

## **The History Professional**

### **An Interview with Richard W. Stewart**

*Richard W. Stewart retired in October 2015 as acting Director/Acting Chief of Military History and Chief Historian of the U.S. Army Center of Military History (CMH) in Washington, DC. He received his Ph.D. from Yale University in 1986. He started his civil service career as a research historian at the Center for U.S. Army Lessons Learned, Fort Leavenworth, KS, and moved on in 1990 to be the command historian at the U.S. Army Special Operations Command, Fort Bragg, NC, before joining the Center of Military History in Washington in 1998. His 30-year career as a commissioned officer included deployments to Operation Desert Storm (Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, 1991), Somalia (1993), Bosnia (1997), and after 9/11 to Uzbekistan and Afghanistan in support of Task Force Dagger during Operation Enduring Freedom (2002). His historical works include War in the Persian Gulf: Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, August 1990–March 1991 (CMH, 2010), The U.S. Army in Somalia (CMH, 2002), and Operation Enduring Freedom (CMH, 2004). He served as Chief Historian from September 2006 until his retirement in October 2015.*

A shorted version of this interview appeared in *The Federalist* (Spring 2016, No. 49).

Interview by Benjamin Guterman

-----

#### **How did you get started as a historian in the military?**

My doctoral work was actually in Tudor-Stuart English history, not military history, although the dissertation focused on the English Ordnance office of that time. The majority of the dissertation covered topics such as finances, bureaucracy, court politics, Parliamentary reform legislation, and other political topics. Like most newly minted Ph.D.s, I did the rounds of the various hiring venues such as the American Historical Association annual meetings and applying to various colleges and departments for teaching positions because that was what I was trained to do. I also applied for, and was accepted, to attend the Army's Command and General Staff Officers' Course (CGSOC) at Fort Leavenworth as a reserve officer for the entire 10-month course rather than just the "normal" course for a reservist of 4 months. While pursuing this unusual "post-doc," I learned of a position as a military historian for the Center for Army Lessons Learned. This position combined my Army experience with the chance to use my historical training, and I jumped at the chance. I quickly realized that I was more suited for a position as an Army historian than as an academic one.

#### **What important historical lessons do you think you have learned from your several deployments as a reserve officer in such operations as Desert Storm in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and others?**

The most important lessons I learned as a deployed historian for Desert Storm, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and Afghanistan were: 1) the importance of helping the Army understand just how important it was to keep records on what they did (a hard sell!) and 2) to capture eyewitness testimony as quickly as possible after an event or operation before the memory has time to fade or change. I did lots of interviews of WWII, Korean War, and Vietnam War veterans, and it quickly became apparent to me that memories fade quickly and that "imposed" memory, or

memory that you think is yours but is based on listening to your friends and comrades, gradually replaces your own, less “worthy” in your eyes, memories. Getting people to talk to you quickly after a military operation or battle and talk to you honestly about what they saw or did, even when it involved killing others or watching friends die, is difficult but captures the most genuine historical experience possible.

