New Exhibit Honors the Lost Battalion (2/131st Field Artillery)

In November 1941, the 2nd Battalion of the 131st Field Artillery was detached from the 36th Infantry Division and ordered to reinforce General Douglas MacArthur’s forces in the Philippine Islands. The sudden outbreak of war on December 7 forced the unit to divert to Australia. A month later, the Texas National Guard unit was sent to Java to help defend that oil-rich island from the Japanese. Unfortunately, nowhere during the first six months of the Pacific War did the Allies prove capable of stopping the onrushing enemy. In early March 1942, when the

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VOLUNTEER OF THE QUARTER: Robby Robinson

Robby Robinson was born in Oakland, California, in 1949. A “Navy Brat,” he spent most of his pre-teen years in Norfolk, Corpus Christi and San Diego. He received an AA Degree from Richard Bland College in Petersburg, Virginia, after which he joined the U.S. Marine Corps.

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Lost Battalion Exhibit, continued

Dutch surrendered Java, the men of the 131st Field Artillery, along with survivors of the cruiser USS Houston, disappeared into the horror of Japanese prisoner of war camps. They would not be heard from for over a year, their disappearance from the stage so profound, their unit came to be called the Lost Battalion.

Those Soldiers, Sailors and Marines would endure unspeakable hardships and cruelties during three and half years of confinement. Used as slave labor in the shipyards of Japan or while building the infamous “railway of death” in the jungles of Burma, they would emerge from captivity as walking skeletons. But throughout the ordeal, these Texans, Sailors and Marines displayed a courage and comradeship as profound as any seen elsewhere in the war. Their story is one of the most heartrending, tragic, courageous, remarkable and touching sagas that the Texas Military Forces Museum has to tell.

In late 2001, the museum opened a permanent exhibit on the Lost Battalion, which was designed and paid for through the generosity of the Lost Battalion Association. This organization, which has been in existence since the men it honors came home in 1945, is made up of the remaining members of the battalion, the Houston and their families. They have held an annual reunion every year since the end of World War II, and done more than any other group to keep alive the memory of what those Americans faced. The exhibit they funded did yeoman service for more than a decade.

Inevitably, however, every museum exhibit gets old and outdated. Graphics fade, technology changes, normal wear and tear accumulate, visitation patterns change and what was once an adequate footprint no longer suffices. All of these factors weighed on the museum’s original Lost Battalion exhibit. But other factors, even more pronounced, made it obvious it was time for a new, more modern, version of the Lost Battalion story. Among these was the planned renovation of the north end of the museum necessary to bring a Korean War-era F84 jet into our Great Hall, which required the displacement of all the exhibits in that part of the building.

Additionally, the staff has long desired to bring this compelling story out of the small room it has inhabited and place it in a more prominent position inside the museum. The old spot had the unfortunate effect of making the Lost Battalion seem like something of a sidebar. The exhibit’s new location places it alongside the story of the 112th and 124th Cavalry Regimental Combat Teams of the Texas Guard who fought in the Pacific War. Thus we concentrate the museum’s WWII Pacific Theater story in one place. The new site also puts the Lost Battalion exhibit in a prominent spot in the museum’s Great Hall, just outside our Hall of Honor. The new location ensures that everyone touring the museum or attending a function in the Hall of Honor will see the exhibit.

What’s more, this new exhibit is built to modern museum standards — with two audio-visual components, proper lighting, better exhibit cases, and the space to tell a more expansive version of the Lost Battalion story. That saga is centered on a remarkable artifact — a M1917 cannon, the very weapon the 131st Field Artillerymen were armed with on Java. This helps emphasize that the members of that unit were not victims, but soldiers who risked their lives to defend their country and what it stands for even when they were in the clutches of their Japanese captors. One wall of the exhibit honors those who perished in the camps by displaying their names in a style reminiscent of the Vietnam Wall. A special exhibit nearby tells the story of the USS Houston which was sunk after a heroic fight, trying to fend off the Japanese invasion of Java, and whose survivors shared imprisonment with the Texas gunners.

