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Visitors get VIP behind-the-scenes look at Army Heritage and Education Center

Staff Sgt. Corey Baltos



LeAnn Fawver, a Collections Division archivist at the Army Heritage & Education Center shows how the center stores physical copies of letters and manuscripts. Photo by Staff Sgt. Corey Baltos.

Frank F. Sempa didn't really talk about his experiences in the Second World War with his children. His son, Francis, an assistant U.S. attorney for the Middle District of Pennsylvania, remembers hearing snippets of his father's experiences as they watched World War II documentaries together. It wouldn't be until a few years after Frank's death, when his daughter Barbe stumbled upon her father's World War II letters in an old shoebox, that his real story would be pieced together.

Frank's World War II story began on the blood-soaked beaches of Normandy where he and the rest of the 29th Division began their fight through France. From there he assisted in the capture of St. Lo, participated in the siege of Brest, helped destroy the Siegfried Line and then marched into Germany.

If Barbe had not stumbled across her father's old letters, Frank's story might have been lost to the ages, but these stories don't need to stay buried in shoe boxes or in the memories of veterans. The stories can be taped and the artifacts can be donated to the U.S Army Heritage and Education Center so they can be collected and preserved for history.

"Many people, when they bring in donations, start the conversation with, 'You wouldn't want this, would you?'" said Greg Statler, director of collections management at USAHEC. The staff takes about 90 percent of the items and processes them.

On Nov. 4 the USAHEC opened its doors to the public to give them a behind the scenes tour of the facility so they could see how Soldiers stories are collected and preserved for history.

The USAHEC campus is divided into four primary working buildings: the Visitor and Education Center, Ridgway Hall, the Storage Facility and the new conservation center. The campus also includes a one mile long outdoor Army Heritage Trail which consists of stationary exhibits depicting various periods of U.S. Army history.



A clipping from the Scranton Tribune shows Staff Sgt. Frank F. Sempa, after the August 1944 liberation of Paris. Sempa's story is just one of the thousands of stories of veterans you will find at USAHEC.

Ridgway Hall

Named after Army Chief of Staff General Matthew Ridgway, it is the home of the Military History Institute. This research facility holds over 15 million items covering the entire span of U.S. Army history. It is open to the public every day except Sundays.

Along with a reading room that can be used by the public, the hall also has several small exhibits of artifacts and photographs representing the USAHEC holdings. These exhibits include a collection of General of the Army Omar Bradley's personal artifacts, as well as a comprehensive display of the first year of the U.S. Civil War. Next week, USAHEC will unveil a photographic display called, "Understanding War through Imagery: the Civil War in American Memory."

"We try to shoot for a new exhibit every 12 to 18 months," said Kaleb Dissinger, curator of uniforms and equipment. "Right now we are working on a new display, 'Taking the Field for Greatness: the Carlisle Indians and American Football,' which will be housed at Root Hall."

All of these exhibits are free and open to the public.

Visitor and Education Center

The VEC opened in May of this year to the general public. It is the welcome and orientation site for visitors, and along with a 7,000 square foot museum, it also houses a gift shop, two multipurpose rooms and a snack bar. It is open to the public every day except Mondays.

The conservation center and storage facility

- Consists of two climate-controlled storage rooms with moveable shelves where the artifacts are housed.
- Includes an analytical lab where technicians can examine artifacts to determine the best way to conserve them.
- A digitization room allows technicians to digitize photographs, papers, and audio and video clips to become available for patron use.
- Laboratories for conservation work on paper documents, objects, textiles and art.
- The conservation center and storage facility is not open to the public.

Preserving artifacts

“Many of the documents come to us in raw form so our first task is cataloging and organizing everything to see what we have,” said Mellissa Wiford, collections division archivist.

Once the documents are cataloged, finding aids, or a list of where the documents are stored, is compiled to assist the researcher.

“The papers of Harold K. Johnson, Army Chief of Staff from 1964-1968, is housed in over 200 boxes,” said Wiford. “Without a finding aid it would take forever to find a specific item. We want people to use the artifacts and the finding aids assist in this.”

“Once the collection is processed and a finding aid is completed, there are actually four copies maintained, two electronic and two print,” said Wiford. A printed and a digital copy are kept internally by the Archives branch, and the other two are available for public access.

The public can access digital copies of the documents by using the Digitally Document System (DDS), or the collection catalog record which is located in the research catalog located on the Integrated Library System (ILS). Both of these digital systems can be accessed via the USAHEC website. A printed copy is also available to the public in the reading room.

“To access the collections, guests will need to fill out a collection request form and hand it over to our circulation staff and they will go pull the material for use,” said Wiford.

Many of the letters and photographs are scanned into computers which has the double purpose of making the document easier to find, and allows for examination without damaging the original. However that does not mean that researchers do not have access to original copies of documents.

“Papers and photographs deteriorate slightly every time they are touched,” said Wiford. “This is due to

the oils and dirt on our fingers reacting with the paper.”

Once the artifacts are organized they are cleaned of dirt, tarnish, rust and other damage. Clothing and other textiles are repaired if possible. Many of the items USAHEC receives have been damaged by time and improper storage.

“Our job is to preserve it and make it available for folks 200 years from now,” said Statler.

Army Heritage Trail

The one-mile outdoor walking path houses exhibits on various eras of U.S. Army history including a World War II in processing center, a World War I trench, a M4 Sherman Tank, and a Bell AH-1 Cobra helicopter.

Twice a year USAHEC hosts two large living history events. The first one, Army Heritage Days, takes place in May and features re-enactors from all eras of U.S. Army History. The second event, which takes place in September changes themes every year. Next year’s fall living history event is on the North African Campaign In World War II.

USAHEC hours of operations

Ridgway Hall
(Military History Institute)

Monday- Saturday: 9am - 4:45pm
Sunday: Closed

Visitor and Education Center

Monday: Closed
Tuesday- Saturday: 9am - 5pm
Sunday: 1100am - 5pm

USAHEC will be open on Veterans Day from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.