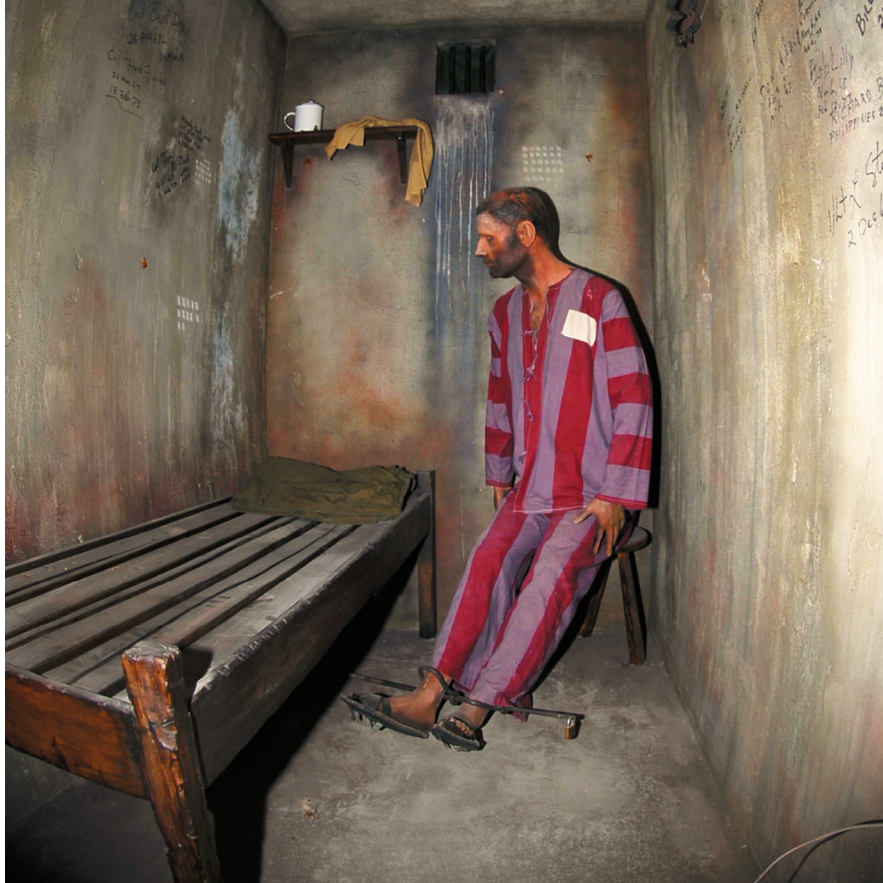


**M**any have undoubtedly heard of the National Museum of the US Air Force at Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio, near Dayton. Comparatively few people probably know about another world-class Air Force facility: the Enlisted Heritage Research Institute on the grounds of the Gunter Annex of Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Ala.

More commonly referred to as the Enlisted Heritage Hall, the institute houses an incredible collection of exhibits and artifacts honoring the contributions of enlisted airmen throughout aviation history. Located adjacent to the Air Force Senior Noncommissioned Officer Academy on base, the hall serves as a repository for a significant collection of historical memorabilia and source documents.

*The Enlisted Heritage Hall's mockup of a cell in the infamous Hanoi Hilton prisoner of war camp.*



Photos by Joe Panza

# HONORING ENLISTED CONTRIBUTIONS TO AIRPOWER

By Joe Panza



The institute has evolved from humble beginnings in 1984 when CMSgt. Bobby Renfroe, the first enlisted commandant of the SNCO Academy, established a collection of historical artifacts in the

## The Enlisted Heritage Research Institute

academy's lobby. Renfroe appointed SMSgt. Bill Allen as the first director of what they dubbed the Enlisted Heritage Hall. As the collection burgeoned, the need for a standalone facility became apparent to properly store and display the valuable artifacts.

In 1986, a newly renovated facility on base, a mess hall built in 1942, officially

became the home of the institute with CMSgt. Wayne Fisk as its first director.

Before entering the Enlisted Heritage Hall today, one sees an impressive display of monuments honoring those who have served during various campaigns, operations, and significant events. Monuments are prominently displayed and pay tribute to those who have defended America from the early days of the Minutemen to the enlisted pilots of World War II, enlisted airmen during the Korean War, and those who died in the terrorist attack on Khobar Towers in 1996 in Saudi Arabia. There is even a monument that recognizes the sacrifice and duty of military working dogs in Southeast Asia.

Entering the facility, one experiences a feeling of reverence seeing the



*The Enlisted Heritage Memorial Park features on static display an AC-47 like the one Medal of Honor recipient A1C John L. Levitov saved from an igniting fire.*

illuminated Medal of Honor display embraced by a large American flag and surrounded by images of the Air Force's seven enlisted Medal of Honor recipients. This moving tribute to Air Force heroes is the focal point of the hall's impressive array of memorabilia.

