

The History Professional

An Interview with Donald A. Carter

*Donald A. Carter graduated from the United States Military Academy in 1977 and served as a Field Artillery Officer until 1992. He received a Ph.D. in history from The Ohio State University in 1985 and served as a military history instructor at West Point and the U.S. Army Field Artillery School, Fort Sill, Oklahoma. He was an archivist at the U.S. Army Center of Military History (CMH), and in 1995 served with the Gulf War Declassification Project and the U.S. Army Declassification Activity. He returned to the CMH in 2003 as a historian. His publications include "Eisenhower Versus the Generals," in *Journal of Military History* (October 2007), and *Forging the Shield: The U.S. Army in Europe, 1951–1962* (CMH, 2015), among others.*



Interview by Benjamin Guterman

Donald Carter

What were your early historical interests, and the focus of your research?

I have been interested in military history since childhood. As a boy I loved playing with toy soldiers, and I never grew up. My earliest interests were the Civil War and World War II, probably because those were the coolest toys. My service in the Army probably prompted my interest in a potential U.S.-Soviet confrontation. When I attended graduate school at Ohio State, I gravitated toward a study of U.S. Army tactical doctrine, and the period of the Cold War seemed to be a potentially fruitful area for study. That led to my master's thesis and Ph.D. dissertation, both focused upon the evolution of U.S. Army organization and tactical doctrine between the Korean War and Vietnam.

What important insights do you think you've gained about the nature and availability of military records from your early work in Army archives and declassification?

Like many historians, I suspect, I find research to be perhaps the most enjoyable part of the historical process. Early trips to the archives at the Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania; the Eisenhower Presidential Library in Abilene, Kansas; and the federal records center at Suitland, Maryland, introduced me to the depth and diversity of records available. The personal papers and interviews I found at Carlisle exposed the personal sides of officers I had met only through history books. I was particularly struck by a series of letters from Matthew Ridgway to his lawyer protesting some of the aspects of his divorce settlement. As I was going through a very similar experience at the time, I found that fascinating. At Suitland, and later at the National Archives at College Park, Maryland, I was overwhelmed by the sheer mass of paper available. I later discovered, however, how dependent we as historians are upon the diligence of the archivists and records managers. Records for the U.S. Army, for example, were plentiful for most periods up to the mid-1950s, but then almost disappear. Even today, the Army is still struggling a bit to get a firm handle on its records management requirements.

How did you come to focus on post–World War II Army history at the CMH?

At CMH I am part of what we call the General Histories Branch of the Histories Division. Our primary responsibility is to prepare the major, "big book," official histories of the U.S. Army. Although part of the Histories Division is still wrapping up a few Vietnam studies, my branch's main focus is on the activities of the Army during the early Cold War period. Since my graduate work had focused, to some extent, on the Army in Germany during that time, I was a logical choice to do the initial volume on the United States Army Europe (USAREUR). At this time, we have completed three volumes, mine and two volumes covering the Army Engineers during the Cold War. The latter two were prepared by outside historians contracted by the Army. We have three other volumes in preparation right now: one on the history of Army intelligence during the Cold War, one on the occupation of Berlin from 1945 through 1949, and one on the Army in Europe from 1962 through 1973.

Do you perform other history-related duties in support of the history program, such as historical reports or public outreach?

Absolutely. Like many government agencies, we have experienced some "pruning" and reductions in staff. As a result, we have to respond to any number of requests and taskings, both official and unofficial. I have prepared numerous information papers for members of the Army Staff on topics such as the history of women in the Army, the Gulf War deception plan, and the evolution of the strategic triad. I've done book reviews for our own publication, *Army History*, and reviewed articles for potential use in our own magazine or other outside journals. I have just recently completed two pamphlets for our commemorative history branch, one on the Army before Vietnam and the second on the St. Mihiel offensive in World War I. I think my favorite assignment, however, was to explain the intricacies of ancient Greek hoplite warfare to a group of sixth graders doing a social studies project on that subject.

During the Berlin Crisis of 1961, U.S. planners' decision to "bluff" the Soviets by probing or sending tanks to Checkpoint Charlie was highly risky. Why did they adopt that strategy?

