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The Army's Grunts Get Their Due

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By MARK YOST

Columbus, Ga.

World War II cartoonist Bill Mauldin once said, "I'm convinced that the infantry is the group in the Army which gives more and gets less than anybody else." The infantryman has finally been given the recognition he deserves with the opening of the National Infantry Museum, situated just outside the gates of Fort Benning, "Home of the Infantry."



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Associated Press

The National Infantry Museum at its dedication.

Visitors first encounter "The Last 100 Yards," a series of dioramas on the infantry's role in taking the last part of any battlefield. The scenes depict great moments in infantry history, such as the Oct. 14, 1781, capture of redoubt No. 10 at Yorktown, Va. American infantrymen, some from Lt. Col. Alexander Hamilton's unit, advanced, bayonets fixed but rifles unloaded "so as to ensure a stealthy attack." Other displays recreate heroic actions at Antietam, Soissons, Omaha Beach, the Ia Drang Valley and in Iraq.

Up next is the Fort Benning Gallery, an overview of modern infantry training—including marksmanship, first aid and communications, as well as advanced infantry specialties such as Ranger school, sniper training and the Pathfinders. Despite the technological advances of modern warfare, the primary goal of the infantry remains the same: "to get within close proximity of the enemy to kill them, destroy their equipment and demolish their will to resist."

These first displays are just a prelude to the primary exhibit space, comprising six galleries organized by historical period. Two, "Securing Our Freedom: 1607-1815" and "Manifest Destiny and the Civil War: 1815-1898," were not yet open. So my visit began with "Entering the International Stage: 1898-1920," which starts with a good overview of the Spanish-American War and the yellow journalism that fueled nationwide outrage over the sinking of the Maine (something we now know was probably an accident). While the Army grew by 1,000% in preparation for war, many of the soldiers were not well trained in even the most basic skills, including field hygiene. As a result, many died of preventable diseases such as dysentery.

Also on display are the weapons of that day: the .45-caliber, black-powder Springfield rifle used by U.S. troops against the vastly superior German-made 7mm Mausers of the Spanish. Shown, too, are Chinese wooden arrows with steel tips that were often hurled at soldiers on

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"China duty" in the early 20th century, as well as a recreated trench from World War I, complete with sound effects.

If the Army learned anything in World War I, it was that the infantryman needed more training. "A World Power: 1920-1947" opens with an overview of the new regimen advocated by such future luminaries as Dwight Eisenhower, Omar Bradley and Mark Clark. For instance, the infantry squad was expanded to 12 men from eight to increase its firepower, and infantry officers were taught to think on their feet rather than rely on rote doctrine. The goal was to abandon the senseless massed attacks of World War I and adopt a more fluid "fire and maneuver" strategy that remains the core of infantry tactics today.

Much of this is familiar territory, but what personalizes the exhibits here are the helmets, uniforms, weapons, decorations and personal stories of individual infantrymen. Like the Silver and Bronze Stars of Sgt. Roland Henry Vogt of Appleton, Wis., who fought in the First Infantry Division in World War II. Or the dented silver flask of Lt. Horace Cofer of the 507th Parachute Infantry Regiment. The flask was in his breast pocket on D-Day when he was struck by artillery shrapnel; it probably saved his life. And then there's Lt. Audie Murphy, the most-decorated soldier of World War II. On display are his service cap and ribbons, including his Medal of Honor, French Legion of Merit, and Distinguished Service Cross.

"The Cold War: 1947-1989" highlights key infantry battles in Korea, Vietnam, Grenada and Panama through the personal stories of such infantrymen as Sgt. William M. Tillman. In 1950, he was one of the few men in the Army who knew how to use the new 3.5-inch rocket launcher. When the North Koreans came pouring over the border, he was flown to the Korean peninsula and ended up training some 1,800 soldiers in its use.

The last, perhaps most valuable gallery is "The Sole Superpower: 1989-present," which takes a fairly objective, apolitical look at all we've done in a period when many have criticized our increasingly influential role on the world stage. Using wall-size interactive maps and after-action analysis, this gallery celebrates the strategic brilliance of Norman Schwarzkopf's 1991 feint against Saddam Hussein's highly overrated Republican Guard; our oft-forgotten humanitarian mission to Bosnia to protect a Muslim minority population; and, more recently, the largely untold valor and tactical victories of infantrymen in towns and neighborhoods across Iraq and Afghanistan.

This last point is the most important. While we haven't repeated the mistakes of Vietnam by demonizing the troops, we haven't celebrated their accomplishments in the War on Terror, either. This museum does just that. It celebrates, without fanfare or political overtones, the accomplishments of the "grunts," the "ground pounders," the ordinary soldiers who so often go unheralded while doing the day-to-day dirty work of combat and peacekeeping. For that alone, this museum is well worth a visit, and a fitting tribute on this Veterans Day.

—Mr. Yost is a writer in Chicago.

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