One then begins a walking tour through aviation history. Bill Chivalette, Enlisted Heritage Hall curator since 1998, oversees the development of displays that chronicle the exploits of enlisted warriors throughout the history of aviation.

Among the exhibits is a recreation of the scene during a Vietnam War battle, where Medal of Honor recipient A1C William H. Pitsenbarger tended to wounded soldiers and fought off the enemy. There's an exhibit for CMSgt. Richard L. Etchberger, who was killed in action at Lima Site 85 in Laos, and

Cash, Charlton Heston, Alan Ladd, Chuck Norris, Jimmy Stewart, Flip Wilson, and many others.

While these magnificent exhibits are the outward signs of the institute's work, its primary mission is to provide archival information and teaching displays to support study, research, and curriculum support to the base's Thomas N. Barnes Center for Enlisted Education, which is responsible for enlisted education worldwide.

Since the early 1990s, Enlisted Heritage Hall personnel have accumulated an impressive library of historical reports and documents. The hall has seen its role significantly expand, as the enlisted professional military education community has come to depend on it as a valuable source of historical information.

Air Education and Training Command's Heritage Project Award for 15 consecutive years and the Air Force Heritage Project Award nine times, according to Chivalette and Graves.

"In the spring of 2004, we dedicated a park on our grounds to honor [the] former director, CMSgt. Wayne Fisk," said Graves. "Not only do we owe a great debt to Chief Fisk for his vision in creating the Heritage Hall, we pay tribute to him as a true American hero. Chief Fisk earned two Silver Stars while serving four tours in Southeast Asia. He participated in many combat rescues and was a member of the Son Tay task force sent deep into North Vietnam to rescue our POWs. Chief Fisk was also the last man off of Koh Tang during the rescue of the crew of the *SS Mayaguez*," said Graves. "He is truly a warrior's warrior."

The Enlisted Heritage Hall expanded by 3,000 square feet in 2007 to make room for additional displays and artifacts. Finding funds for the development of new exhibits remains an ongoing challenge, said Graves.

"Our exhibits and monuments are made possible through the generous contributions of active and retired military personnel, the general public, and organizations that realize the importance of preserving the legacy and heritage of the enlisted force," said Graves.



**CMSgt. Fred Graves (l), Enlisted Heritage Hall director, speaks with Bill Chivalette, the hall's curator, in front of the exhibit honoring Air Force Cross recipient TSgt. John A. Chapman.**

like Pitsenbarger, received the Medal of Honor posthumously. Another exhibit honors Sgt. John L. Levitow, who earned his Medal of Honor during the Vietnam War when, despite multiple wounds, he threw an ignited flare from an AC-47 gunship, saving the aircraft and crew. There's also a display with a mannequin of a prisoner of war sitting in an exact mockup of a cell in the "Hanoi Hilton," North Vietnam's infamous POW camp.

"We do not put an exhibit on the floor without extensive research to make sure each detail is historically accurate" said Chivalette. "Years of research and study have gone into some of our displays and many have won the Air Force Heritage award, the highest honor that is given to facilities like ours."

A Wall of Achievers contains photographs of enlisted airmen who went on to higher offices or became celebrities. There you will find photos of Johnny

The hall "recently added touchscreen computers and the inclusion of thousands of pages of accessible historical data on our website have added a new dimension to our research capability," said Chivalette. The institute's Facebook page is meant to help continually promote the history and legacy of the Air Force's enlisted force.

CMSgt. Fred W. Graves II, Enlisted Heritage Hall director, praised his staff.

"Technical Sergeants Rachel Rapp and Roy Parrish and A1C Stephanie Russell, with the help of volunteers like Mr. 'Hoot' Gibson and retired [CMSgt.] Earl Cordell, have put the Heritage Hall on the map," said Graves. "What they have created rivals the finest museum-quality exhibits you will find anywhere. I consider Mr. Bill Chivalette to be one of the finest curators in the country," said Graves.

Among its honors, the institute has won

The institute's newest building expansion, the Berlin to Baghdad Wing, houses a wide range of unique displays, including the Berlin Airlift exhibit that incorporates modern technology, such as an avatar capable of speaking to visitors in a number of languages.

"This impressive exhibit is one of the favorites of our visitors," said Graves.

The Enlisted Heritage Hall is a place of honor everyone can be proud of. It's open to the public year-round, Monday through Friday, from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m., and on Saturdays from 9 a.m. until 3 p.m. For more information, visit <http://afehri.maxwell.af.mil> or call (334) 953-3174.

Tax-deductible contributions to help support the institute may be sent to the Air University Foundation, 55 LeMay Plaza South, Room 251, Maxwell AFB, AL 36112. ■

*Joe Panza is the Air University Foundation's executive director.*