

THE MILITARY MUSEUM AS CLASSROOM¹

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I: THE OPPORTUNITY

One of the difficult associations that students must make in their study of history is visualizing the physical conditions of the event or period under study. For example, when World War I pops up on the schedule of a history of Western civilization course, or a more specialized course in European, American, or World history, students might have difficulty in conjuring up images of what it must have been like for soldiers engaged in battle on the Western Front. It is easy to understand mud and stagnant water if you're standing in it up to your hips. But to imagine it without the "props" is harder. When we add the pictures of some of the other pervasive realities of combat in 1918—such as the unavoidable stench of death in the trenches, the crackle of machine gun fire, the ominous poison gas clouds hanging in shell craters, and the loud thumps of mortar and artillery rounds falling amongst frightened soldiers—the approximation of reality becomes more vivid. The problem for students is that they do not have a personal frame of reference with which to measure their new information.

Some may have seen the "remake" of "All Quiet on The Western Front," starring Ernest Borgnine and Richard Thomas, instead of the classic with Lew Ayres. Perhaps others viewed, on the old movie channel, "Paths of Glory" starring Kirk Douglas as the conscientious and moral Colonel Dax who must face up to the alleged cowardly behavior of his men in a failed attack. A few may even have visited the scarred landscape of the Verdun area of France, which even today bears witness to the enormous destruction unleashed by the heavily armed contending armies. Very few probably have read Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*, published in 1975, or selections from the writings of Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, or Joyce Kilmer. The literature and film art from the World War I era is extensive and poignant, but it still requires students to engage their imaginations to supplement their study of facts, circumstances, and motivations of the men and women who made the history of World War I. A museum that exploits interaction with its visitors by means of its reproduction landscapes, period narratives, images, and sounds can stimulate the learning process by providing the missing personal frame of reference.

II: THE STORY

Many history museums do not have a tightly focused story to deal with. Military museums do focus their story on a particular unit, group of units, geographical location, or series of events that have a military theme. There are many excellent military museums across the United States, often located on military posts and bases. For example, the U.S. Cavalry Museum is located at Fort Riley, Kansas. Its excellent

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At other points in the highly detailed galleries of the First Division Museum at Cantigny, students and teachers can exploit the story to advantage. In 1993 we observed the seventy-fifth anniversary of the armistice ending the fighting in World War I. The Great War, as it was known to its veterans, was on the one hand a great adventure, but on the other a great disaster when the reality of trench warfare began to take its toll in lives and equipment. The Cantigny museum sets its first galleries at 1917-1918 to explain mobilization for service in France and all the attendant problems with forming an expeditionary army. Once "over there" the doughboy joined the Tommy, the *poilu*, and the *Soldat zu Fuß* in the common misery of modern warfare. On a back street of Cantigny, France, a short while after America's first battle of the war on May 28-31, 1918, the teacher can explain to the students why American troops were supported by French tanks. A full size replica of the Schneider CA.1 hangs over the realistic trench, hung up on a tree stump with its oil pan emptying on the sandbagged parapet. The students, in turn, might report on preliminary readings the teacher had assigned as preparation for the museum visit.²

Arriving at World War II, in a recreated barracks set at Fort Devens, Massachusetts, in December 1941, the visitors learn how new recruits were molded into fighting units, then shipped to Scotland in August 1942 for the final training for the invasion of North Africa. Present in the space are uniforms, a made-up steel bunk and photographs of mobilization and training. Over the radio on the shelf above the bunk can be heard the ringing words of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's appeal to Congress for a declaration of war against the empire of Japan. You cannot escape either the global significance of the entry of the United States into World War II or the impact of that entry on individual American citizens who had to take up arms in their country's defense in response to their president's call. A teacher might prepare to use this space to explain the process of mobilization and the global character of World War II by

