Miranda Summers Lowe is a curator in the Division of Armed Forces History at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American History, and a captain with the District of Columbia Army National Guard. She earned her B.A. from the College of William and Mary, and her M.A. from Brown University.

Interview by Thomas Faith

Why did you decide to become a military curator at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American History?

I’ve spent most of my military career explaining the army: as a student, I was explaining what I did to my classmates. When I worked in public affairs, I was working with media. I realized that I loved bridging the gap. The Smithsonian attracts a wonderfully diverse collection of visitors from all over the world from every age and interest. I liked the idea of presenting military history to a general audience rather than working in a military history museum where most of the audience was already military. I was excited to work on a venue on the national mall and with a fantastic collection of objects to place military history in context.

What do you think are some strengths of the Smithsonian’s collection related to the U.S. military?

For over a century, Smithsonian kept the national military collection. We have an exhaustive collection of pre-20th century uniforms and equipment, which is a rich resource to dip into. We have a good collection of items from notable members of the military, but also a good collection from the everyday soldier, the homefront, and support personnel. I think one of our greatest strengths is that we’re a museum full of many kinds of experts. I might find a first aid kit in our collection, or in the medical history collection, and each curator would have a different rationale for collecting it. As a researcher, I think the objects where different divisions intersect are some of the most interesting objects.

What considerations do you make when curating objects from present-day military activities?

The time scale on Global War on Terror (GWOT) collecting is probably my greatest concern. I get a little jealous talking to say, a Civil War curator, who only needs to focus on five years, whereas I’m working on 18 years and counting! Even if I just wanted to display something like a standard issue army uniform, I’d need to collect at least three at this point, with dozens of variations. At this point I look for inflection points on policy, technology, or tactics. I also think it’s important to collect the enemy, the homefront and support personnel. In this era, that includes contractors and embedded journalists. The homefront is fascinating because we have the same personnel returning for three or four mobilizations, so the lines between being at war or at home are blurred.

What kind of work did you do as an intern at the museum where you are now employed full time?

My biggest project as an intern was thinking about post 9/11 collecting, so there’s one big thing in common! I think the biggest difference is that as an intern, I thought my career would be in museum education, so I focused on programming. I was exposed to curatorial as an intern, and ended up working in that field mostly because of the experience.

What was the biggest challenge you managed during the transition into civilian employment after returning from deployment overseas?

I think the hardest thing is losing the sense of purpose. I’ve deployed twice now: once to Iraq, once to the Horn of Africa. I was lucky enough to be on excellent teams and have deep, meaningful work. There’s a purpose and an intensity to waking up every morning and knowing that you’re needed that nothing else compares to.

Do your experiences in the National Guard influence your work as a curator?

My experiences serving in the National Guard have certainly changed my perspective on military history. I’m less interested in big names and big battles than I used to be and more interested in how the military affects and is affected by social and cultural change. When I go to drill and work with this incredible group of ethnically, racially, geographically diverse soldiers, and then read the histories that don’t reflect that, it doesn’t sit well with me. I don’t think that members of the military are exceptional. In fact, I wish that service was much more commonplace. The process of taking a group of people and creating a force that can do exceptional things and protect an exceptional country—that’s where the story lies.

In your experience, what is the biggest benefit to historical programs who employ military veterans?
I think that veterans are taught to structure their thinking from the moment we join. Any good academic program does that as well, but I think that the military does a good job of extending that structure outside of how we write and into how we treat each other and how we work in teams. Especially if the military funded their education, I see more racial and geographic variation in veteran hires, and there’s a lot of strength in the diversity of thought. I know that I wouldn’t have been able to get the education and experience I have without the army.

**What advice can you offer curators and other professionals about strategies to further their impact across social media?**

I think social media has expanded the conversations that used to only happen in publications and conferences into something that’s more accessible and improvisational. The fission can be deeply motivating and fulfilling. I think the best advice I can offer is that social media is a conversation. I see a lot of people who post on Facebook or twitter, but they don’t respond to other posts or even the comments on their own posts. I think we forget that you need to give to get. It’s scary to show your in-progress work or frustrating to take the time to answer an inquiry that’s not fully formed, but it’s all part of being in a community.

**Finally, what is your favorite aspect of your duties?**

I like sharing history with people. I like public programs. I actually love a good research inquiry. I can write an article and never know if anyone read it, but with a query, I know that at least one person cared deeply.

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**NARA and Obama Foundation Sign a Digitization Memorandum of Understanding**

The following news was posted at the National Archives AOTUS Blog on February 19, 2019, by David S. Ferriero:

This week, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) and the Barack Obama Foundation agreed on a memorandum of understanding (MOU) regarding the plan to digitize all of the unclassified textual Presidential records of the Obama administration. The Foundation will select the vendor, with NARA approval, and oversee the contract.

The digitization plan was first outlined in May 2017, and this MOU is the first agreement coming out of the Letter of Intent signed in September 2018. Approximately 30 million pages of unclassified Presidential records at the Obama Library will be scanned, and the scanned images and associated metadata will become part of the Electronic Records Archives. Because the records are governed by the Presidential Records Act (PRA), the archival staff of the Obama Library will review the material before their release. The records will then be made digitally available to the public through the National Archives Catalog and the Obama Library website.

Last September we signed a Letter of Intent with the Obama Foundation and, as promised, have continued to work toward an agreement for the digitization of the unclassified textual records of the Barack Obama administration. I am pleased with the progress that this MOU represents and look forward to further progress as NARA and the Obama Foundation partner on this exciting new model. For information about the records of the Obama administration, visit www.obamalibrary.gov. Information about the new model for the Obama Presidential

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