

Putting a face on base history

The team in charge of preserving AEDC's legacy is looking to the future



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Those who visit one section of Building 430 can see where a tremendous volume of one-of-a-kind documents representing 60 years of AEDC history is stored and undergoing processing.

Walk through the door and it is hard to miss an old, but well preserved vinyl gray arm chair. It's the same one that President Harry Truman sat in during his dedication of AEDC to General of the Air Force Henry Harley "Hap" Arnold in June 1951. Also prominently on display is an AGFA large-format view camera on a "portable stand."

It's a Rembrandt studio camera that was used by the base photo lab's staff in the 1950s to take portrait photos of Arnold's employees.

When Gwendolyn Hinson first walked through that door as the archive assistant to AEDC Historian David Hiebert in January 2010, she didn't know what to think.

"It was overwhelming," said the 30-year Air Force reservist. "My first thought and question was, what is this chair doing here and what is the significance of it? So, I was told about the history of it and the same thing with the camera.

"Mr. Hiebert has been in this office for 24-25 years and he is a wealth of knowledge, so he began to tell me the story."

Hinson initially came to AEDC to fill a temporary position and later transitioned to a full-time government civilian as archive assistant.



Gwendolyn Hinson, AEDC archive assistant, and David Hiebert, AEDC's historian, examine the Rembrandt studio camera that was used in the 1950s to take portrait photos of Arnold's employees. (Photo by Rick Goodfriend)

Recalling her initial reaction when first walking into the History Office, she said, "I did not know where to start. I am working with Mr. Hiebert to formulate a plan to make the History Office more user-friendly."

Hiebert, AEDC's historian since July 1987, said they first have to finish going through all of the documents to determine which were or could be cleared for release. Then, they have to determine which materials are worth saving.

Ironically, the Truman chair and the old portrait camera and other memorabilia don't qualify for archival safekeeping.

"We have Maj. Gen. Lee Gossick's uniforms for example, and they deserve a better display," Hiebert said.

General Gossick, a World War II veteran, was an AEDC commander, AEDC Fellow and later served as deputy general manager for Sverdrup Technology, Inc.

Hiebert said a lot of work remains to be done, including a way to keep the memorabilia and put it on proper display on base.

"We're going through the complete body of archival documents that actually predate the center," he said. "They go back to the German work in places like Peenemunde and Berlin and have the German work on test facilities that they were doing during the war."

Hiebert and Hinson stay busy.

"We have in this office, on the magnitude of 500 requests for historical information a year," Hiebert said. "It is very, very

difficult to keep up with these sometimes. Some of the questions are ones we can answer off the top of our heads, such as what was the dedication date for AEDC. More often we have questions such as what was the construction date or date for a facility like Mark I and convert the cost into today's dollars.

"In addition to that we talk about the history of test and the history of the various types of organizations, such as service-funding, which was in the 1970s, or the true center concept which people don't really understand today."

Hiebert talked about the major challenge facing his two-person team.

"The challenge is that as we [AEDC] lose people through retirement, all of the corporate knowledge that these people represent, leaves with them," he said. "The younger people, while they're extremely good technically, don't have the corporate background to see the larger context. And so the challenge of the history/archives is to ensure there is a corporate memory in place to advise people that we've tried this before and these were the issues, advocacy issues, those kinds of things."

Hinson said she sees the task ahead of Hiebert and herself as fairly straightforward in some respects.

"Rome was not built in a day and I know that the History Office won't be the state of the arts that quickly either," she said. "The fact that there is a plan is a major accomplishment."