

Unit History: A Two-Edged Sword

By Dr. Larry Roberts

Quite often, young officers have walked into the History Office at the Engineer Center with the mission of writing a history of their unit. Usually, the task was given to them by a battalion commander, who wanted something for new soldiers to read. The obvious purpose of such a document is to instill a sense of pride in the unit, fostering unit morale and esprit. This is the traditional view of unit history. It is the reason units are allowed to maintain an organizational history file within the Modern Army Recordkeeping System (MARKS). However, that file, and unit history in general, can actually serve the unit commander in two ways. It can enhance unit morale/esprit and provide information for command decision making. This is possible only if there is command emphasis.

Few of those young officers who entered my office knew of a unit history file. Once informed of its possible existence, they went to it and often found little of value to their task. Unit history files run the gamut from little or nothing, save last year's annual history report, to a collection of random newspaper clippings, change of command brochures, and pictures of changes of command and organizational day activities.

While these items have merit, they do not completely document the unit's accomplishments in war or peace. Invariably, those officers returned to my office in search of more information. They ultimately learned that gathering material on their units is a slow process that involves working with a number of federal organizations. However, with patience and determination, they can get what they need.

Before contacting federal organizations for information, the unit historian should examine the unit's Lineage and Honors (see page 39), often found in the commander's office. This will save a lot of time. The Lineage and Honors details the unit's federal service and identifies the various campaigns for which the organization has service credit. By knowing the periods of federal service, the action officer can disregard those conflicts during which the unit was inactive. The Lineage and Honors will also identify parent organizations. Their files and histories are logically a part of the heritage of the unit and should be examined as well. The campaign credits will tell the researcher where the unit served. Campaign credits for the Pacific in World War II mean that the officer can ignore the European theater when doing work in published historical works. After reviewing the Lineage and Honors, the action officer can begin contacting other organizations for additional information.

There are a number of sources of unit history. The National Archives contains unit files for hundreds of organizations, especially for the years of World War I, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. The major liability of the Archives is the cost charged to reproduce those files. If a unit chooses to purchase complete files, it normally finds copies of material, such as unit orders and correspondence, which have little merit for a written history. However, scanning the files to sort out the unwanted material requires a trip to the Archives, something few units can afford. One of the best approaches is to contact friends or associates in the Washington area and ask them to spend a couple of hours in the Archives.

Other information can be found in written histories, such as the official history of World War II, published by the Center of Military History, or books written by participants. Some material can be found in publications such as

DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY

Lineage and Honors

589th ENGINEER BATTALION

Constituted 1 July 1940 in the Regular Army as the 31st Engineer Company and activated at Fort Belvoir, Virginia

Reorganized and redesignated 15 December 1941 as the 31st Engineer Battalion

Reorganized and redesignated 29 April 1942 as the 31st Engineers

Redesignated 1 August 1942 as the 31st Engineer Combat Regiment

Regiment broken up 22 March 1943 and its elements reorganized and redesignated as follows:

2d Battalion as the 241st Engineer Combat Battalion

(Headquarters and Headquarters and Service Company as Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1114th Engineer Combat Group; 1st Battalion as the 31st Engineer Combat Battalion - hereafter separate lineages)

241st Engineer Combat Battalion inactivated 31 January 1946 in Japan

Redesignated 30 January 1947 as the 589th Engineer Combat Battalion

Redesignated 10 January 1966 as the 589th Engineer Battalion

Activated 21 January 1966 at Fort Hood, Texas

Inactivated 1 November 1971 at Fort Lewis, Washington

Headquarters transferred 30 September 1986 to the United States Army Training and Doctrine Command and organized at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri

CAMPAIGN PARTICIPATION CREDIT

World War II
Asiatic-Pacific Theater, Streamer without inscription

Vietnam
Counteroffensive, Phase II
Counteroffensive, Phase III
Tet Counteroffensive
Counteroffensive, Phase IV
Counteroffensive, Phase V
Counteroffensive, Phase VI
Tet 69/Counteroffensive
Summer-Fall 1969
Winter-Spring 1970
Sanctuary Counteroffensive
Counteroffensive, Phase VII
Consolidation I

DECORATIONS

Meritorious Unit Commendation (Army), Streamer embroidered VIETNAM 1967

BY ORDER OF THE SECRETARY OF THE ARMY:

WILLIAM A. STOFFT
Brigadier General, USA
Chief of Military History



Unit crest of the 589th Engineer Battalion.