² For example: Dale E. Wilson, *Treat 'Em Rough!: The Birth of American Armor, 1917-20* (Novato: Presidio, 1989); Ralph E. Jones, George H. Rarey and Robert J. Icks, *The Fighting Tanks: From 1916 to 1933* (Old Greenwich: WE Inc., 1969 [1933]); Richard Haigh, *Life In a Tank* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918); for the air war, see: Lee Kennett, *The First Air War, 1914-1918* (New York: The Free Press, 1991); John H. Morrow, Jr., *The Great War In The Air: Military Aviation from 1909 to 1921* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993); other titles from which students could glean a "sense" of the war are: Henry Berry, *Make The Kaiser Dance: Living Memories of the Doughboy* (New York: Arbor House, 1978); John Ellis, *Eye-Deep In Hell: Trench Warfare in World War I* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976); Frank Freidel, *Over There: The Story of America's First Great Overseas Crusade*, rev. ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990); John Toland, *No Man's Land: 1918, The Last Year of the Great War* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982); Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975); Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (New York: Atheneum, 1991); Albert M. Ettinger & A. Churchill Ettinger, *A Doughboy With The Fighting 69th: A Remembrance of World War I* (New York: Pocket Books, 1993); Henri Barbusse, *Under Fire: The Story of a Squad (Le Feu)*, trans. by Fitzwater Wray (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1917); and the very best history, Edward M. Coffman, *The War To End All Wars: The American Military Experience in World War I* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1986) [1968 by Oxford University Press]). There are, of course, many primary sources dealing with the American experience in World War I. Students might benefit from reading an attack order for a division, then trying to figure out what effort is required to accomplish the task. This kind of Socratic dialogue between teacher and students in a highly realistic museum setting can be most profitable.

exhibits explain the role of the cavalry and dragoons in the development of the frontier and their contributions to the U.S. Army from the early nineteenth century to the present. At Fort Sill, Oklahoma, one can learn about the history and role of artillery in the armed forces. A new Museum of Airborne Warfare is in the planning stages at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. The National Infantry Museum at Fort Benning, Georgia, gives a broad picture of how infantry units changed over time in the U.S. Army. The Casemate Museum at Fort Monroe, Virginia, explains the development of coastal artillery. The West Point Museum, collocated with the U.S. Military Academy at its breathtaking site above the Hudson River in New York State, offers insights into the Revolutionary War period and the development of the Military Academy. These are only a few of the Army's excellent facilities. The Air Force, Marines, Navy, and Coast Guard have comparable facilities.

There are many privately owned and operated military museums and a few good municipally operated military museums, such as the Liberty Memorial Museum in Kansas City, Missouri, certainly one of the finest World War I exhibits in the world. The First Division Museum at Cantigny in Wheaton, Illinois, which opened its new 37,700 square foot building on August 27, 1992, presents the full historical record of a single infantry division, the legendary "Big Red One." Since it is the museum the author is most familiar with, it will be used for illustrative purposes. The important point, however, is that *any* museum can serve a teacher's purpose with a little effort beforehand.

III: THE PRESENTATION

In Wheaton, Illinois, the Cantigny First Division Foundation created a new military exhibit hall that puts its visitors "inside" the story and surrounds them with recreations of historical locations, artifacts, photographs, battle noise, soldiers' conversations, and lighting effects—all intended to reproduce the sensations of actually being a witness to historic events. In doing so, the staff of this new museum used a technique that theater producers have always known—information presented in a realistic way always is a stronger stimulus to learning than passive viewing of objects behind glass. By engaging all of the senses, visitors are moved to the point of actually experiencing some of the emotions of the participants in the original events.