**On becoming Chief Historian, what were your highest priorities for the history program?**

I really had three main priorities, all focused on the future of the Army and the historical profession in the Army. The first priority was one of continuity. I was now the sixth Chief Historian of the Army, and since the formation of the office after World War II, the Center has maintained the reputation of publishing the highest-quality, most objective, clearly written, and comprehensive histories possible. I felt the weight of maintaining that legacy and knew that I had to ensure that I passed on to the next Chief Historian an office just as capable of upholding those standards. So reading, vetting, criticizing, and shaping the next generation of official historical studies was my top priority. Second, to insure that that was possible, I had to focus on finding and hiring the best possible historians with the best experience and academic training to write those books. With the best historians, trained and educated in historical methods by the best schools, we could continue to produce the best official histories. To find them and hire them, in many cases despite the best efforts (it appeared) of the Army civilian personnel office to thwart me, was critical to the long-term health of the Army historical program. I experimented with the Federal Career Intern Program, with a variety of job announcements and “key word” combinations to fight the “Resumix” beast (an automated resume sifting system ill-suited to finding anyone with talent), and finally establishing an intern program with Pathways interns and Presidential Management Fellows to try to find and hire talent when all the system wanted me to do was hire the minimally (and poorly) qualified. Official histories are not written by people, however well-meaning, with minimal qualifications. My third priority was to continue to work with our field historians and push for the regular deployment of historians, both as individuals and as part of Military History Detachments, to Iraq and Afghanistan to conduct interviews with participants but more importantly to vacuum up all the operational records of our forces in the contingency theaters. We learned early on that the Army Records Management Program, despite pious hopes, interesting regulations, and regular exhortations (without follow-up) from Army leaders, was broken and that units were not keeping or retiring to keep their operational records. And as any historian knows, if you don't have the documentary record, you only have hearsay. Despite the near disaster of the failure to keep good records from the Gulf War, which came to light with the Gulf War Syndrome scandal, the Army still had failed to put in place a systematic, inspected, comprehensive records collection program, and our historians were forced to do all they could to make up the difference. Through their hard efforts and those of our Field Programs and Historical Services Divisions, our historians managed to capture over 150 terabytes of key primary source documents. We have, on the whole, enough data to write the official history of the Army in the Global War on Terrorism up through 2014, but it was despite the Army Records Management Information System and not because of it.

**What range of services and information does the CMH provide to Army staff and commands?**

The Center provides a wide variety of historical and museum products. I was primarily involved in the historical side of the house so I will concentrate on that. As Army historians we produced some form of product that we hoped would "scratch every itch" from casual questioner to a detailed analytical investigation as to what happened and why in any particular operation. We have historians on the Army staff and throughout the commands helping any commander or staff officer with any historical question. All that a policy maker or staffer needs to do is ask the question on their issue, "how have we handled this in the past" and we would pull upon the resources of the Army history community to try and provide detailed historical perspective on issues ranging from downsizing the Army, fluctuating manpower and recruitment strategies, officer reduction strategies, theater withdrawal plans, intelligence operations with sometimes less-than-trusted allies, occupation policies of the past, cultural issues, election and franchise expansion techniques and results, disarming militias after a conflict, and a host of other issues. We also produced staff papers from a one-page summary to an 80- or 100-page essay on topics including integration of the armed forces, interrogation of prisoners of war over time, Army prison operations, policy shifts on the service of women and minorities, Army requirements generation processes, equipment acquisition practices, and other topics. To provide a more general aid to maintaining Army heritage (a key aspect of morale) we also produce campaign pamphlets from past battles from WWII, Vietnam, Korea, the War of 1812, and the Civil War as well as unit lineage and honors certificates and unit histories. Finally, we produce the official histories, which cover Army operations and initiatives in detail and are based firmly on primary sources so that they serve Army doctrine writers and the American people as authoritative accounts of what the Army has done and why. It is only when our doctrine writers see clearly what happened that they can produce better doctrine for the future. And the history of the Army is basically distilled experience that those doctrine writers and policy makers can rely on to make their judgments and write their manuals.

**You've urged a more expansive understanding of military history to include economic, social, legal, political, technological, and cultural issues. Can you provide some examples of how CMH histories have taken this wider perspective?**

Military history is so expansive as a discipline and covers so many topics, that if historians limited themselves just to battles and leaders, much of the critical experience of an Army in a democracy would be overlooked. Manpower, training, demographics, politics, finances, the evolution of law in a democracy, and many other facets of society are reflected in our military, impact it, or are changed because of it. When we wrote the history of the U.S. Army in World War II (the famous "Green Books") we had to include strategy, the politics of coalitions, planning conferences, manpower levels, production figures, as well as the battles and leaders. War and militaries are complex issues that affect all aspects of society, and the more we integrate facts and knowledge about those issues, the better and more complete will be our histories. We have just published *Forging the Shield*, the first substantive volume of the U.S. Army in the Cold War. To understand the Army as an institution during that peacetime period of competition, we have had to include aspects such as coalition building, politics, culture, building of infrastructure, manpower needs (selective service), finances, and all the other interrelated aspects of an America mobilized as a society to meet the communist threat around the world. To that you must add

details of organization theory, personalities, personnel policy, intelligence, logistics, and even family support policy (or lack of the same). An Army as an institution and as a reflection of American society must have sophisticated histories written about it by sophisticated historians who take cognizance of all of its many aspects.