This new Lost Battalion exhibit is the result of many months of research, planning and construction by the museum’s talented staff, interns and volunteers. They have built a fitting, educational and moving tribute to those brave soldiers, sailors and Marines. We hope that you will stop by and see it.
Usually in this space I spend time bragging about progress the museum has been making, the fantastic job our volunteers, interns and living historians are doing, the kudos we’ve received from visitors or informing all of you about upcoming events or exhibits. But this newsletter I want to speak about something else, something of profound importance to those of us engaged in the field of history, preservation, commemoration and education.

Even if you just casually follow the news you will recall that over the last several months there has been a pronounced movement by some demanding the removal of a host of historic symbols, monuments and names from the public square. Vandals have defaced statues and headstones. Corporations have refused to sell certain kinds of merchandise. Gift shops have banned products. The names of some of this nation’s greatest historical figures have been deleted from events.

Now it is the birthright of every American to feel, think, write and speak about any subject anything they wish. That right was won on the battlefield, and has been preserved on battlefields throughout history by the men and women who have worn our uniform – the men and women whose story this museum exists to preserve and tell. People of good will can disagree on a whole range of topics. Often there are thoughtful, intelligent arguments to be made on both sides of any question. Democracy is a boisterous business which often appears chaotic and confusing. But, as our founding fathers well knew, it is the only system suited to a free people.

Therefore it is not any person’s or any group’s stance on a given topic that concerns me. Indeed, I am heartened to see our citizens engage in the rough and tumble of non-violent political discourse. What does concern me, however, is the seeming assault on history itself. The idea that people of previous eras must pass muster against some vaguely defined standard of acceptable beliefs, attitudes or actions created in the present, lest their memory be wiped from view, is disturbing, indeed frightening.

To demand that historical figures “measure up” to some current definition of political correctness is to imply that reminders and tributes to the entirety of 5,000 years of recorded human history must be purged from the public square. It is to say that no accomplishment or contribution, no matter how significant or great, can be remembered or honored, unless the person or group so remembered can claim a spotless record vis-à-vis a momentary version of what is considered politically acceptable. Since no human being is perfect, no one from the past can ever measure up – and 100 years from now, as the future looks back on our present, which will be its past, I dare say no one alive today will ever “measure up.”

Our history is a shared history. All Americans today are the sum total of everything our nation has been through and all who have lived in it. Symbols only have the power that you give them. The past can be used to unite, or it can be used to divide. We learn from the past by taking it on its own terms. We understand the past by trying to stand in the shoes of the people who lived at a particular time in order to see their world through their eyes. You cannot lecture the dead. You cannot rewind and erase. Condemning the past is a futile exercise because the past cannot be changed. If the standard
Usually this column showcases new or newly cataloged artifacts to the museum, and while we have many new artifacts since the last newsletter, I thought we’d change it up a bit for this one. While cataloging is the main focus of my job, research requests and questions actually take up more than 50% of my time. While most of those requests are from individuals, we do get a number of authors looking for information or photographs for books they are writing. Here is a list of books which the photo archivists – Bob and Jean Gates – and I have contributed to in the last six years.

Volunteers, docsents and interns continue to be the backbone of the museum as they work every day to welcome and educate our visitors to the history of the Texas Military Forces. We couldn’t manage without these wonderful people. Our summer interns are Jac, Jenna and Hannah. They have been a great help to Edward working on the numerous exhibit updates as well as helping out with the flood of summer tours. Jenna and Hannah will be continuing in the fall.

Be sure to visit our gift shop. We continue to add new items and the used books section is always a treasure hunt as new books are constantly being donated. We continue to take donations of documents and artifacts related to Texas Military Forces, and Texas military history. I am happy to answer any questions about the donation process or the museum’s artifacts. You may call or email me at the museum.

Most of these are available from the museum gift shop. Call (512) 782-5659 to order.

The Great Call-Up: The Guard, the Border, and the Mexican Revolution by Charles H. Harris III, Louis R. Sadler relates to the 1916 call up of the National Guard for Mexican Border service.

They Called Them Soldier Boys: A Texas Infantry Regiment in World War I by Gregory Ball, details the history of the 7th Texas Infantry Regiment, TXNG, which became the 142nd Infantry Regiment during WWI.

