



By James “Beau” Wasson

“This is the story of three years in the lives of thirty-eight American soldiers. Typically, they are descendants of nine nationalities, from all sections of America, helping to defend their liberty, families, and the rights of free men everywhere. Entrusted with the reproduction of top military secrets involving the lives of thousands of men and the success of the invasion prior to D-day, they were charged with operating, maintaining, and moving \$1,000,000 worth of equipment, and its destruction if threatened with capture. . . .

Largely over age, rich in civilian experience, they fought with their skills twenty-hours out of twenty-four, in two shifts, bore arms and performed their full share of other Army details. . . . They make no pretense of being heroes and fortunately wear no Purple Hearts. This is merely a record of their travels and their contribution to wrecking the Festung Europa and driving the Nazi Wehrmacht and Luftwaffe to a final battlefield surrender.”

An anonymous Soldier penned these words about the Reproduction Platoon, 902d Engineer

Air Force Headquarters Company in 1945. They appeared in a unit scrapbook titled *902 in the ETO*. This scrapbook, along with hundreds of pages of unit reports, articles, newspapers, and pictures, provide numerous stories from the 902d Engineer Construction Company's history. More than simple stories, these tales form a narrative that shapes the culture of the organization today.

A deliberate unit history program is an oft-overlooked, yet critical, aspect of building a great culture. According to [Joe Byerly](#), identity is a crucial component of creating a "sticky" story that influences culture. Referencing [Seth Godin's work](#), Byerly observes that you will know your story is positively influencing the culture when members start asking, "Do people like us do things like this?" A history program helps define "us", the things we do and provides weight to unit actions. To be effective, leaders must deliberately develop a history program.

The heavy lifting of defining "us" falls on your organization's [vision](#). A history program should both inform and support the development of your vision. A good history program accomplishes this through two distinct phases: discovery and publication.

Discovery. A useful history program goes far beyond the unit's lineage. Your historian's mission should be to discover the stories and rich detail that brings the past alive. Contacting branch historians, military libraries, the Center of Military History, the Institute of Heraldry, and veterans will provide you with a plethora of primary source material.

Primary sources will assist in answering key questions: How did my organization view itself at different times? What are the enduring characteristics of the organization? Did any members of the organization live these characteristics through their actions?

Identify stories that can feed and support your unit's vision. These stories will become the central narrative of your unit's history. You don't need outlandish feats of heroism to connect your history to your vision (though it doesn't hurt). If your vision includes discipline or technical competence, find stories that highlight these attributes. As you move into the publishing phase, you will frame these stories to support your vision.

Publication. While many units have a repository of historical documents and a historical summary, few units put their history to work. History should permeate your unit. The unit's history should reinforce and build the "us" by interacting with Soldiers daily.

Building exposure requires the creation and display of artifacts. Artifacts are stories, facts, pictures, or physical objects that serve to remind viewers of their culture. Artifacts enable Soldiers to identify with the group (by seeing themselves in their forebears), frame their

actions (we have done things like this before), and ultimately align their behavior (“People like us do things like this”). To be effective, Soldiers must have exposure to artifacts.

Deliberately place artifacts for maximum exposure. Place pictures with a short description in the barracks. Publish “On this day in the unit’s history” post on social media. Hold an organizational day on the anniversary of the unit’s founding. Include unit history when giving safety briefs. Incorporate unit history into Soldier/NCO of the month boards.

In addition to highlighting artifacts from the unit’s past, the unit’s history should evolve with new successes. Integrating recent events into the historical narrative allows Soldiers to be part of the living history of the organization. This allows Soldiers to identify more easily with their forebears and adds weight and significance to their actions.

The stories you choose to highlight should support your vision. Consider aligning artifacts with your vision. If initiative is a key component of your vision, placing photos and stories that demonstrate initiative together can send a powerful message.

Culture is important and difficult to cultivate. Create a culture that supports your vision by leveraging history. Looking to the past may be the key to unlocking the future of your organization.

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