**Can you briefly discuss the professional historical standards you stressed in your supervision of dozens of pamphlets, books, and monographs on Army history?**

The Center often gets chided for taking a long time to write its official histories. We turn out our pamphlets and papers much quicker, of course, but the official histories, which are meant to be authoritative and as definitive as the sources allow, do take time. That is because we want to get it right. For that, we have a series of reviews of chapters by supervisors, by peers, and even a final panel by nongovernment subject-matter experts to ensure that we are not just writing a “good news” Army story. CMH is committed to writing quality history, not “court history” and to telling the whole story—good, bad, and indifferent—because the Army and the American people deserve the truth and are better served by it than comfortable falsehoods. If a historian uncovered and wrote about uncomfortable facts that showed the Army in a poor light, I stressed that as long as the sources sustained that judgment, then we had to publish it. If new sources appeared, we would change our judgment accordingly. In short, if you had the evidence and could make your case, I would support it. The problem comes when the facts are not clear or the evidence contradictory. That is where peer review and subject matter expert panels were of value to help sift and weigh the evidence. But in the final analysis, I knew that my name would go on the book along with that of the author, and I had to be sure that the story was as straight as the evidence allowed. Quality history was our goal.

**The Center revised its core textbook, *American Military History* (2 vols.), in 2009 with new chapters on the Global War on Terrorism. What new insights did you gain and even impart therein about the modern Army?**

I undertook as general editor the effort of revising and updating *American Military History* in 2004 and then again in 2009 to accomplish a number of goals. First, the old textbook was 20 years out of date, and while many of the earlier chapters were still in good shape overall, there had been a lot of work done by scholars in the intervening years that needed to be incorporated. Many of the facts did not change, but interpretations had. It was important to bring all the sections up to date, but especially to revise the recommended readings list at the end of each chapter. After all, the text was meant to be issued to ROTC cadets, and they needed to have a ready reference on the latest historical scholarship for each era. Second, with the edition dating from the mid 1980s, all the contingency operations from Desert Storm to Somalia, to Bosnia, to the Global War on Terrorism were missing. It was critical to provide chapters for new, soon-to-be-commissioned officers that talked about *their* Army and about *their* wars. Those wars were still in progress so the sections, especially on Iraq and Afghanistan, were necessarily short on details and results, but we had to take a stab at some kind of analysis, however tentative. As for lessons learned, there were probably two lessons, somewhat contradictory in nature. The first was that technology was having a massive impact on the modern battlefield. Precision guided weapons, blue-force tracking (keeping real time control over where friendly forces were located), computers, and satellites were all making a real difference down to the soldier level. At the same

time, many “experts” decreed that such technology was now so important that a “Revolution in Military Affairs” had occurred that had changed the very nature of warfare and, it was implied, made the soldier virtually obsolete—the return of the infamous “push-button war” of the ’50s. The reemergence of a nasty series of foes in 2001 who could hide on the battlefield and within civilian populations, and negate much of our much-vaunted technology put an end to those extravagant claims and pointed out, again, that the key to victory on any battlefield where you wanted to preserve lives and hold ground was still the well-trained soldier. Ground power continues to be as relevant today as ever even though advances in technology can be of great help.

**What was your role in redefining the process of capturing and preserving Army field records (Army Combat History) after Desert Shield/Storm in 1990–1991?**

My first deployment as a combat historian was to Desert Storm in support of Army Special Operations, and I learned first-hand about the challenges of traveling to a contingency theater, establishing oneself on a staff, and collecting interviews, documents, and photographs of an ongoing operation. The fact that it was special operations with all of the attendant security clearance challenges just sharpened the lessons that I learned. The need for discretion, persistence, and tact to gain credibility in a headquarters suspicious of anyone purporting to “capture” or write about what they were doing were valuable lessons. In the years since, both at Army Special Operations Command and later at the Center, I worked with dozens of command historians, Military History Detachments, and with Forces Command and Army Reserve Command to try and capture how field historians could do their jobs better, particularly in the realm of assisting in records capture. Despite some significant opposition from within the community, many of whom insisted on continuing to use civil war battles as training vehicles for records capture long after the current operational environment of modern operations had thrown such teaching vehicles in the dust, we at the Center managed to completely restructure training for field historians and military history detachments. We co-wrote a Commanders’ Guide to Operational Records and Data Collection in conjunction with the Center for Army Lessons Learned (back to the beginning for me!) and the Records Management and Declassification Agency, and published a Field Manual, FM 1-20, on Military History Operations and revised that in 2013 into an Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 1-20 for Army-wide distribution. In short, as a community we learned from our collective experiences, revised a training course to pass on those experiences, and enshrined them in doctrine and tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) so that future generations of historians would undertake this necessary task even better in the future. This will be especially important if, again, the Army Records Management program fails in its primary mission and that burden falls upon the historical community.

