

# Utilizing Army Historians in the Operational Force

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Today's U.S. Army possesses a decentralized network of historians who constitute various elements of the Army Historical Program. Army historians excel at interpreting, disseminating, and teaching military history. However, the Army as a whole has not effectively integrated historians into the operational force. Most commanders and staff officers remain woefully ignorant regarding the operational role of historians. The skills and knowledge of historians can bring a wealth of capability to the operational force. Commanders and staff need to begin leveraging their expertise as part of everyday operations.

## The Current Status

Historians in the operational force are categorized into three functional roles: unit historical officers (UHOs), members of military history detachments (MHDs), and command historians. UHOs are officers or noncommissioned officers, appointed at the brigade and battalion level to conduct the duties of a command historian, albeit with a more limited scope (see figure 1, page 68).<sup>1</sup> UHOs are typically overlooked, but they are the foundation upon which the Army field history program is built. Command historians rely on UHOs at the brigade and battalion levels to help accomplish their doctrinal responsibilities. Well-trained UHOs provide great benefits to their commanders and are also able to expand the reach and influence of both MHDs and command historians.

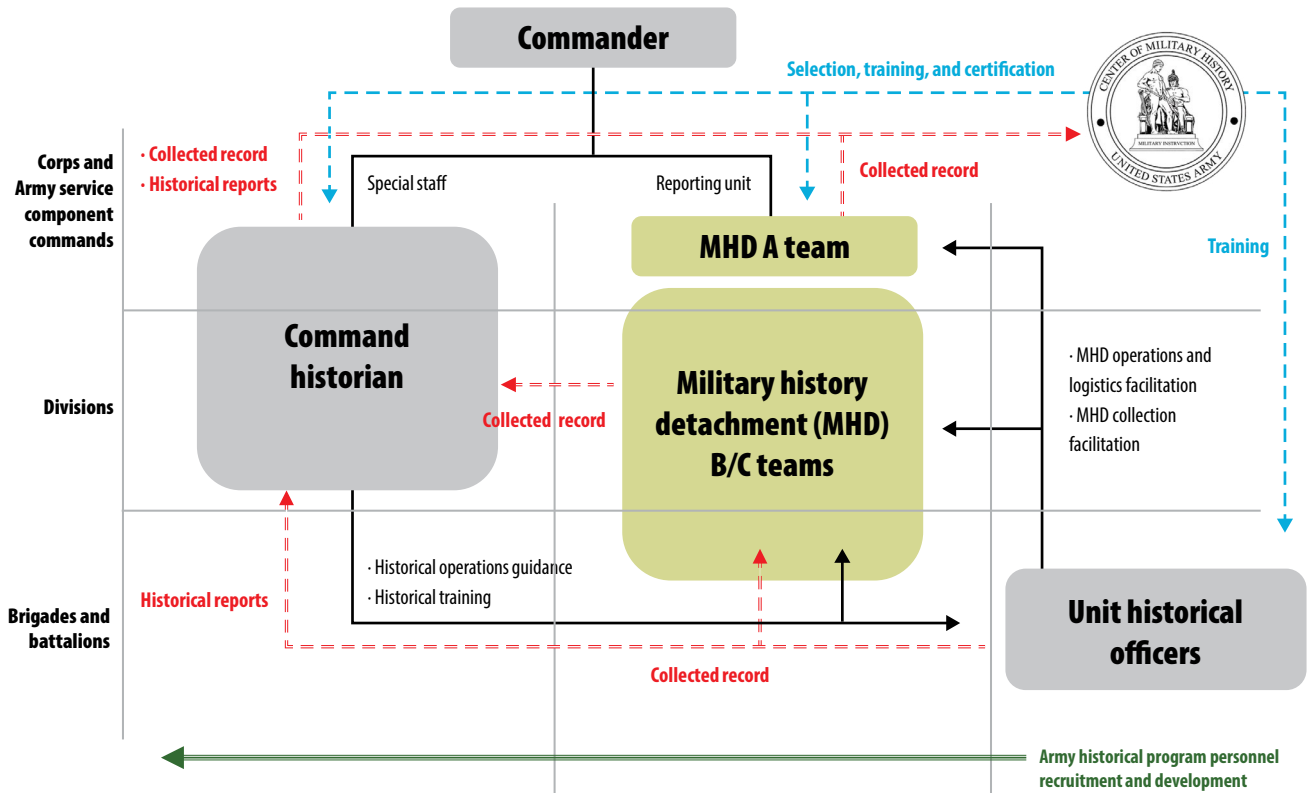
While designated as military historians, officers assigned to MHDs are more accurately defined as collection assets. They are tasked with preserving the