The Last Battle: When U.S. and German Soldiers Joined Forces in the Waning Hours of World War II in Europe by Steve Harding covers a mission to rescue French dignitaries held prisoner at Castle Itter, and features 4 soldiers from the 142nd Infantry Regiment.

Patriots from the Barrio by Dave Gutierrez tells the story of Company E, 141st Infantry Regiment from the point of view of some of the original Hispanic members.

A Death in San Pietro: The Untold Story of Ernie Pyle, John Huston, and the Fight for Purple Heart Valley by Tim Brady describes the Italian Campaign through the eyes of Ernie Pyle, and famous movie director John Huston (of the U.S. Army Signal Corps in WWII) and features many stories of the 36th Infantry Division in WWII.

Learning Under Fire: The 112th Cavalry Regiment in World War II by James S. Powell chronicles the history of the 112th Cavalry Regiment from mobilization to the Pacific and back home to Texas during WWII.

Beyond The Call: The True Story of One World War II Pilot’s Covert Mission to Rescue POWs on the Eastern Front by Lee Trimble and Jeremy Dronfield is the story of a bomber pilot sent to rescue POWs behind the lines on the Eastern Front.
The museum changes regularly, and sometimes rapidly. On more than one occasion the discussions on how to track and showcase these changes have been spirited and lively. How can we show the changes made to the space in a timely and entertaining fashion? How can we reach the distant public and spread the message that the museum and its mission are relevant and exciting at the same time?

The answer is simple, but up to now has been out of our grasp: a mobile app.

Applications can be free to the public, easily advertised with quick response codes, or within the museum itself. The way that people live inside their phones and devices, a museum app is arguably an impending necessity.

The truth is that we, the museum, did not approach Peter Feng, and the folks over at Eventus about building an app. No, Eventus was looking for partners to develop an application platform made specifically for the changing landscape of museums and places like museums.

The objective is to give the ability to institutions to curate their collections in a virtual space that can almost completely replicate their actual collections. It’s a very exciting opportunity for the museum, to collaborate in the development of software that could mean so much to the museum community, to put our two cents’ worth into the creative process before the product is set in stone is a remarkable thing.

Our part in the development of the app is to provide the raw information, the photographs, and the map for the app interface. That being said, it is quite a lot of material and information, even to do just the initial 15 photographs and 15 object labels per gallery, as requested at this point in time. Our brand new, shiny, interns have been working diligently on this tedious task for many weeks now, and we are just at the point of fulfilling the initial request for information.

When the app is fully functional, the end users should be able to interface with the museum in the following ways: Swipe sideways through the entire museum in a chronological fashion, or use a map graphic of the museum to select an individual gallery; click into an individual exhibit; click into individual objects within that exhibit and view the objects and label text.

The app will support the museum with a featured object area and pages that thank the many supporters and benefactors of the museum through the foundation.

In addition, the option to read text aloud provides accessibility to the blind (which has been one of my primary missions), and the function of language translation makes the museum accessible to visitors from non-English speaking countries.

This fantastic opportunity deserves the time and energy that we have focused into it. We look forward to seeing the beta version of the app, as created by our new partners at Eventus, and we will keep you apprised as to its progress.
**General Harry Hay's Pistol**

**DESCRIPTION**

This beautifully engraved .9mm Lefaucheux pinfire revolver was made by noted gunsmith Auguste Francotte between 1853-1860. The Lefaucheux is in its original case, with an original cartridge box and 6 pinfire cartridges. It was presented in 1861-62 to Colonel Harry Thompson Hays in command of the 7th Louisiana Volunteers. Col. Harry T. Hayes, was known as an officer who drank hard and fought harder. He took part in most of the major battles fought in the Eastern Theater during the War Between the States.

**RELATED IMAGES**

- Tank Radio
- Machine Gun
- Machine Gun Cart
- National Association
- Tank Radio
- Machine Gun
Momentum

It is often hard to describe how well an organization is doing in a single word or a just a sentence. When it comes to the Texas Military Forces Museum and the Texas Military Forces Historical Foundation, so much has taken place, and is continuing to unfold, that it is difficult to know where to start or what to focus on in a short Foundation President’s Message. What can be said with a reasonable degree of certainty is that the museum and the Foundation are healthy and both are gaining momentum.