That wasn't really a U.S. strategy, but rather a Lucius Clay strategy. President Kennedy had sent retired U.S. Army General Lucius Clay to Berlin as his personal representative. The president gave Clay virtually free rein in Berlin, much to the consternation of USAREUR commander, General Bruce Clarke; and SACEUR, USAF General Lauris Norstad. The confrontation at Checkpoint Charlie escalated from Clay's decision to have U.S. military police, then infantry and tanks, escort American diplomatic personnel through the border crossing point, rather than submit to East German harassment. Clay did not believe that the Soviets would push the situation to war. As a result, U.S. and Soviet tanks faced each other across the checkpoint for about 17 hours until both sides cooled off a bit and had them withdrawn.

***Forging the Shield* is an impressive and comprehensive picture of the U.S. Seventh Army's deployment in Europe, from strategic and tactical developments to housing and morale questions. Did you envision that large canvas from the outset?**

Actually, the original concept for the book was to cover the period between 1951 and 1973. We recognized that covering such an extended period would either result in either a rather cursory survey of the period, or an unwieldy volume of at least 1,000 pages. As a result, we split the period in two, with my volume covering the first half and another historian doing a volume covering the second half. Otherwise, yes, the idea was always to provide a comprehensive study of the Army in Europe. We wanted to make sure that the actions of the soldiers and leaders in USAREUR and the Seventh Army were placed into the context of the political and social developments going on around them.

***Forging the Shield* shows that in post-World War II Western Europe nuclear weapons revolutionized every aspect of military doctrine, planning, and organization, and created tensions at all levels, including between the president and his generals. What was the central dilemma?**

The dilemma was really, how do you confront the superior military strength of the Soviet Union and later, the Warsaw Pact, without bankrupting Western economies to match that strength. Nuclear weapons seemed to offer a way to do this. The Army in Europe quickly realized that, from a military standpoint, this approach made little sense as any conflict would vaporize much of Europe. This was particularly true when West Germany entered the alliance, since the main battleground would be in their backyard. So, by the mid-1950s, most military leaders in Europe believed that nuclear weapons might serve as a deterrent, but would not provide a realistic way of actually fighting a war. Although

have continued to struggle with how to best incorporate nuclear weapons into Western defense plans.

You write that the rebuilding of the German army was the U.S. Seventh Army's most important accomplishment. Why is that so?

A defense of Western Europe never really made sense if you could not incorporate West German manpower into the defense plan. Only the Germans could provide sufficient ground strength to give the West a reasonable chance of standing up to the Soviets. The French and, to some extent, the British, remained reluctant to allow German rearmament so soon after the WWII surrender. The Seventh Army's assistance not only facilitated the restoration of the German armed forces, but also helped to forge remarkably close links between the German and American soldiers. That the Germans as a whole not only tolerated but embraced the presence of so many American military troops and facilities for so many years stands as a testament to the close relationship forged between the two armies.

***In Forging the Shield* we read about successive revisions in U.S. military plans in Europe with several follow-up military exercises that revealed serious deficiencies in communication and preparation. Yet in the end, how did the Seventh Army achieve its mission of containing Soviet aggression?**

In reviewing an initial draft of the book, a good friend cautioned me that I could not really say with authority that the U.S. Army in Europe had prevented a Soviet invasion. That assertion would require far more insight into plans and policies on the other side than we could include within the scope of the book. In the end, it's a history of the U.S. Army rather than a comprehensive study of the Cold War in Europe. However, I think, as I put into the conclusion, that the presence of the Americans, complete with the logistical infrastructure, raised the stakes of any proposed Soviet incursion to the point where potential losses were unacceptable. Somewhat ironically, I believe that the presence of so many U.S. civilians also served to deter hostilities. Not only did it reflect the level of American commitment, but it could also reassure the Soviets that, with so many U.S. civilians in the potential combat zone, we were not going to undertake any hostile actions on our side either.

How does *Forging the Shield* expand on earlier interpretations of the 1950s deployment in Europe? Have you used any overlooked or newly released sources?