Army's history through the collection of operational documents, oral histories, photos, and historical artifacts. Their collection efforts provide the basis for the Army's official histories, archives, and artifact collection. MHDs are spread across all three components, with the preponderance located in the U.S. Army Reserve and the remainder in the National Guard, save for two MHDs assigned to the active component. The division of MHDs among three different components, combined with underresourcing, misuse, and a general lack of understanding of how MHDs are employed has limited their successful employment.

Command historians are doctrinally found on all staffs at the division level and above. During the course of the last seventeen years, in an effort to build more robust staffs capable of working in complex counterinsurgency environments, the Army's operational units have removed historian billets in exchange for more traditional capabilities. This is because command historians were generally viewed as not providing operational relevance to their commanders.<sup>2</sup> This sad fact has led to the Army's historians becoming largely separated from the operational force as they are relegated to three- and four-star Army commands, and several unique bastions such as the U.S. Army Center of Military History, the U.S.

**Next page:** Lt. Col. John Boyd (*left*), Capt. Lora Neal, and two other historians visited the 42nd Infantry Division troops in north-central Iraq in 2005 to help document the war. (Photo by Kevin Dougherty / ©2015 *Stars and Stripes*, All Rights Reserved)





(Figure by author)

**Figure 1. Command Historians, Military History Detachments, and Unit Historical Officers Interact in a Complex and Mutually Supporting Manner**

Military Academy, the Command and General Staff College, and the Army War College.

Seven of the fourteen historian slots at the division and corps level in the active component are currently filled. There has been progress in alleviating this situation through the hiring of term-limited historians at the Army’s three corps headquarters. As seen in figure 2 (on page 69), only one of the Army’s eleven divisions has a permanent civilian historian assigned as of this writing.<sup>3</sup> Several others have assigned Unit Historical Officers as additional duty assignments.

With this lack of capability, Army historians have focused on their core tasks—preserving, interpreting, disseminating, and teaching history—to the detriment of their role as contributing members of operational staffs. Typical tasks performed by historians in operational units include staff rides, leader professional development sessions, and writing command history reports.

What is not commonly seen is a historian who applies history and the related professional skill sets as an integrated member of the staff to enhance the operational effectiveness of the unit. This is not limited to just the Army; the historical field in general has trended away from applying its expertise in a utilitarian matter and has instead concentrated on producing academic history.<sup>4</sup> The Army’s current practice of not integrating historians into the Army’s operational processes does the Army a disservice. This needs to change. Historians have unique capabilities and knowledge that can increase the Army’s ability to fight and win our nation’s wars.

### Why Historians?















To best explore the unique capabilities of historians, a preliminary analysis of their qualifications is warranted. Army Regulation (AR) 870-5, *Military History: Responsibilities, Policies, and Procedures*, defines a historian as “an individual, either military or civilian, who has

received specialized academic training and occupies a military history position.<sup>5</sup> Specialized academic training is the key qualifier for a historian. To obtain additional skill identifier 5X, a historian must have eighteen credit hours in history, military history, or a related field.

professional military education system, the training found in a graduate-level history program equips historians with advanced expertise in these skill sets.