Museum visitation numbers are increasing at an unprecedented rate. The recent “Hands-On History” event was a remarkable success. Despite the sweltering heat, there were well over 900 participants in this second year event — almost ten times the participation as compared to last year.

Acquisition of incredible artifacts is ongoing with too many to list. Exhibit expansion and infrastructure improvements are taking place at a phenomenal pace. Sponsorship support from large organizations is starting to come in, and big name national entities like Wells Fargo and USAA appear to be poised to substantially support the museum well into the foreseeable future.

It is also worth noting that at the beginning of the summer, the Foundation hired Brooke Adams on a part-time basis to help address Foundation administrative needs as well as to manage a wide range of special projects to include a membership drive. Her prior experience at the museum, along with her formal education and training in museum science, make Brooke an invaluable asset. To enhance her ability to get the job done, the Foundation has invested in a number of technology upgrades for an improved membership database and more refinements in membership recruiting and retention.

Brooke is enthusiastically engaged in updating membership information and increasing membership while still managing to juggle a multitude of other administrative matters. Working closely with Richard Gruetzner, Foundation Vice President and Membership Chair, Brooke is implementing a number of strategies to improve membership numbers and overall involvement. You may have seen the recently created portable membership recruitment booth which serves to not only recruit members, but to also be a visible reminder about the museum and what it holds.

With a similar degree of zeal, the Fundraising Task Force has been particularly active under the leadership of Board member Kathy Smelker. Plans are well underway to add a Texas Independence Day Barbecue to the list of Foundation and museum events held each year. The Mason sponsored t-shirt in support of the museum has been particularly popular, and future editions of the shirt are expected to sell well.

Plans are also in the works to renovate the museum gift shop and revitalize gift shop operations. A modern point of service (POS) payment system is being put into place to not only make gift shop transactions easier, but to also more efficiently process contributions and membership dues. With its portable functionality, it will also make transactions at off-site events considerably easier.

In short, the museum and the Foundation are currently enjoying the type of momentum and positive energy that have been sought after for years. Plans are coming together and starting to yield measurable results. Although we still have a long way to go, the dice are rolling and the future looks promising. While we could still use a patron saint and more donors to elevate our financial bottom line, things are indeed looking up.

We are also always in need of volunteers and contributors to make great ideas a reality. Now is an ideal time to get involved with the museum or the Foundation. We hope you will treat yourself with a visit to the museum, and that you will honor the Texas military by becoming a member of the Foundation, renewing your membership, upgrading to Life Membership, or making a donation. It is with your help that we have momentum, and it is with your help that our momentum will continue to grow.
On Saturday evening, July 25, the museum hosted its second annual Hands-On History night. By every measure the event was an enormous success. More than 900 visitors attended and that’s just counting tickets sold — guests six years old and under were admitted free, so overall attendance was in excess of 1,000. Since this is one of the rare occasions an admission fee is charged for a museum event ($5 per person), we brought in $4,405 to the museum foundation coffers. This compares to last year’s initial Hands-On History “test run” which was attended by 100 folks and produced zero profit.

Like last year, the event allowed guests to pick up and hold a wide variety of historic weapons under the guidance of our expert living history volunteers, who shared their knowledge of arms, uniforms and equipment through every time period from the Texas Revolution to the War on Terror. But this year we also opened up vehicles for guests to climb in and look around, including jeeps, armored personal carriers, halftracks, helicopters and tanks (both our Sherman and Hetzer).

Because of these additional attractions, we expected more visitors, but we were truly surprised to find people lined up all the way down the front of the building when we opened the doors a few minutes before 6 p.m.

The lines remained that long for the first hour and a half, despite sending staff and volunteers to sell tickets outside. The number of attendees was truly gratifying and exciting. This was especially the case since we did no real advertising for the event beyond social media, word of mouth, our digital sign on MoPac and having handouts available in the museum for five months prior to the event in addition to our docents promoting it to school tours and daily visitors. Clearly we were offering something the public wants!

