

ON TRACK: Living History through Tanks at the Museum of the American G.I.

By Jon Fairchild

A cannon barrel aimed at the sky breaks the gently sloping plains, the steel frame of a behemoth of a tank standing guard as sentinel. Nearby, a platoon of men works frantically to restore another tank: the sound of mechanical clanging, of repair duties, of engines rumbling, and of cannon firing rises through the air. Some men are wounded; a mechanic working on the tank had his finger badly mauled by metal as he worked. Yet dedication to the cause presses them onward. The work must be done, and quickly, to prepare for the assault.

Where, and what, exactly is this assault? Doughboys providing desperately needed relief to beleaguered French and British allies in World War I? American G.I.s and tankmen pushing across the fields of France to liberate

Paris in World War II? Perhaps U.S. Marines defending against the threat of communism in the name of containment in Korea and Vietnam? No, this tank and the garage nearby where restoration efforts proceed are located in College Station, Texas. The year is 2013. The assault these men are preparing for is the 15th Annual Open House for the Museum of the American G.I., where a host of visitors will descend upon the museum in March 2014 to enjoy the Living History Day display of their excellent collection of American military vehicles.¹

The museum, which incorporated as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit museum in 2001, is the brainchild of founder and president Brent Mullins.² Brent's interest stems from a long history of collecting militaria, dating back to his youth. Originally, he



collected American military uniforms. Once his collection grew, he sold the uniforms to move on to larger, grander things, restoring his first military vehicle in 1976. Though the Jeep he restored may seem a far cry from the massive tanks that fill multiple garages on the museum grounds, it sparked an interest, which has filled him for decades, growing more expensive in scale.

His hobby eventually evolved into dream made reality, a personal collection worth millions of dollars. Of the tanks in his collection, each is worth anywhere from \$250,000 to upwards of \$500,000 – and the various artillery pieces, trucks, and half-tracks are also worth a considerable sum.

While establishing this impressive cache of armored vehicle history, Mullins served his nation with pride in the U.S. Marines Corp Reserve from 1980 to 1989, married Leisha Mullins in 1987, and opened up Mullins Jeep Parts to fuel his various restoration efforts. The sheer volume of parts located on site is mind boggling. From fuel cans to tank treads, seat covers to cannon barrels, every part one can imagine fills the building's halls. Brent or the museum own all but two of the vehicles; an M18 Hellcat tank destroyer and an M4 Sherman medium tank have independent, private owners. Yet the most impressive aspect of the museum's collection is not the size or the value but the labor of love that goes

into preserving and restoring these artifacts for historical memory.

Though the concept of a museum honoring the memory of veterans through their equipment, uniforms, and vehicles is not unique, the implementation certainly is. Leisha Mullins and Mark Hawthorne were gracious enough to grant a personal guided tour of the facility, explaining just how the Museum of the American G.I. stands a tier above the competition. The guiding principal of the museum is recovering the memories and sharing the stories of American veterans through the concept of "living history" – representing history through reenactment, rather than relying simply on static displays. Living history museums, since the emergence of Colonial Williamsburg in the 1930s, have entertained and educated the public through use of artifacts, reenactments, and activities to recreate the past for visitors.³

For the Museum of the American G.I. in particular, this means not just having an immobile steel hulk on display but taking a vehicle and restoring it to its original functionality. Leisha noted how important a complete restoration is to living history, to see how the vehicle functioned inside and out, rather than doing solely cosmetic work on the frame. At the Museum of the American G.I., these vehicles represent an unfolding story. Visitors can "come out and see

This M18 Hellcat tank is one of many tanks on display inside the Museum of the American G.I. The collection includes a host of other vehicles, from trucks and Jeeps to boats and helicopters, uniforms, and other items of interest that were used in wars since the turn of the twentieth century.

Photo courtesy of Jon Fairchild.



The Renault FT-17 tank is a World War I light tank supplied by the French to the Americans upon U.S. entry in the war in 1917. The photo above shows what the tank looked like before restoration efforts, bearing ninety years of accumulated rust. On the left, in the midst of restoration efforts, it will soon be transformed for the annual Living History Day.