Stars and Stripes and *Yank* magazines. Command newsletters, such as the *Castle Courier*, the newsletter of the Engineer Command in Vietnam, are excellent sources for those units who served in Southeast Asia. Often, the Military History Institute at Carlisle Barracks is the best single source for much of this type of publication. The *Military Engineer* and *Engineer* magazines have traditionally published articles on unit activities. The Defense Technical Information Center (DTIC) has some of the quarterly reports (lessons learned) written by engineer units in Vietnam. Many Army libraries have access to DTIC and can order these reports.

The History Office, Office of the Chief of Engineers, at Alexandria, Virginia has an extensive unit history collection. A master index for each unit identifies what type of material is present, including oral interviews with senior engineer officers. In addition, a call or note to the Organizational History Branch, Center of Military History, Washington, D.C., can produce information on the unit's history and the symbology of the organization's crest (Distinctive Unit Insignia- DUI).

While the Engineer Center at Fort Leonard Wood has been slowly collecting unit material, there is much we do not have. A call or note would determine what is available. Again, with patience and determination, a young action officer can collect enough material to write a unit's history that is useful in telling the new soldier a story of challenges and accomplishments.

That story normally deals with operations in war. This is because most of the information found in the Archives, Carlisle Barracks, and other places deals with units in war. While that is important, combat constitutes only a small part of any unit's overall history. A greater amount of time is spent in peacetime and involves the countless challenges and requirements of an Army not at war.

Ironically, the unit's efforts in peacetime, in such areas as training, can provide the second important benefit of unit history and the organizational history file, support for decision making. A unit



Photo from the Brady Collection of Civil War photographs.

This historical photo of the 8th New York State Militia is an example of recording unit history.



This photograph, taken by CPT Dunham of the 43rd Engineer Battalion, Fort Benning, Georgia shows humor in recording his unit's history.

commander faces numerous challenges over the course of his or her command. Requirements for maintenance, training, post support, and family support compete for attention and resources. This is not new. Peacetime is traditionally the most demanding period for an army because resources are scarce and requirements are not. The knowledge of how one's predecessors handled these conflicting demands would benefit any commander.

For example, if after-action reports from unit field training exercises, to include the National Training Center, were maintained over time, the current command could identify areas of consistent strength or weakness. When coupled with completion reports of construction projects, post support detail summaries, etc., a new commander would know quickly what challenges he or she might expect. Copies of annual organizational inspections, especially in the areas of maintenance, would reveal the impact of these demands on the readiness of equipment, unit morale, and soldier support.

Many of these reports are found in other files in the headquarters, such as the S3 and S4 files. However, these items normally have a comparatively short file life. Regulatory requirements to retire certain files after a cutoff date and the simple need for file space normally account for the demise of historically-significant documents. By contrast, the Organizational History File, 870-5s, is a permanent file. Regardless of who maintains the file, it exists as long as the unit does. Therefore, material placed in that file will always be available to the commander or his/her staff.

Some may consider it strange to put a command inspection report or a field exercise after-action report in a "history" file. That is because too many believe that history is what happened 20 or 30 years ago. In fact, yesterday is history; it has happened and cannot be changed. The material placed in the historical file today becomes the historical material for all who will serve in the unit. Invariably, the value of that file is driven by the quality of material placed in it.

One of the most important items which could be placed in the file is a commander's review and assessment of activities. Virtually every unit is required to produce some form of annual historical report. Often, these documents are of marginal value being only copies of last year's input with the names, statistics, and dates changed. However, this report could be valuable if seen in the context of what was done, why, how, and the lessons learned from the effort. An annual, or even more frequent, summary of what the unit did, what initiatives were taken, what worked/what did not would be extremely useful to future unit leaders.

In times past, end-of-tour reports were common for many unit commanders and key personnel. Today, we tend to limit that type of report to general officers. However, there is no reason why key officers and NCOs in a command should not write such a report. It would not only be valuable in the unit history effort, but would also be useful in providing perspectives and insights gained during service with the unit.

History is valuable to the profession of arms. Many famous leaders have attested to the value of applying the lessons of the past to the challenges of the present. The knowledge and appreciation of a unit's accomplishments are important in building and sustaining esprit. Soldiers are challenged to maintain the traditions and standards of those who came before them. However, the raw materials of a unit history, the reports and papers that document what happened and why, can also be used to help current leaders guide their soldiers through the demands of today. Maintaining a viable file will also serve those who will follow.

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