Even though it was very hot inside the museum’s Great Hall (almost 1,000 bodies will drive the temperature up in any space) and our air conditioning was on the blink (which made things worse), the vast crowd thoroughly enjoyed themselves. Everywhere you looked you saw fascinated children, engaged adults, enthusiastic teens and pleased parents. People waited patiently and politely in line for up to an hour to be able to climb inside one of the tanks, and not a word of complaint was uttered. Some visitors told us this was the best five dollars they’d ever spent.

Providing this fun, unique and educational experience to our guests would have been impossible without the tireless efforts of the museum’s staff, interns and living history volunteers — of whom some 45 participated. The staff and interns were tireless in selling tickets and water, orienting guests, capturing pictures, answering questions, manning the gift shop, taking care of the restrooms and carrying water to our reenactors.

As for those remarkable living historians, they went non-stop (and I mean that literally) for more than three hours without even a bathroom break, as a seemingly endless stream of people paraded in front of them to touch, hold and learn. The depth of expertise these wonderful volunteers displayed was truly remarkable, as was their endless good cheer and enthusiasm. They were the critical component who made the evening such a success.

As always we learned lessons from this event that we will apply to the next one ... and you can certainly count on hosting another Hands-On History next summer!
for decrying, defaming and attacking the symbols of the past is that some of the present wish to make them political objects to advance modern political agendas, then where does that stop? Those who wish to ban one thing may soon find that something they treasure, some benign piece of the past they have lived with their entire lives, is suddenly offensive to someone and must be driven from the public square — a flag, a cross, a monument, a plaque, a name. How long before it is a book or an idea?

Those who wish to be offended will always find something to be offended by. Those who wish to divide will always attempt to divide. Those who wish to do evil will always find a way to do evil. The symbols and relics of the past are not the cause of those things. Rather they are reminders of what was, who we once were and how we have evolved and grown and are (hopefully, though not always) better.

As America is a melting pot of peoples from around the world, so too is its history. We take from every culture, every new wave of immigrants, that which is best or most useful and leave that which is not to history. Once, the worst thing you could be in America was Irish. Today, every March, the whole nation celebrates the Irish contribution to America. So too should it be with the past. We extract from it lessons which we should use to guide our present and build our future. We take from the past what is helpful or useful and mold it into who we are. We seek to understand that from the past which we no longer wish to embrace or can use. It is part of understanding how we have come to be who we are, but it is not who we are.

The men who fought for the South in the War Between the States (90,000 of them Texans) made contributions to America before and after the war. Some fought for the U.S. in subsequent wars. They fought with all their might and valor to defend their homes and their beliefs. They fought with chivalry, as did their foes. The crucible of war gave the men of North and South a commonality that they did not have before the war... a shared experience, a shared honor, a shared sacrifice. When the military verdict was rendered, the men of the South laid down their arms, accepted their defeat, obeyed the laws and helped rebuild the country together with the men who had worn Blue. They did not, as so often happens after Civil War, engage in guerrilla war or perpetual blood feud against the victors. If they had, Americans might still be killing Americans today.

Rather those two bodies of soldiers embraced each other as brothers in arms and moved on to make a better, though far from perfect, world. Perhaps we should follow their example and allow that pride in service, sacrifice, valor and military skill is due to each, and it is the right of each to honor and remember and commemorate those qualities and hold them up as virtues to emulate today. As a reenactor for more than 30 years, I have worn Blue and I have worn Gray and I share an equal AMERICAN pride in both flags and both uniforms. After all, as a WWI era magazine cover put it — showing an aged Confederate Veteran shaking hands with an aged Union Veteran, both embraced by a smiling Doughboy: Blue plus Gray = Khaki.
Are you a member?

You may already support the museum and its events, or champion causes supporting and honoring our veterans ... or maybe you proudly wore our nation’s uniform.

There's another way you can share your patriotism and help tell the story of the Texas Military Forces.

Become a member of the Texas Military Forces Historical Foundation. Memberships start at just $25. Join today.

www.texasmilitaryforcesmuseum.org

Upcoming Events

November 7-8: Close Assault 1944 living history program
February 13: Valentines Dinner Dance
March 5: Texas Independence Day Celebration
March 12-13: Guns of 1863 living history program
April 16-17: Texas Military Forces Open House/Muster Day
May 28-29: Close Assault 1944 living history program