However, the key attribute provided by historians is their status as subject-matter experts in a topic relevant to the commander. Whether it is the history of intelligence operations, the military capabilities of China, counterinsurgency tactics in contemporary conflict, or a myriad other possible topics, advanced schooling in specific historical fields combined with the research requirements of graduate programs equip Army historians with a level of knowledge that goes far beyond the superficial familiarity typically found on an Army staff. This knowledge base is greatly needed in the operational force, where Army staff officers are characteristically in an operational billet for a period of twelve to twenty-four months and lack the time to become experts in a specific area relevant to the mission. A 2017 report by the Bipartisan Policy Center identified expanding cultural knowledge as a critical personnel system reform needed to meet the military's future missions in an increasingly complex world.<sup>7</sup>

During the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), U.S. soldiers' poor understanding of the local religious, political, and social structures hindered American operations, especially in the early years.<sup>8</sup> A 2014 study conducted by Christopher Tebo, in which soldiers were surveyed about the topics and effectiveness of their predeployment training, found that only 6.3 percent of soldiers received instruction in the history of the nation to which they were deployed.<sup>9</sup> Soldiers and leaders could not have hoped to navigate the complex operating environments in Afghanistan and Iraq with such a poor understanding of their areas of operation. In many cases, a lack of understanding ended up creating the insurgents that U.S. soldiers fought on a daily basis.<sup>10</sup> This lack of historical and cultural understanding at the tactical level has strategic implications for lengthening the

	1st Armored Division	
	1st Cavalry Division	
	1st Infantry Division <sup>1</sup>	
	2nd Infantry Division <sup>1</sup>	
	3rd Infantry Division	
	4th Infantry Division <sup>1</sup>	
	7th Infantry Division	
	10th Mountain Division (Light Infantry) <sup>1</sup>	
	25th Infantry Division	
	82nd Airborne Division	
	101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) <sup>1</sup>	
	I Corps	
	III Corps <sup>2</sup>	
	XVIII Airborne Corps	
Permanent trained historian	Assigned historian	No historian
1—Have a unit historical officer assigned as an additional duty 2—Civilian historian assigned in a temporary term limited position		

(Figure by author)

## Figure 2. Current Manning of Army Historians in the Operational Force

Civilian historians hired by the Army have advanced degrees in history or related topics.

A 2017 survey of recent graduates with bachelor of arts degrees in history found that the academic skills they most used were research, writing, critical thinking, analysis, communication, and ability to consider complex contextual interactions from different points of view.<sup>6</sup> While the Army trains some of these skills through the

conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, which have often been described as wars won or lost based on the decisions of our most junior leaders.

The lack of understanding goes beyond the tactical level. It can be found at the highest echelons of the Army. A 2005 study by RAND Corporation about postwar planning for the war in Iraq stated that as “wars do not end when major conflict ends.” Gen. Tommy Franks, who was responsible for planning the invasion, lacked a “holistic view” informed by previous historical examples in Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Bosnia.<sup>11</sup> Historians would have been able to provide such context.

What would happen if Army units had historians as organic assets and staff members? Succinctly, the unit would now have someone who was an expert on the history, society, and culture of the projected area of operations; would understand the various ethnic, political, economic, religious, and sectarian issues that would shape the coming operation; and would also understand the tactics, equipment, and philosophy of warfare. Such detailed subject-matter expertise and advanced training in analysis and synthesis would be invaluable to commanders and

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their staffs during training, planning, and ongoing operations.

Furthermore, combining the skills of professionally trained historians with specific subject-matter expertise creates professionals who are experts in causation. Historians’ ability to analyze historical precedents in which they are the experts and distill complex problems to the root cause makes them a valuable asset for the operational force.<sup>12</sup>

An Army unit with a historian who is an expert in an operationally relevant area would be uniquely equipped to provide meaningful

