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Military History

THE NEWSLETTER FOR THE AASLH MILITARY HISTORY AFFINITY GROUP

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AASLH Military History Affinity Group

War Stories

by Jackie Davis, Museum Specialist, Ft. Sam Houston Museum, Ft. Sam Houston, TX

Most Americans these days have little experience with the military, but the military—past and present—is still a significant part of our history. From those of us who deal with the military daily, here is some advice to the non-military museum that finds itself collecting militaria. (And since I deal with the Army, I will use “soldier” to represent all military personnel.)

All the services are enormous, complex and constantly-changing organizations. Although there are overall experiences that military folk have in common, each person’s experience is affected by which service he belonged to, his particular job, where he served, when he served, how long ago he served and his own personal attitude. So:

1. Soldiers don’t know everything about everything—although some think they do—and they all have opinions. For example, just because WWII soldiers in the Pacific did not wear Ike jackets, did not mean that soldiers in other areas weren’t authorized them, as one WWII vet insisted.
2. Soldiers have been known to—shall we say “embellish”—their experiences. An old military joke: What’s the difference between a fairy tale and a war story? A fairy tale begins, “Once upon a time...” A war story begins, “Now listen. This is no s***!” Embellishing one’s military exploits has been around since at least Baron von Munchausen. Embellishment doesn’t just involve spectacular events; even ordinary details have been known to be embellished.

Welcome to the first issue of the Military History Affinity Group Newsletter. Articles are supplied by members of the AASLH Military History Affinity Group Advisory Committee. Please feel free to forward this e-mail to colleagues.

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3. Conversely, all the services have a myriad of regulations governing their service members, and what regulations say and what soldiers actually do are not necessarily the same thing. So, it is possible for a soldier's story to not agree with "regulations" and still be true.

4. Being related to a soldier does not automatically make a family member knowledgeable in the soldier's career and experiences. First, family members only know what their soldier has told them—and soldiers are notorious for not talking about their experiences. Second, the attitude of family members toward the military and other service members may be diametrically opposite their soldier's, which can affect what they report to you.

Our advice? Of course, record the information that is reported to you, as it is reported. But as with any testimony, do your best to verify it. Virtually all the military's current regulations are available online and an amazing number of obsolete ones are, too. Since wading through these is akin to learning an archaic form of English, we on the Military History Affinity Group can help "translate" and help point you in the right direction.

Just remember the above, as most of us were military members, too!

Things That Glow in the Dark

by Jackie Davis, Museum Specialist, Ft. Sam Houston Museum, Ft. Sam Houston, TX

The [U.S. Army Center of Military History](http://www.usarmymuseum.com) has notified its component museums that they now have a mandatory requirement to identify (with all sorts of administrative whistles and bells) all of their holdings that contain radium* (identified as RA-226). As the Center says, "... the chief conductor on this train ride is the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, and since they have the power to impose some eye-popping fines for noncompliance, we're going to let them ring the bell and toot the horn."

We offer this as a head's-up to our compatriots who do not belong to CMH: Be prepared, such a requirement may be coming through different safety regulatory bodies to you, also.

The associated article in the Aug/Sept/Oct 2010 issue of the "Army Museum Memo" offers illustrations and some fairly technical information of some examples of military equipment that contain radium. Probably the most common and recent are the military lensatic compass and the tritium sight for the M-16 rifle. Other examples personnel markers and a "Radium Outfit Touch-up Kit" from the 1950s. (And the one I found amazing, "Radium Nutex", not otherwise identified. Looking on the Internet, I discovered these were radium-treated condoms!)

Right now, the goal is only to identify radioactive materials in the Army's holdings. Expect lots of discussion on what should be done with the items.

If you would like a copy of this article, email jackie.davis@us.army.mil.

*Quick review on radium. Its most stable isotope, is RA-226, which has a half-life of 1601 years and decays into radon gas. It was used as late as the 1960s in luminous dials on various types of equipment and vehicles, and apparently, by the military, later than that. Radium paint was first replaced with promethium paint, and later by tritium "bottles" which are still in use. Tritium is potentially dangerous if ingested.

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