I consider the book to be more of a synthesis than breaking any major new ground. One of the earlier reviewers reminded us that, in his words, we were coming somewhat late to the table in terms of Cold War research. Because the work is an official history of the U.S. Army, by definition, most of the research is based upon records created by the Army and upon interviews and per-

source material based upon the research of so many military and Cold War scholars that have come before me.

Can you give us some insights into your new project of a study of U.S. occupation in Berlin, 1945–49?

The Berlin volume was begun several years ago by a colleague who has since retired. Although he left an excellent first draft, the review panel and the CMH chief historian identified several areas that required additional research and significant revision. That has been my job for the past year or so. The book covers the period when the four Allied powers, the U.S., Britain, France, and the Soviet Union, worked collectively to oversee the occupation and to restore basic services and civil government within the city. Because of conflicts between the Soviets and the other Allies about how the city would be administered, Berlin became a focal point for the Cold War confrontation. The book will cover a period from the American decision late in the war not to join the race for Berlin until the termination of the Berlin Blockade in 1949.


What advice would you give to new and future federal military historians?

I guess I would encourage anyone interested in a career in this field to get a good grasp on information management technology. I'm an old school book and paper person, and I can see that the future of our profession is in electronic recordkeeping and interpretation. Already, many of the historians at CMH are working to gather records from the field that are almost exclusively electronic. It's pretty clear that is where historical study and research have been heading.

The opinions expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the policies of the U.S. Army Center of Military History.

Read *Forging the Shield* at <http://www.history.army.mil/catalog/pubs/45/45-3.html>

See a list of SHFG interviews at <http://shfg.org/shfg/federal-history-work/interviews/>



EXPLORATIONS
IN FEDERAL HISTORY
SHFG • www.shfg.org

Explorations highlights and reviews the broad range of federal history work and nonfederal work that promote the history of the federal government. It is sent by email to SHFG members three times per year: April, August, and December.

Recent topics: Intelligence, Public History, Military History, Foreign Policy, National Park Service, and Book Reviews. Articles

National Declassification Center Not Yet “Releasing All It Can”

Nate Jones

The National Declassification Center (NDC), governed by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), has the potential to become President Obama's largest, longest-lasting, and most important transparency initiative. The NDC has made important strides over the past six years, but important steps remain to ensure that the Center actually fulfills its mission to “release all we can, and protect what we must.”

According to the most recently available public figures, the NDC has “successfully” reviewed 352 million pages of classified records since 2010. Of these, 222 million pages have completed the NDC's declassification review but have not completed NARA's boxing and processing procedures—and possibly another Department of Energy review. Of the remaining 130 million pages that the NDC has reviewed, only 77 million pages (just 59 percent) were actually declassified. The remaining 53 million pages were returned to their sensitive compartmented information facilities, where they will await re-review at some future point.

This 59-percent release rate is troublingly low. A comparison with government-wide Mandatory Declassification Review (MDR) request figures reveals that documents requested under MDR are released to the public in whole or in part over 94 percent of the time. The Center's release rate would be even higher if the processing included only documents 25 years old or older.

The primary reason for the NDC's unacceptable rate of censorship is its use of a page-level “pass/fail” declassification review process. As the Public Interest Declassification Board (PIDB), the government declassification watchdog, recently explained, “a single word in a record determined to require continued classification beyond 25 years will cause the entire record to ‘fail.’ This process, originally designed by agencies to conserve limited resources, actually does the opposite.” Instead of promoting declassification, this “page by page” shortcut shoves these historic documents back into the vaults (still classified) until a requester requests another “wasteful, expensive” re-review. It also appears to directly contradict the NDC's mission to “release all we can.”

At an April 2015 public forum on the NDC's prioritization process hosted by the National Archives, members of the public strongly reiterated that any other reforms are secondary to the need to end page-level “pass/fail review,” which will lift the NDC's declassification rate to the much more acceptable government declassification rate of 94 percent.

While the NDC has not yet ended “pass/fail review,” soon after the April meeting, the Center took the important step of listing the titles of record series processed for declassification—but not yet publicly available—on its website so that users can know what the NDC has processed. Even better, the NDC now institutes “indexing on demand” wherein researchers can request access to these previously unavailable records and—if they have