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Weaponizing Air Force History

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**AIR FORCE TEST CENTER
EDWARDS AIR FORCE BASE, CALIFORNIA
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UNITED STATES AIR FORCE**

**Paper: "Weaponizing Air Force History," Dr. Stephanie M. Smith
in
Test Support Track**

(U) In 1943, the U.S. Army Air Forces established a Historical Division under the Assistant Chief of Air Staff for intelligence to preserve and record an accurate and objective history of World War II. This became the Air Force History Program in 1947.

(U) The mission of local field historians like me includes producing the periodic history of the unit; deploying in support of contingency operations; providing historical perspective to the commander and key decision makers in many cases and preserving the institutional memory of the organization. We use our rich Air Force history and heritage to create a robust history program that builds and shares our Airman identity and enhances esprit de corps.

(U) Local field historians work at all levels of the Air Force command structure to collect and preserve the documents, film, photographs, history and heritage of their organization and provide research and heritage services to their commanders, senior leaders, their organizations, and to the media and the public. One primary duty has remained since the program was established, and that is the periodic history report of the local organization, preserved and archived at the Air Force Historical Research Agency. While the format and content have changed since the 1940s, the periodic history remains one of the key means of preserving Air Force history and significant documentation.

(U) Recent work to make these documents shorter and more efficient as a means of preserving documents at the Agency, and also supports the idea of "weaponizing Air Force history." Weaponizing the Air Force history means several things. It means supporting our leadership first, by anticipating their need for historical products and publications that reinforce their messaging to higher headquarters and the Department of Defense. It means focusing on the Air Force's and our organization's
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history and heritage to help build comradery and identification with the mission through handouts, presentations, talks, displays, and appearances at commander's calls and other events. It means using our history to bolster our future, our Airmen, and our leadership.

(U) Air Force Instruction mandates that the Air Force shall maintain historical programs across the full range of operations in peacetime and war. It does so in order to preserve the institutional memory of the Air Force, provide historical perspective to decision makers, support professional development, enhance esprit de corps, and inform the American public.

(U) It also says that the Air Force shall prepare accurate, objective, and comprehensive historical reports and publications in peace and war intended to improve warfighter capability. To accomplish this, Headquarters Air Force and MAJCOM senior leadership shall ensure historians are operationally integrated at the wing-level and above, provided all necessary access to information, and complete timely reports. Through these reports, the Air Force shall accession and preserve in perpetuity historical information with operational, informational, training, research, legal, or historical value.

(U) However, the Air Force Manual on accomplishing Air Force history also precludes historians from directly conducting advocacy for the Air Force. Historians do not themselves seek to influence strategic audiences, to employ heritage in support of advocacy efforts, to advocate on behalf of aerospace science in general, or to support military recruiting efforts, except as tasked in support of military requirements. Commanders, however, do conduct advocacy for resources and on behalf of their workforce and mission sets.

(U) Air Force Instruction also mandates that the Air Force shall use military history in decision making. This Air Force's historical perspective should be based on accurate and factual information. Accurate and timely historical reporting provides decision-makers with

information they can use to improve the combat capabilities of the United States Air Force and the Department of Defense.

(U) Documenting Air Force history 'as it happens' does not, by itself, improve mission accomplishment. The history report is just how we archive data for the future. It is how we save our writing and how we ensure the Air Force archives important documents and records at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) repository for Air Force history at the Air Force Historical Research Agency at Maxwell AFB, Alabama. The Air Force's annual history itself, therefore, is not what historians use to inform and educate our organizations—it's just the box, not the pizza. In recognition of that fact, effective with the December 2018 publication of AFI 84-101, the history program set about changing the paradigm of how the Air Force writes its history.