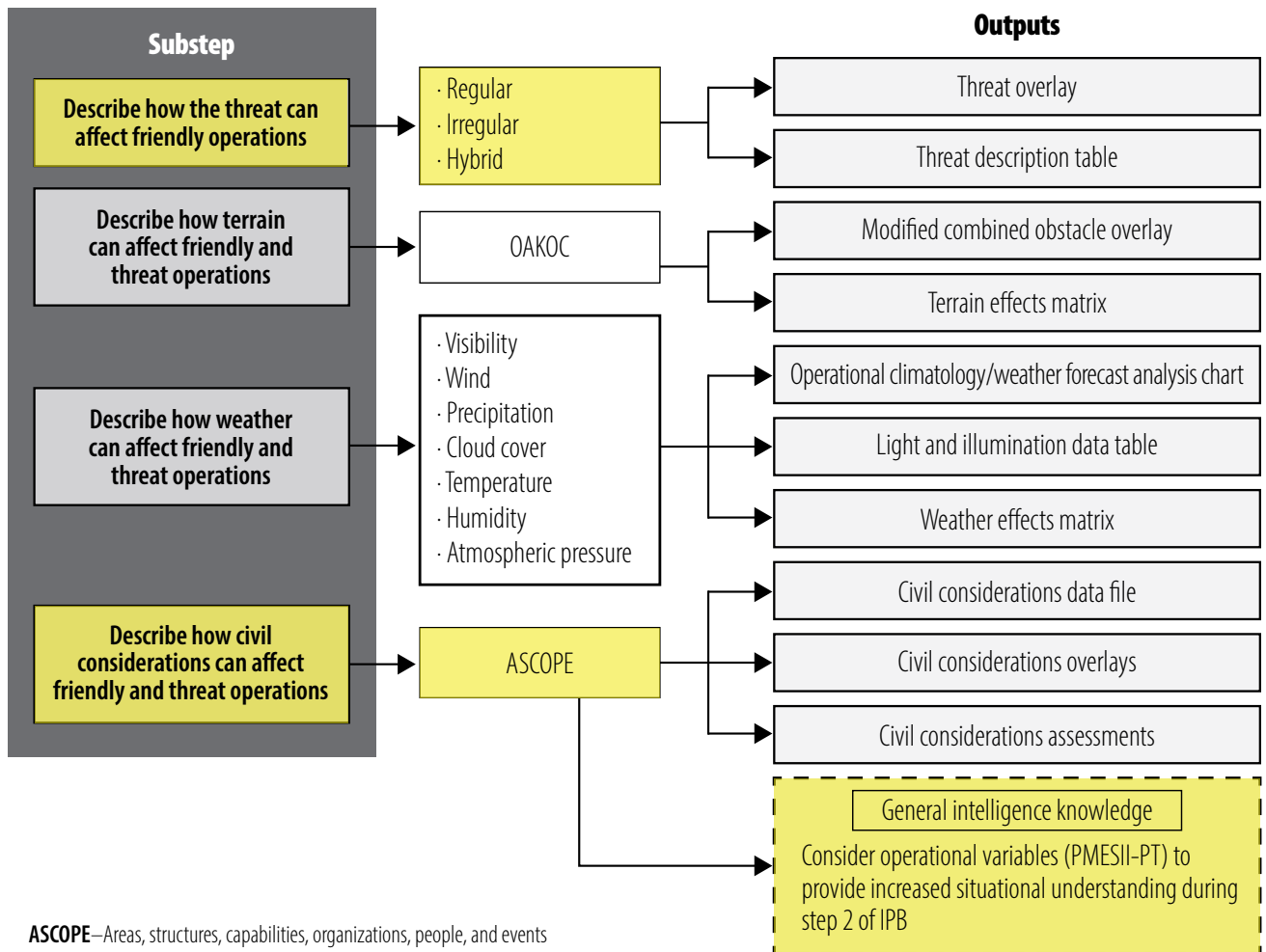
input to the staff and the commander. Historians could have helped mitigate many of the problems our soldiers and leaders have encountered during the GWOT and will continue to face in future operations.

The 25th Infantry Division, one of the few operational units to retain its historian, provides a useful case study. It has benefited tremendously from the multifaceted scope of work that its civilian historian has provided. The historian, Adam Elia, has been at the division through multiple deployments, is fully integrated into the staff, and participates in the military decision-making process by providing historical context and increased understanding of the operational environment. During planning, he liaises with the division intelligence and plans cells. Thus, the division chief of staff stated that the historian has “shown himself to be value added to the command and staff” and that “having historians on staff that are motivated to make history work for the commander and the senior leaders is worth considering for units that do not already possess them.”<sup>13</sup>

