

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.



Richard W. Stewart

Interview by Benjamin Guterman

This interview is a shortened version of the full interview, which will be available at a later date at <http://shfg.org/shfg/federal-history-work/interviews/>

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.

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.

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. ❖