. The renovation included expanded capacity for storage to increase its collec-

Established in 1975, the museum displays items from its collection of insignia, uniforms, weapons, equipment and paintings.

Displays provide information about the history of pay and rank structure, while others examine daily life in the 1830s, female NCOs, prisoners of war and the development of the NCO Education System, among others.

“These are the stories of NCOs through history — through their eyes and their experiences,” said museum cura-



tor Larry Arms, author of *A History of the NCO*, a widely used booklet in Army schools.

The museum averages about 10,000 visitors annually, mostly Soldiers. This summer, a museum tour was incorporated into the lesson plan of the Battle Staff Noncommissioned Officer Course at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy, Fort Bliss, which will bring in hundreds more to visit.

“There’s a lot of interesting details you would never find out unless you go see a museum like that, interesting facts that people don’t know when it comes to the NCO contributions to our nation. This is the place to find that,” said Master Sgt. Philip Eville, BSNCOOC course manager.

“You can see how we’ve transformed as NCOs over the years,” he said. “And, you realize your contributions to the nation throughout history.”

However, the new online virtual tour will expand that reach even further, including those Soldiers enrolled in the BSNCOOC via video teleconference.

“Every NCO out there needs to know and take pride in that this is their museum,” said Leah Smith Jr., a retired master sergeant and BSNCOOC developer.

“But, a lot of Soldiers won’t ever have the opportunity to come here to Fort Bliss to see the museum first hand. With the virtual tour, Soldiers in Alaska, Germany,

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Kuwait or anywhere in the world, will have that opportunity.”

Among the exhibits are a collection of World War II cartoons by Pulitzer Prize-

winning artist Bill Mauldin; model 1840 NCO swords; and war bond posters.

Uniforms on display include those worn by Sgt. Maj. Dennis Thompson, a



Opposite page, clockwise from top: A small-unit leader during the Korean War; World War II khaki uniform for women; Civil War-era uniforms and insignia; Uniform worn by Sgt. Tracy McMillan, 626th Support Battalion, Kandahar, Afghanistan. This page, top: NCOs during the Lewis and Clark Expedition and a showcase of the fur factories’ products; American Revolution mural showing Gen. George Washington presenting the military Badge of Merit to Sgts. Elijah Churchill and Daniel Bissell.



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prisoner of war for more than seven years in both North and South Vietnam, as well as by Sgt. Tracy McMillan of the 626th Support Battalion during her tour in Kandahar, Afghanistan.

The museum is also home to the 18 original paintings by Army artists Spcs. Anita Y. Sonnie, Theresa L. Unger and Manuel B. Ablaza, which were commissioned for the series during the first Year of the NCO in 1989.

The NCO Oral History program, which features interviews with NCOs from World War I to the present, is housed at the museum. Among the collection are oral histories of former sergeants major of the Army, part of the Army History Book Project in conjunction with the Center of Military History. A number of the interview transcripts are available for reading online.

“These histories are terrific because they contain the stories and experiences of some of our greatest NCOs in their own, vivid words,” curator Arms said. “There’s no better way to understand the history of the NCO. ... These are the Soldiers, the NCOs, who have put their boots to the ground.”

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**U.S. Army Museum
of the
Noncommissioned
Officer**

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Opposite page: **The modern NCO.** This page, clockwise from top left: **Operation Desert Storm uniform and captured Iraqi equipment;** **Operation Iraqi Freedom, 89th MP Brigade Military Police uniforms, with Iraqi police uniform in the center and a photo of Medal of Honor recipient Sgt. 1st Class Paul Ray Smith in the background;** **Museum curator Larry Arms with NCO rank insignia and photos of NCOs through history in the background.**