**The Commemoration program of short publications of milestones such as for the War of 1812 bicentennial and the Vietnam War’s 50th Anniversary seems to be aimed for the general public. Was that the goal?**

The Center of Military History, and the Army history community at large, has always had two missions that are complementary: history and heritage. History means that we write academic quality history, based on primary source documents, to tell the Army story with sufficient

authority and detail that it serves as the basis for new doctrine. And we must tell the Army story in a more readable fashion so that soldiers and the American public understand what the Army has done for the nation since 1775. The commemorative program has as its goal the writing of campaign pamphlets on each battle or campaign that has a streamer commemorating it on the Army flag. Those pamphlets are often based on secondary sources; provide the reader a narrative account, with maps, of the battle or campaign; and put that battle or campaign in the context of the war or operation. These are meant for the general public and the average soldier, not because they bring new insights necessarily, but that they remind us of all that past generations have done for the nation as part of the continuity of service to the nation that the Army embodies. It is our heritage, and we want future generations of soldiers and citizens to know about it and remember it. This is particularly critical with our veterans. We started this program with pamphlets commemorating the campaigns and battles of World War II and the Korean War for the 50th anniversary of those conflicts mainly for the veterans. And we continue that important mission now with pamphlets on the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War so that those veterans, many of whom have not reflected on what the war meant for many years, can think about their service and how important it was. Like all of our publications, our pamphlets are not meant to glorify war but remember sacrifice and service and commemorate without celebrating.

**What should we know about oral histories at the CMH? Do they require special procedures, and to what extent are they available to researchers?**

Every command historian, schoolhouse, or activity seems to have an active oral history program to try to get commanders, soldiers, and civilians to reflect on their jobs, their operations, and even their careers in the Army. For example, we conducted over 1,000 oral history interviews immediately after the events of 9/11. These were moving personal testimonies, many of which were published in an anthology entitled *Then Came the Fire*, published in 2011 on the 10th anniversary of the attacks. Oral histories do what documents cannot: record emotions, impressions, and thought-processes for decision making. While never sufficient as evidence to stand alone, and they must be used with care, they provide valuable augmentation to the written record. The Center alone has thousands of oral histories, some still on tape and even, in the case of some Vietnam War oral histories, on old reel-to-reel tape, many still un-transcribed. They are valuable resources that take time to use, but add the human dimension into the equation of war.

**How does the CMH work with and support Army museums nationwide?**

The Center has increased its engagement with the Army museum system dramatically over the past several decades. Army museums emerged over time in a very decentralized fashion, borne out of local command or unit interest, into a system that at its peak had over 80 separate museums. It is still a system with over 60 active Army museums and dozens of National Guard museums with important, in some case irreplaceable, artifacts that tell the Army story three-dimensionally. At first the Center had only a few personnel engaged in providing general guidance and direction to that inchoate mass of museums, but with dramatic challenges of funding and artifact accountability, the Center has increasingly taken over direct management of museums starting in 2006 and is planning to provide even more centralized control over all Army museums in the future. Their collections are too valuable to leave them in the hands of

local, often uninterested, commanders with uncertain funding streams and poor management and accountability issues.