III Corps command historian Steve Frank has also demonstrated the value historians can provide to operational units. By working with the G-3 (operations) and G-5 (plans) staffs, he has been able to inject historical precedents into upcoming training exercises to make the training more relevant, and thus more valuable. He supplemented the training plan with a series of leader professional development sessions to provide leaders with vital historical data to inform their future decision-making. He has been able to advise the commander on how to best leverage historical assets located in theater. His successful operational integration also facilitated the historical collection mission. By serving as the focal point of the Army Historical Program at the corps level, Frank has been able to ensure proper historical support and collection across the theater when deployed in support of Operation Inherent Resolve in 2017 and 2018 by providing both a centralized plan for historical operations and by advocating to the commander on behalf of the various historical elements in theater.<sup>14</sup>

## Recommendations for Integrating Historians

Knowing that a historian can provide a level of subject-matter expertise that goes beyond what is now organically available to commanders, the question then becomes how the operational force can utilize Army



**ASCOPE**—Areas, structures, capabilities, organizations, people, and events

**IPB**—Intelligence preparation of the battlefield

**OAKOC**—Observation and fields of fire, avenues of approach, key terrain, obstacles, and cover and concealment

**PMESII-PT**—Political, military, economic, social, information, infrastructure, physical environment, and time

(Figure courtesy of Army Techniques Publication 2-01.3, *Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield*, March 2019; modified by author. The highlighted portions indicate areas in which historians can be key contributors on an Army staff)

### Figure 3. Substeps and Outputs of Step 2 of the Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield Process

historians. The following recommendations provide a starting point for integrating historians into the Army’s operational force in a more comprehensive way.

**Assist with intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB).** IPB is the “systematic, continuous process of analyzing the threat and environment in a specific geographic area.”<sup>15</sup> The historian, an expert in the area in which the unit intends to operate, is uniquely poised to provide valuable input that goes beyond what an intelligence officer is trained to provide. The

historian has the largest potential impact in the first two steps of IPB: define the operational environment and describe environmental effects on operations (see figure 3). Army Techniques Publication 2-01.3, *Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield*, specifically states that “understanding friendly and threat forces is not enough; other factors, such as culture, languages, tribal affiliations, and operational mission variables, can be equally important.”<sup>16</sup> These are typically categorized as operational variables and are utilized



during the second step of IPB. These variables are areas, structures, capabilities, organizations, people, events (ASCOPE), and political, military, economic, social, information, infrastructure, physical environment, and time (PMESII-PT). While an intelligence staff within a tactical unit may have knowledge of these factors through self-study, the historian is the only staff member who has comprehensive formal training in these operational variables.

During the last seventeen years of the GWOT, U.S. operational forces have been consistently hindered in their counterinsurgency operations due to their inability to break existing paradigms that are based on their faulty understanding of the operational environment, thereby exacerbating the conflict.<sup>17</sup> The enemies of the United States are products of different cultures and societies, and one must understand the framework within which their decisions are made to understand their decision-making rationale.<sup>18</sup>

**Framing.** Many of the skills outlined above revolve around the idea of framing; that is, “the act of building mental models to help individuals understand situations.”<sup>19</sup> This becomes important when executing

Staff Sgt. Amy King, a historian with the 161st Military History Detachment, Headquarters, U.S. Army Europe, conducts an oral history interview with Capt. Francisco Barrera of Headquarters, 2nd Battalion, 34th Armor Regiment, 11 July 2019 during their deployment to support Atlantic Resolve at Drawsko Pomorskie Training Area, Poland. (Photo by Capt. Bryant Wine, Georgia National Guard)

the Army design methodology, the Army’s process for framing an ill-structured problem. The GWOT has been a series of ill-structured problems that the Army is seemingly unequipped to solve. The military decision-making process and the Army’s troop leading procedures are planning methodologies for structured problems, which are typically found in linear systems (which typically have known variables and properties). For example, in a company-level raid, the commander can account for the variables and properties through the mission-planning variables: mission, enemy, terrain and weather, troops, and time available and civilian considerations. While there may be specific unknowns, the general capabilities (properties) in such a system are well-established for each of the variables.