There is a danger for the museum if this technique is carried too far. Instead of a realistic museum experience, the visitors may be stimulated in an unrealistic way akin to the excitement of a carnival ride or a theme park—an error that detracts from the intended effects of the exhibitry. For example, the story of the landings on Omaha Beach on June 6, 1944, is presented in a highly detailed replica of an LCPV landing craft, complete with a "soldier" descending a cargo net from the "adjacent" troop ship. It was technically possible to provide some motion to the floor of the theater by means of hydraulics interconnected electronically to the program. The museum staff chose not to carry the simulation that far, suspecting that the "ride" might detract from the power and drama of the story presented by audiovisual projection. The exhibition technique must never supplant the story; it should enhance and facilitate the story. The presentation of a military story has a related danger—giving the false impression that war itself is being extolled, or that the undeniable exhilaration of battle somehow justifies its destructiveness.

having students read selectively from Eric Larrabee's *Commander in Chief*, Marvin A. Kreidberg and Merton G. Henry's *History Of Military Mobilization In The United States Army, 1775-1945*, or one of the many fine volumes in the *United States Army In World War II* series published by the Department of the Army.³

At the next stop along the chronological pathway through the museum's exhibits, you encounter a touch-screen television monitor. The program is titled "Soldiering." By selecting from interview segments with 1st Infantry Division veterans, you learn what it was like to be part of an infantry squad in World War II. A section of the program titled "Field Manual" presents several dozen short "packets" of information about many topics, like the Army Air Forces, penicillin, and land mines. A third section of the program lets you play the role of an infantry commander faced with decisions about tactical situations. By means of a computer and images and film footage stored on a laser disc machine, you are "led" to the best answer to the problem. Interactive television programs can be adapted to almost any museum learning situation, but are particularly useful in a military museum.

The Vietnam War is difficult to deal with in a non-pejorative way. Despite heavy, complex political and social messages, the Vietnam War has some positive learning value for students. The First Division Museum sets the story in an artificial jungle—you learn about the struggle for power in Vietnam after World War II and the eventual entry of the United States into what many viewed as an insurgency in South Vietnam instigated and supported by North Vietnam, but viewed by others as an internal or civil war. A walk down a simulated jungle trail, after seeing figures outfitted for warfare in the rice paddies and learning about the 1st Infantry Division's five year "tour of duty" in Vietnam, brings you to a clearing and the chance to see an award-winning ten-minute audiovisual program about the Big Red One's service in a decidedly hostile theater of operations. The setting is sufficiently realistic to permit the teacher to prompt the students to reflect on one or more provocative issues. For example, the simple question, "Why was the United States involved in combat in Vietnam?" might lead to a stimulating five or ten minutes in the lobby or on the beautiful grounds surrounding the museum. Likewise, a student who noticed many non-Caucasian faces in the audiovisual program might ask about equity of service and opportunities for advancement for minorities in the Armed Forces of the United States. The museum provides the stimulus and the opportunity for the teacher to build upon the exhibit content. Anyone who has taught college students is grateful for an occasional stimulating opportunity.

³ Eric Larrabee, *Commander in Chief: Franklin Delano Roosevelt, His Lieutenants, And Their War* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987); Marvin A. Kreidberg and Merton G. Henry, *History Of Military Mobilization In The United States Army, 1775-1945* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1955); from the *United States Army In World War II* series, Robert R. Palmer, Bell I. Wiley and William R. Keast, *The Procurement And Training Of Ground Combat Troops* (1948); Mattie E. Treadwell, *The Women's Army Corps* (1954); Byron Fairchild and Jonathan Grossman, *The Army and Industrial Manpower* (1959), and Ulysses Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops* (1966); see also Larry I. Bland, Sharon R. Ritenour and Clarence E. Wunderlin, Jr., editors, *The Papers of George Catlett Marshall* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981-), 3 volumes to date. Volume 2 contains General Marshall's thoughts on manpower and mobilization.

IV: MUSEUM-VISITOR INTERACTION

The process of reestablishing the First Division Museum at Cantigny in its new space took six years from concept to reality. Although long-range planning continued throughout the six years, it was only after the collections were organized and protected, the staff expanded and trained, stable funding forecasted, and the new facility completed, that the museum was ready to launch into its functional role of connecting with the community. As a result of a visitor profile survey taken early in the process, the museum staff knew that students of all ages made up about forty percent of the visiting public.