Photos courtesy of the Museum of the American G.I.

it in action, the Armored Support Group [a collection of volunteers and veterans who served in those vehicles at the museum] dressed in appropriate attire for the vehicle on display."⁴

The vehicles are licensed according to federal law with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives because, in addition to restoring the armored vehicles to drivable condition for living history displays and reenactments, their mighty armaments are prepared to fire as well. Since they have been demilitarized, the museum uses blanks, but controlled explosions are timed in conjunction with the firing of the guns to provide quite the spectacle at the open house. Of course, the outcome of the battle between the American tanks and the German vehicles (a replica of a Stug III tank destroyer and a SD.Kfz. 251 half-track) is never in doubt. "The Allies always win," Leisha beamed enthusiastically.

The Museum of the American G.I. goes to staggering lengths to restore its vehicles to the high standards required of living history. The intense restoration process consumes not only thousands of hours of labor and thousands of dollars in parts, but also intense research to recreate authenticity. This attention to detail and the use of original parts and designs are paramount. The museum has an archival library brimming from floor to ceiling with original blueprints, designs, maintenance, and technical manuals for the complete vehicles and the individual parts. Radio sets, engines, no detail is too minute to be accurately and authentically pursued at the Museum of the American G.I. As Leisha put it, "We do it by the book – and we have the book."⁵

While the massive frames of the vehicles – the three

Sherman medium tanks, the two Hellcat tank destroyers, two light tanks (an M3 Stuart light tank and an M24 Chaffee light tank), as well as various artillery pieces, half-tracks, and transports – are impressive, seeing the work that goes into the restoration process only increases the sense of awe. The museum is currently restoring a French-built FT-17 light tank, the only example of its kind, which actually saw service in World War I, located in the United States.

Even though the FT-17, the tank encountered in the first paragraph with the crew of frenzied mechanics, does not quite have to be built from scratch, an astounding amount of research, parts (to say nothing of the hunt for the parts), and labor have gone into this process. The museum acquired a maintenance manual for the FT-17 in the original French, which sits in the massive archive of manuals and reference materials. The owners acquired many parts and even entire vehicle chassis from other museums and private collectors. The chassis of another FT-17 came from a museum in Louisiana in order to cast replacement parts when originals simply could not be found. The museum has gone as far as Australia in the hunt for original parts, a testament to the driving spirit of authenticity in living history.

Leisha Mullins and Mark Hawthorne shared a touching story of why living history matters, why the Museum of the American G.I. does what it does. Day after day a man had driven past the museum, where a Vietnam War-era river patrol boat sat visible from the highway. Finally, he stopped in and asked to see the patrol boat, noting that he served in Vietnam on river patrol boats. He walked up to it, and after seeing the serial number on the side of the boat, he started crying. He said, "That was my boat. That was the boat I served on." Leisha explained, "That is why we do this. We are authentic as possible. We track down, as much as we can, the history of the vehicles. It's very cathartic for a lot of these veterans."⁶

This man's story hardly seemed an exception. Over the course of two hours visiting the museum, Mark and Leisha

These books represent a selection of the original manuals the museum has in its archive, including manuals for American trucks, Jeeps, tanks, and artillery. Founder Brent Mullins initially collected militaria such as the uniforms shown here.
Photo by Jon Fairchild.



Vietnam veterans reunited: Jack Fugate and Steve Hickman stand by the 1968 River Patrol Boat (PBR) they served on during the war.

Photo courtesy of the Museum of the American G.I.

regaled me with countless tales of veterans and their memories, of vets who volunteer and work at the museum, and of those who visit with their families. The museum is doing its job perfectly.

Though the museum stands as a shining beacon of living history done right, of memories preserved through the vehicles of the past, the Museum of the American G.I. faces challenges. As with any museum, money has proved a constant woe. Though the board of directors has carefully managed to get the museum up and running, the number one priority is to stay out of debt and be self-sustaining.⁷ Recognition presents another challenge. Mark quipped that the museum is "the best kept secret in the Brazos Valley." In the face of these obstacles, the museum currently operates out of a temporary facility while it prepares its permanent structure to open in 2014.

The hollow shell of the permanent museum currently stands ready as a hallowed ground of historical memory, a temple waiting to be consecrated. The vehicles, uniforms, equipment, and other artifacts will fill this temple, where an eager congregation will come to understand the complex experiences of the past made real through living history. As Brent, Leisha, Mark, and the veterans and volunteers of the Armored Support Group labor to restore the FT-17 to join her sisters in the Open House reenactment, it is clear that their vision and drive are taking the museum right where it needs to be – On Track.

For further information on the Museum of the American G.I., please visit <http://magicstx.org/index.shtml>.

For excerpts from the interview and expanded content, please see the *Houston History* website at www.houstonhistorymagazine.org.

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