Nonlinear systems are those that are far more complex. Actions made in such a system can create effects not easily anticipated since identifying relationships between variables is difficult and properties are not known values.<sup>20</sup> These systems can be analyzed and synthesized to an extent by those with a deeper understanding of the variables. A historian who is an expert on the operational variables can begin to understand the relationship dynamics in the nonlinear systems in which the Army operates. This makes them uniquely suited to frame the problem when conducting the Army design methodology for ill-structured problems. This becomes increasingly important at higher headquarters, which are responsible for managing more complex problems at the operational and strategic level. These problems tend to be less structured than those at the tactical level. Army strategists in functional area 59, some of the most common users of the Army design methodology, often have backgrounds in history for this reason.<sup>21</sup>

**Red Team officer.** Red Team officers are utilized during planning to serve as the enemy commanders and thereby identify likely enemy courses of action (COAs) and alternative plans. If there is more than one COA in development, another officer may be appointed to serve as the Red Team officer for each subsequent COA. Historians are uniquely qualified to serve as Red Team officers in military formations. With formal training in the enemy's capabilities and historical utilization, they can offer unique insight into the enemy's expected response. The historian already has many of the desired skill sets outlined in Field Manual 6-0, *Commander and Staff Organization and Operations*, such as a broad understanding of the enemy environment and the enemy's perspective, an ability to anticipate cultural perceptions of all potential groups within the area of operations and the area of influence, and the capability to conduct a critical review and analysis of the proposed plan based on historical precedents.<sup>22</sup>

**Regional alignment.** At the close of 2012, the Army issued an execution order to initiate the formation of regionally aligned forces (RAF). RAF units are assigned to combatant commands and train in support of the commands' regional missions.<sup>23</sup> This specific training makes them the combatant commander's "first sourcing solution."<sup>24</sup> A historian on the staff of a RAF unit, who is an expert in the history of the area in which the RAF unit is aligned, would be a critical asset. That person could

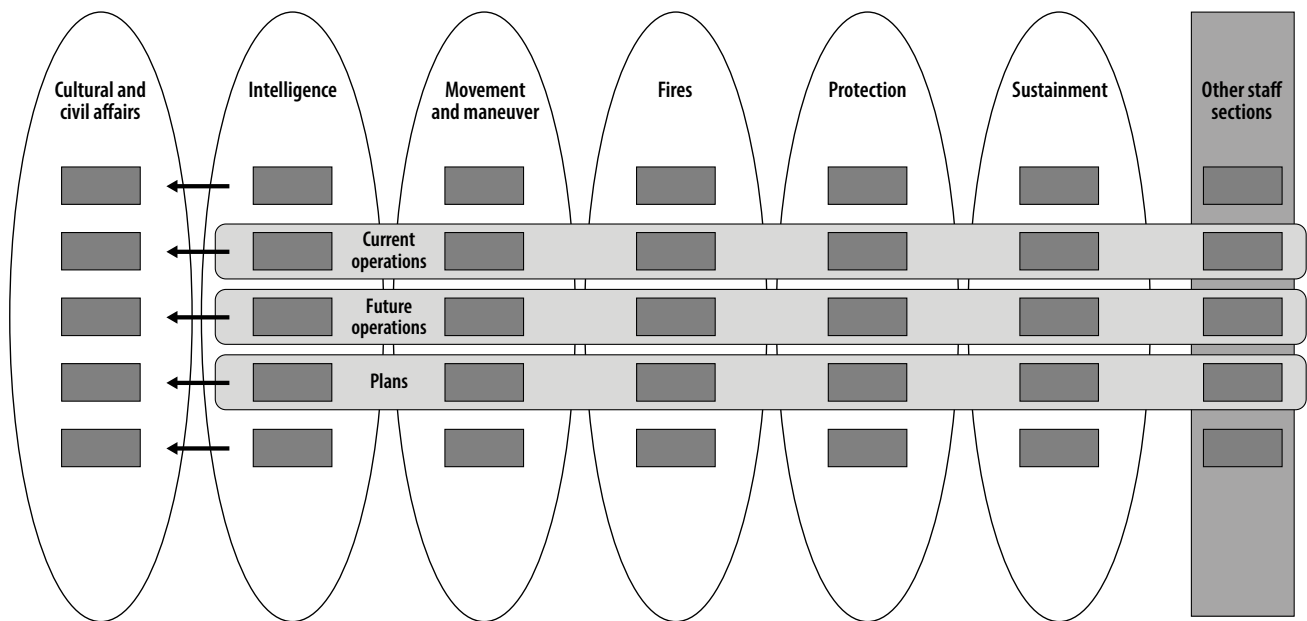
facilitate the development of "culturally sensitive forces" based on a greater understanding of the partner nation's culture, military, and the security problems, which both are mutually attempting to solve.<sup>25</sup> Since many of the security problems that are addressed are also complex and ill-defined, the historian can also be leveraged to assist with the security cooperation operational planning between the RAF unit and its partner.

