



COUNCIL ON AMERICA'S MILITARY PAST - U.S.A.

PRESERVING, INTERPRETING AND SHARING OUR MILITARY HERITAGE

presents

The Persistent Pandemic Preservationist February 2021

Editor's Note:

Welcome! This is Number 2, Volume II of a monthly newsletter featuring historic sites across the country responding to the challenges of the COVID-19 Pandemic. The intent is to stay in touch with old and new members, and to share information that is interesting and useful, in the hope that we will create a community of practice among those preserving the nation's military past. Each issue will focus on one or more sites. The original Persistent Preservationist was an excellent newsletter produced by esteemed CAMP member Col. Hal Youmans, USA (Ret).

This issue features the new National Museum of the U.S. Army at Ft. Belvoir. Years in the making, it opened during the Pandemic — only to have to close again. Our more formal newsletter, Heliogram, will cover the museum in detail when circumstances permit. We offer here the pandemic experience from two perspectives, that of a museum employee and of a visitor who is a fellow historian.

Now, as many of you know, I was associated with the old Marine Corps History and Museums Division for a good many years, and never thought there could be any military museum as good as ours. After reading about the competition, I am not so sure anymore!

As a suitable introduction to the subject, let me recommend that you copy and paste this link into your browser: <https://vimeo.com/476497310/9c54b9e97c>.

Our thanks to the authors!

Stay safe, everyone! — Nick Reynolds, Editor.

National Museum of the United States Army: Staying Connected While Apart by Susan Smullen, PAO

As with nearly all museums and historic sites, the National Museum of the United States Army has found it challenging to tell its story amidst a global pandemic. And what a story it has to tell. The National Army Museum is the first and only museum to tell the full history of the U.S Army in its entirety, providing a comprehensive portrayal of Army history and traditions through the eyes of the American Soldier.

The Museum officially opened on Veterans Day, November 11, 2020, to stellar reviews but closed a month later as a public health precaution due to changes in COVID-19 activity in the National Capital Region. The short window of public access allowed the Museum to begin to measure its impact and to see how soldiers' stories connect with the American public providing a fuller picture of American history.

Building on that public interest, the Museum is developing a schedule of virtual programs to ensure that members of the public interested in military and historic tourism stay connected.

Book Talks with military historians, Battle Briefs, and Virtual Field Trips, along with seminars and videos such as Curator's Corner provide lively discussions and compelling insights on important events and remarkable stories.

Designed to appeal to a broad array of audiences and interests, the virtual programs are free but require advance registration. The calendar of events can be viewed here: <https://www.thenmusa.org/events/>.

Digital resources can be found here: <https://www.thenmusa.org/education/digital-resources/>.

The Museum is also looking ahead to when we can re-open. Volunteer engagement and training continues for our corps of docents and we are regularly reviewing our COVID-19 protocols to ensure that visitors will be able to visit confidently. Information on the Museum's reopening will be posted when available at: theNMUSA.org.



Impressions of a Pandemic Visit
by
Richard Schroeder, Ph.D.

An easy drive from downtown Washington, past some of the ugliest urban sprawl in the country, the NMUSA itself at Ft. Belvoir is a lovely place. A beautiful winding uphill road runs past a shiny new unmanned stainless steel gatehouse to a large parking area next to a large parade ground in front of the shiny glass and metal blocks of the main building. Aside from the expected handicap parking spots, there are many "limited mobility spots" apparently under the honor

system. They're using free timed tickets (as does the Smithsonian African American Museum) but I saw very few visitors on the day I visited with my son.

Now-typical security portals and x-ray machines lead into a cavernous lobby. The lobby ceiling has a long series of campaign ribbons colorfully embedded in the ceiling; it is a striking visual. The initial large exhibit is about the Army in Society, with lots of blown-up newspaper front pages, and prominent credit to ol' Harry Truman for integrating the US armed services. Then there is a series of chronological galleries, with lots of uniforms, equipment, and infantry weapons. There are pillars with photos and stories of historical individual soldiers. Due credit is given to Civil War "Colored Troops" and frontier Buffalo Soldiers, along with a nod to, but to me insufficient emphasis on, US Army Air Forces (although they do explain the reasoning behind the decision to drop the atom bomb on Japan). Two interesting features: the uniformed mannequins have faces molded from the faces of actual current soldiers, and for each historical period they present the make-up and weight of a soldier's full kit. They look pretty damn heavy. I found everything to be bright, shiny, well-cared for, and well-curated and explained.

One of the most interesting aspects of a museum like this is watching families where the old veteran is telling war stories and boring the kids to death. In our case, this museum inspired my son (US Army airborne MP 1995-2000 with service at Fort Bragg, Bosnia, and Korea) to tell a series of sometimes hilarious/sometimes horrifying stories about his own service. Even twenty years later, the sight of the exhibits clearly brought back vivid memories, and I felt the same about the Vietnam exhibit.

As is typical of new museums – again like the African American, or even the new International Spy Museum – it's not obvious how to progress through the exhibit spaces. The gift shop needs to expand its selection.

But in general, this museum is a great success, definitely worth a return visit.

Founded in 1966 as the Council on Abandoned Military Posts, CAMP changed its name in 1981. It is a non-profit, 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization whose members are interested in the identification, restoration, preservation, and memorialization of old military installations as well as their history and traditions. All persons sharing these interests are invited to join. CAMP publishes an academic journal (The Journal of America's Military Past) and a newsletter on recent developments in historic preservation (Headquarters Heliogram). It also holds an annual conference. Find out more at: www.campjamp.org.