**You were a strong advocate for Career Program 61. Why were its hiring reforms so important to you, what were the earlier recruiting difficulties, and what has been the impact on the history program?**

Career Program 61 for all Army historians, archivists, and museum professionals was a major initiative that I am proud to have spearheaded. The Army goal was to have all civilians in the Army affiliated with some career program, and initially they tried to put us into the Public Affairs Career Program, which was not a good fit. After discussions with the Army, I managed to convince them that we needed our own, albeit small, career program. By calling together subject-matter experts from the field, we put together special discussion groups, created a series of career plans, ladders, maps, and documents, and generated a G-1 and G-3 approved ACTEDS (Army Civilian Training, Education and Development) plan. This plan outlined all the different steps and standards of a historian, archivist, or museum professional from entry into the Army until retirement. It demystified what you needed to do in terms of experience, training, and education to master your career field or, if you wished, to switch into an allied discipline. In addition, it established an intern plan for bringing on new people at the entry level, providing them with a systematic training and development program so that at the end of their intern plan they were ready to be fully fledged professionals. It also provided us, for the first time, with access to training funds (to the tune of over \$100,000 a year) to get our professionals into additional training opportunities, or even chances to get advanced academic degrees, to improve their careers and their skills to better contribute to the mission of the Army history program. Over time, Career Program 61 will be the vehicle by which our community becomes more and more professionalized, trained, and effective in its mission of providing the best historical, archival, and museum support to the Army.

**Reflecting on your career, what one or two personal accomplishments at the CMH are you most proud of?**

I would have to say that the two personal accomplishments that I am proudest of are those that had the greatest long-term impact. As you can see from my previous response on CP 61, I am proudest of being the guiding hand for five years in the creation, codification, and implementation of a Career Program that will have a growing impact on our profession for generations to come. To be in on the ground floor of the creation of that program was personally and professionally very rewarding because it will have such a long-term impact. It will be, to take a page from our Navy brethren, a “force for good.”

Second, I am personally proud that I was one of those historians who, either deployed or back at headquarters, was a consistent (and persistent) voice to get historians into the field, capture documents, interview soldiers, and collect on our Army today so that historians in the future will have the raw material to write the official histories. I was just one of hundreds who fought to deploy or to deploy others, to write up lessons, to prepare doctrine, or to fight for the money to set up the increasingly expensive automated systems to store and access the electronic documents of an Army at war. But I am proud, and each of those hundreds should share in that pride, that we did the tough job at no small personal risk and fought the good fight, even when

the Army often seemed uninterested in our mission. We persevered, and we should take great comfort in the degree to which we succeeded.

Finally, although you only asked for two, I must add a third source of pride. I believe that I was able to live up to my pledge when first appointed Chief Historian, to maintain the quality of our historical publications. That has always been “job one” for me. In my time at the Center, first as Chief of Histories Division for eight years and then Chief Historian for nine, that quality was always on my mind as we published, as a team, over 120 high-quality historical publications from pamphlets to periodicals to special studies to major official histories. I picked up the torch from Dr. Jeffrey Clarke, Chief Historian number five, and believe that I have kept it burning for Chief Historian number seven when he, or she, is selected.

**Overall, how has the CMH changed in the past two decades, and what major challenges do you think lie ahead?**

The biggest single change has been the increasing engagement of the Center with the management of the Army museum system. It is no longer an after-thought for the Center. When I came to the Center in 1998, the National Museum project was still stumbling, and each Army museum was its own separate entity run and funded, to a greater or lesser degree, by a different major command or unit. Now, with the National Museum finally about to be created and the Center pushing to directly manage all the Army museums, it is apparent that much of the time and energy of the Center's leadership and a large proportion of the Center's money will have to be focused on museums rather than history. History will not vanish from the Center's mission set—writing the official history of the Army was the Center's original mission and cannot, I say again cannot, be delegated elsewhere, but the intense management challenge of running the Army's museums has increasingly dominated the Center's time. That is the biggest single change and the biggest single challenge.

Probably the next major challenge is to develop new ways to disseminate our outstanding historical products to an Army that, like the American public, seems to suffer from a short attention span. The subtle analysis of historical fact takes time and effort and does not recommend itself to “twitterization.” We, as a community, will have to continue to generate the same quality works and develop new ways to push them out, electronically through a variety of media, to the increasingly distracted world if we are to continue to make a difference. We cannot give up traditional publication of major books for the official record, but mining those books and turning some of their most significant insights into shorter electronic products will probably be the wave of the future.