With some pre-visit coordination, careful hosting on the day of the visit, and some follow-up after the visit, student groups can make best use of their visit time, which usually is carved out of precious classroom contact time. By looking into ways that the museum's educational spaces and equipment might be used to supplement the curricular goals of the visit, the museum outing becomes more than a day away from the classroom routine. For example, most museum staff professionals are trained in some traditional discipline like history or sociology in addition to their skills in museum exhibition. Additionally, most museums have a reference library of works relevant to the theme of the museum. By scheduling time for students to use those references, the museum visit day can be made more interesting with contributions from the students. Similarly, a visit by a team from the museum staff to the classroom, bringing an artifact trunk and perhaps a videotaped oral history coordinated with the curriculum topic, often can be an excellent adjunct to learning.

Program outreach will not happen by itself. Teachers simply are too pressed to do very much as a supplement to the classroom requirements. The process of arranging transportation, finding enough interested colleagues to help supervise the trip, thinking about lunch arrangements, and making the coordination with the visited museum often does not leave the teacher much time to think about the substantive aspects of how the museum and its collections might reinforce teaching points. The museum staff can help with this process. First, however, the teacher must know the capabilities of the museum and the willingness of the staff to be a curricular resource.

It is very important for the museum not to crowd too much information into any of its gallery spaces. We all have visited museums that are essentially "open storage," that is row after row of different examples of the same artifact without explanation or story. It is crucial that the museum interpret every space that it presents to the public—from shoe-box size to room-size. The story is the important feature of a history museum exhibition; the artifact, photograph, and text simply are the means to explain and interpret the story. There are those in the museum profession who revere the artifact to the exclusion of the story associated with it. Preservation and protection of the artifact are essential for many reasons, but they are among the means, not the ends, of museum work. The payoff for many long hours of planning and hard work is that bright look of comprehension on the faces of visitors in the exhibit area. It tells us that we are connecting with the communities which we serve.

V: SOME IDEAS ABOUT THE STUDY OF WAR

War and its aspects often present a significant challenge to teachers at every level because of the inherent emotional and social burdens. The human catastrophe of war

is a legitimate subject for historical inquiry because, as with cancer, a fuller understanding of the circumstances may yield better approaches and techniques for dealing with it. Like oncologists, historians of war are not in love with their subject, only respectfully in awe of it and determined to understand it. In the case of the First Division Museum at Cantigny, the staff makes clear at every opportunity, particularly with students, that the principal focus of the storyline is soldiers, what they do in combat, the sacrifices they make to accomplish their purpose, and their achievements in the midst of one of life's most trying circumstances—war.⁴

We now are in the midst of observing the fiftieth anniversary of events of World War II. There is much commemoration of individual heroism and assessment of military-political achievement by the Allied nations in their victory over the Axis powers. There is also the opportunity to understand the Cold War from the perspective of its terminus. Museums can add to our power to understand the events of our world, but only if we visit them intelligently as a resource to learning.

The effective military museum is neither a passive supplier of information nor an advocate of radical interpretations. Rather, it presents its story accurately and sympathetically, but powerfully, using techniques that stimulate all of the senses. Gone are the days when museum visitors bring only their bodies to the museum to peer at anachronisms in large glass cases. Expectations today are higher and the challenges for the museum are greater.

⁴ There is a large body of literature dealing with the nature of war and its effects. A few selected titles include: J. Glenn Gray, *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959); Robert L. O'Connell, *Of Arms And Men: A History of War, Weapons, and Aggression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Quincy Wright, *A Study of War*, 2d ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965 [1942]); Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy Of A War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985); John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993); Raymond Aron, *On War*, trans. from the French by Terence Kilmartin (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968); John G. Stoessinger, *Why Nations Go To War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1974); Michael Howard, *The Causes Of Wars and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983); Bernard Brodie, *War And Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1973); W. Scott Thompson and Donaldson D. Frizzell, eds., *The Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Crane, Russak & Company, 1977). While it probably is too soon to expect a searching account of the Gulf War of 1990-91, Rick Atkinson's *Crusade* (1993) is worth the time. War is the most persistent, intractable problem facing the human race.