

chief historian's FOOTNOTE

CELEBRATING ARMY HISTORIANS

As we commemorate the U.S. Army's 250th anniversary, we also must honor the military historians whose tireless work preserves the history of America's Army. For nearly 250 years, Army historians have chronicled both the Army's institutional history and the detailed operational challenges in both success and failure in battle. When you consider the primary function Army historians provide, which is writing the official history in peace and war to improve the Army's effectiveness, our story begins with the U.S. Army during the American Revolutionary War.

In 1781, just six years after the beginning of the war, General George Washington wrote to the Continental Congress to propose creating a section of writers, led by a leader in "whom entire confidence can be placed" to organize and preserve war records at his headquarters.¹ With congressional approval, Washington hired the Army's first chief historian, appointing Lt. Col. Richard Varick as his general secretary. One can imagine Varick walking into Washington's headquarters to find a mountain of paperwork—an experience repeated by nearly every historian arriving at a headquarters today. Over the next several years, Varick and his team compiled orders, correspondence, and detailed reports on troop movements—laying the groundwork for what today we term "operational history." Although revolutionary pamphlets like Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* (printed in 1776) stirred public opinion, Varick's work provided a factual blueprint of military engagements, leader decisions, and logistics that led to success and failure on the battlefield. The forty-four volumes collected during the war and in the immediate postwar period became raw material for later historians.

As the nation grew, so did its commitment to detailed historical documentation. In 1864, Congress again authorized the Army to collect and publish the official history of "The War of the Rebellion." Between 1880 and 1901, historians completed 131 volumes with records of the U.S. and Confederate Armies and the collection now is considered as the essential source to the study of the Civil War.² Following World War I, Army historians produced a monumental series of 128 books. These volumes, spanning tactical orders of battle, troop deployments, and the technological innovations of industrialized warfare, stand as a comprehensive record of operational complexity.

The challenges of World War II demanded an even more nuanced synthesis of narrative and operational detail. Forrest C. Pogue emerged as a leading figure during this era. Serving as an official combat historian, Pogue's work went beyond merely charting events; he delved into the operational intricacies that defined the European Theater of Operations. Through firsthand interviews with soldiers and in-depth analyses of battlefield coordination and tactical shifts, Pogue provided an immersive account that shed light on how operational decisions influenced the course of the war. His narrative combined strategic assessment with operational detail, offering insights that continue to inform both historical scholarship and modern military doctrine.

In the post-World War II era, combat historians have further expanded the operational narrative to capture the complex nature of modern warfare. During the Korean and Vietnam

Wars, historians meticulously recorded the harsh realities of fighting in extreme conditions, focusing on the rapid troop movements, supply challenges, and shifting battle tactics that defined the conflicts. More recent theaters, like Afghanistan and Iraq, have presented historians with new operational challenges in the realms of counterinsurgency, urban combat, and multidomain operations.

Over time, Army historians have examined key operational details in their effort to capture both the strategic and human elements of conflict. Today, Army historians are leveraging tools to move digital data from the forward line of troops to the archive, conducting interviews, and capturing important documents and data from around the globe. Their work, steeped in operational art and the historian's craft, simultaneously serves as the Army's historical record and as a guide for refining tactics, training, and doctrine to improve the Army's combat capabilities. Behind all of it, the U.S. Army Center of Military History ensures that both the operational and narrative dimensions of military history are preserved.

This summer, we recognize 250 years of America's Army. Please join me in remembering generations of military historians who chronicled each tactical maneuver, strategic decision, and operational lesson to write our official history. From Colonel Varick in the Revolutionary War to military history detachments on the ground in four areas of responsibility today, help me celebrate Army historians who weave the threads of heroic deeds and the practical challenges of warfare into a rich tapestry of national defense. In every preserved order, every examined maneuver, and every doctrinal update, military historians ensure that operational history remains the backbone of our national defense. Their enduring legacy inspires today's commanders and informs tomorrow's strategies, ensuring that the Army's storied past—every operation recorded, and every lesson learned—continues to guide our future and remind us that understanding how battles are fought is as crucial as remembering why they are fought.



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Notes

1. Samuel K. Fore, "Richard Varick," George Washington's Mount Vernon, <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/richard-varick>.

2. Terence J. Gough, "The U.S. Army Center of Military History: A Brief History," 1996, Research, U.S. Army Center of Military History, <https://history.army.mil/Research/Reference-Topics/A-Brief-History/>.