More importantly, a historian would provide a level of expertise in the operational environment that could be decisive. The RAF mission is predicated on understanding the culture, geography, military, and history of the country in which the unit is operating.<sup>26</sup> Army historians in the operational force should be assigned to RAFs in accordance with their field of study and a unit's respective mission. This would build "cultural expertise" and enhance the Army's ability to operate in the complex operational environment that permeates current and projected operations.<sup>27</sup>

**Training scenario development.** When a unit attends a rotation at one of the Army's combat training centers, it is immersed into scenarios that stress each of the operational variables encompassed by PMESII-PT and ASCOPE. These elements are usually integrated into the scenario that sets the conditions for the rotation. A typical scenario involves the destabilization of the Atropian government by insurgents, who receive support from the bordering Ariana.<sup>28</sup> (These countries are generally accepted to be the equivalents of real-world countries, and the operational variables in the scenario are thus developed.) A command historian would allow units to develop their own relevant training scenarios specific to their upcoming missions. The historian would be able to develop a complete training scenario based on his or her knowledge of the projected operating environment, from the strategic context down to the tactics and techniques employed at the lowest levels by the opposing force. This would provide far more meaningful training than repetitively fighting the Ariannians, which may or may not actually be based on the unit's projected mission in its ready year. Frank, the III Corps' command historian, is currently piloting this role.<sup>29</sup>

**Preparing historical studies.** This contribution exists in current Army doctrine, but since it is inconsistently implemented, it is worth reiterating. Army doctrine directs Army historians to support the commander with historical perspective through well-researched





(Figure courtesy of Field Manual 6-0, *Commander and Staff Organization and Operations*, 5 May 2014; modified by author)

## Figure 4. Modified Command Post Organization

studies.<sup>30</sup> The Mosul Study Group's report, *What the Battle for Mosul Teaches the Force*, is a recent example of comprehensive examination. Less comprehensive products may take the form of information papers or command briefings. Several historians contributed to creating this report by collecting, analyzing, and synthesizing relevant information into a timely product that has been disseminated to commanders for use in planning future operations.<sup>31</sup> This is not a new practice. Its effectiveness has been documented since at least World War II. Maj. Gen. Ralph Smith, commander of the 27th Infantry Division from 1942 to 1944, wrote to the assistant chief of staff at the time to commend the work of the now famous Col. S. L. A. Marshall. Smith was impressed with the timely operational data that was being collected that he and his staff could utilize for improving performance in future operations.<sup>32</sup> This function is now largely performed by MHDs. All commanders should have this organic capability to receive timely historical analysis and integrate it into their planning process. Historians should track current trends in the area of operations and tie them back to historical trends. These historical studies should be the key output of the working historian's running estimate,

which continually assists the commander in decision-making per Army doctrine.

### Managing a Historical Program

To successfully leverage the specialized skill sets of historians, both commanders and the Army Historical Program must change how they manage historians. Rather than continuing ad hoc methods, there should be deliberate selection, integration, and development of historians.