(U) Rather than thinking of the official Air Force annual history as the way to present historical knowledge, our new applied history approach leverages the information and lessons of the past to create usable knowledge. This usable knowledge informs decisions today and the future. The most recent style guide refers to this as not building the box but making the pizza. That pizza comes delivered in the box of the Air Force annual historical report. Providing a usable history also relies upon a knowledgeable historian in the room at the right time to inject critical information and historical context into the decision-making cycle.

(U) Therefore, one example of weaponizing Air Force history includes anticipating and/or meeting the needs of the commander for historical information. This can mean producing a short bullet background paper on a historical topic to support a current argument. It can mean providing a talking paper with accompanying presentation on the history of a specific topic for the commander to brief in a meeting. At the most involved, it can mean researching within the archival collection, previous historical reports, and historical monographs to produce a thoroughly-researched and documented study. For a meeting of the Air Force Test Center commander with the deputy commander of Air Force Space Dr. Stephanie M. Smith/History Office, Edwards AFB/18 Apr 19/661.277.3871

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Command, for example, I produced the history of the U.S. Air Force's experience in developmental test in the domain of space. I have copies of the public release version of the study available here today if anyone is interested.

(U) Another part of weaponizing Air Force history includes involving Airmen in heritage efforts. Heritage briefings and programs can range from a 30-second heritage slide in a meeting, to a dedicated hour-long program on some subject. In a few contexts like a staff meeting, a degree of formality is necessary. But in general, historians should seek to use all appropriate tools of the public speaker's art to engage the audience. Presentations and briefings generally require less preparation, and generally offer a modest impact. A good presentation provides good return on investment.

(U) A commonly used formulation in the Edwards Air Force Base mission and strategic vision is championing the value of the developmental test mission. Generally that refers to the actions of the commander in advocating for the mission and needed resources among the leadership of higher headquarters. It can also, for historians, mean working to tie Airmen more closely to the mission of the U.S. Air Force and the Air Force Test Center.

(U) Once again, however, heritage programs stem from the interests of the commander. Air Force historians work for, and on behalf of, commanders and civilian leaders. Because heritage programs in the Air Force are mission-based, the primary customer is the commander, not the audience. Their intent is to influence the audience's knowledge, perceptions, feelings, values, and behavior. In these cases, the historian is acting as an agent for the commander. Heritage programs are especially suited for problems that can be addressed through feelings and emotions, such as career field retention, family engagement, or unit loyalty.

(U) With limited resources, the Air Force manual provides that heritage projects should focus on mission needs, as defined by the commander. The key metric for a heritage project or program, just like Dr. Stephanie M. Smith/History Office, Edwards AFB/18 Apr 19/661.277.3871

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for an airstrike, is whether it met the commander's intent. Moreover, many heritage projects are not directly commander-tasked but are initiated at the historian's initiative, or in response to a request.

(U) Some of my office's heritage efforts include recurring monthly briefings on historical topics on the first Wednesday of every month, and talks on some First Fridays at the Club.

(U) Finally, the Air Force history program's role in advising units in the design for official Air Force emblems for approval by the Air Force Historical Research Agency also works to tie Airmen to the mission and to the unit. The expressed purpose of Air Force heraldry is to promote esprit de corps, morale, comradery, and a sense of identification with Air Force heritage. Historians are sometimes gatekeepers for Air Force heraldry in the sense that our role requires us to rule out inappropriate or disallowed designs, while ensuring that Air Force heraldry is tasteful and brings no disrepute to the U.S. Air Force. Another popular product I brought with me is the heritage poster that displays all the current approved heraldry for the Air Force Test Center and 412th Test Wing. Currently, only a few eligible squadrons are without official heraldry.

(U) In general, then, the purpose of Air Force history is not just to document and preserve our history. It also works to enable commanders and civilian leaders to make informed decisions, and advocate for their units and mission sets, and build comradery and esprit de corps among Airmen.

SOURCE: Instruction (U), AF/HO, "AFI 84-101: Aerospace Historian Responsibilities and Management," 13 Dec 2018. (RELEASABILITY: There are no releasability restrictions on this publication.)

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