The first step is to reinvigorate the unit historical officer program. Providing dedicated and trained UHOs at the battalion and brigade level will set the foundation for providing Army commanders with historians as a standard staff asset. Commanders should begin appointing UHOs as provided in AR 870-5 and ensuring they are qualified through a UHO mobile training team provided by the U.S. Army Center of Military History, or by attending the Command and General Staff College's A625 Army Field Unit Historian (resident) or Field and Unit Historian Course (distance learning). These course instructors have begun working together to revise the curriculum for UHOs and to schedule mobile training teams for deploying units.

The operational force should also request MHDs during training to build the habitual relationships and utility that will be necessary in the operational environment. Recent collective training exercises have demonstrated how MHDs can provide a real-time collection and feedback mechanism to commanders and staff about what is actually occurring in their area of operations, from the junior-enlisted level to the highest level of command. This information can then be integrated into decision-making, future planning, and refinement of tactics, techniques, and procedures. MHDs will also help build the unit's historical record and the historical record of the area of operations that will be necessary for follow-on forces to operate successfully.

Commanders at the division level and above should work to reestablish billets for command historians on their staff. Short a permanent position, hiring a term civilian employee or selecting an officer with an additional skill identifier 5X for a broadening assignment would allow the commander to begin leveraging the capabilities of historians.

This organizational concept would also enable a unit's command historian to serve as the proponent and lead for all Army Historical Program elements including UHOs and MHDs within their respective command. Placing the command historian as the commander's lead for all historical elements will make those elements more effective and also make the historian a more effective asset for the commander and his or her staff. This organizational construct will allow the command historian to facilitate organized collecting and also provide historical support to commanders at all levels by drawing upon a wide network of current information and historical expertise from across the command via MHDs and UHOs.

Once present, the historian should be integrated into standard staff functions and be expected to produce as would any other staff officer. One way to do this would be to create a functional cell at division headquarters and above, focusing on cultural and civil affairs that advises the commander predominantly on the impact of the operational variables (see figure 4, page 74).

The RAND report on the postwar planning in Iraq states that if the Army will continue to operate in foreign cultural environments, it must do so in a way that does not undermine the mission.<sup>33</sup> A functional cell such as this could actually enhance

the Army's ability to carry out its mission rather than merely attempting to avoid the development of additional problems. This cell would consist of the command historian, the foreign area officer, and the G-9 (civil affairs officer). The command historian would be able to facilitate integration of information both vertically and horizontally from across the Army Historical Program. This would give the commander, through the cultural and civil affairs cell, access to a holistic analysis of the operational variables similar to what is already available through the functional operations, intelligence, and logistics cells with regard to traditional mission variables.

## Conclusion

The Army Historical Program is at a turning point. Emphasis on building readiness is driving change across the Army. The time is ripe to increase the participation of historians in the operational force. Army historians can do more than collect and preserve the Army's operational records. They can provide critical capabilities that have been missing from the operational force structure and truly enhance readiness and mission accomplishment.

This work has already begun. UHO and MHD training and integration is being revised and pushed aggressively across the operational force. The recently established Army Futures Command has a command historian position on its tables of distribution and allowances after a temporary historian demonstrated clear added value. Three MHDs were deployed simultaneously to three different theaters for the first time in 2018, supporting Operation Inherent Resolve, Operation Atlantic Resolve, and U.S. Forces Korea. The year also saw the integration of four MHDs from all three components into a corps-level warfighter exercise.

Work remains, though. Commanders and staffs must work to select, train, and utilize UHOs and command historians. They should allow the development of a meaningful Command History program. MHDs must be integrated into exercises and operations to provide the baseline collection necessary to enable UHOs and command historians to succeed. Historians must be expected to contribute to mission accomplishment.

This treatise is not meant to establish a formal plan of action for changing the role of historians in

the operational Army. It is meant to spark a discourse on how to increase the operational utility of the Army historian and begin shifting the perception of historians as ancillary parts of the staff to that of vital members, ones who can provide meaningful contributions both in training and in war.

Fundamentally, it proposes a shift of the operational Army historian mindset. Rather than focusing solely on the institutional history of the Army, Army historians in the operational force should be contributing to the Army's core mission—to fight and win our nation's wars. ■

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## Notes

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