

By **RICHARD CHIN**

*Fort Snelling, Minn.*

Seeing a tank in a military museum is a little like looking at a dinosaur in a natural-history museum. Big and impressive to be sure, but also dead, cold and silent.

But what if the beast could roar into ground-shaking life?

The answer to that question can be found next to the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport, at the Fort Snelling Military Museum. Situated on a patch of Army Reserve land, the museum, started in 1997, is run by about 100 civilian volunteers and financed largely by donations. It's one of the few armored warfare museums in the world dedicated not only to preserving historic military vehicles, but also to putting them in working order.

The fun starts when volunteers crank up the engines and drive the vintage tanks in parades, tear around dirt fields, and run over and crush junk cars in free public displays. "It makes it something people can relate to more than a big chunk of iron sitting on a concrete pad," said John Hutterer, president of the volunteer group.

Run under the auspices of the Army Reserve's 88th Regional Readiness Command and the Army's Center of Military History, the museum's collection of about 65 vehicles ranges from World War II to the first Gulf War. It includes Stuart, Sherman, Pershing, Patton and Sheridan tanks, armored personnel carriers, self-propelled howitzers, trucks, jeeps and amphibious vehicles.



*Fort Snelling Military Museum*

A restored Sherman tank.

The vehicles, all still the property of the Defense Department, were transferred by the Army to the museum from storage facilities housing obsolete hardware. A few somehow survived stints as targets on firing ranges. Some relics have been rescued from duty as metal monuments: sealed up old tanks parked in front of Veterans of Foreign Wars or American Legion halls. One jeep arrived in pristine condition, with less than 100 miles on the odometer. But other machines have combat wounds that need to be patched up, such as the Commando armored car that had a wheel blown off by a mine in Vietnam.

A 1942 Stuart tank arrived crusted with rust after spending some postwar years languishing in the Haitian military before being repatriated to the U.S. The Stuart became the pet project of one of the volunteers. He put it through a five-year restoration job, bringing it up to spotless showroom condition with original accessories and tools, including binoculars and grenades in the commander's compartment. "Never point a demilled weapons system at a visitor," says an instruction manual put in the tank.

"Everything is completely functional, including the gun itself," said Mr. Hutterer of the beauty queen with tracks. "But there hasn't been a round of tank ammunition at Fort Snelling for 60 years."

Many of the other vehicles in the museum look more like grease-stained workhorses or works in progress. "Still runs pretty good," said volunteer Ray Peterson of one of the museum's Patton tanks badly in need of a paint job.

The museum itself is kind of a scruffy place. It's basically a maintenance building with five shop bays, some canvas Quonset huts, a gravel display area and a dirt demonstration area.

The hardware includes such iconic pieces of American military mechanization as World War II Sherman tanks, an M3 halftrack and a DUKW "Duck" amphibious vehicle. There are also obscure, oddball or unsuccessful machines, such as the quirky six-wheel-drive Gama Goat, a transport vehicle that could twist in the middle. "A lot of people in the U.S. Army hated this thing," said volunteer Brian Lillquist, who used to drive bulldozers in the Army.

The museum also has a Sergeant York self-propelled antiaircraft gun, one of a few built before the weapon system was killed during the Reagan administration. "It was too complex for its time," Mr. Lillquist said. "It also had trouble hitting the target," Mr. Peterson added. All the same, volunteers were a little reluctant to turn it on, because they were concerned its radar might start tracking flights from the airport.

Not every piece of hardware is a weapon or a transport vehicle. The museum is home to the Army's last sawmill, a machine mounted on a semitrailer. It was used by a platoon of Army Reserve lumberjacks in northern Wisconsin. "It sat here a couple of weeks before we figured out what it was," Mr. Peterson said. "We have no idea how it works," said volunteer vice president Ron Corradin.

The volunteers include a lot of former servicemen, including some who have helped restore the same types of vehicles they drove in the military. There are also doctors, lawyers, engineers, mechanics and machinists. Some farmers from Iowa pitched in when the brake assembly on a Patton tank blew out. "They said it was no tougher than fixing a combine," Mr. Lillquist said.

One teenage volunteer went on to enlist in the Army and ended up in a tank unit. Museum volunteers say he's the Army's first recruit who knew how to drive a tank before he entered basic training.

To get antique weapons running, the volunteer mechanics have resorted to scrounging for old parts on eBay. Cadillac V-8 engines needed for the Stuart restoration were found in Kansas, where they had powered an irrigation system. A replacement fan belt for a Sherman tank came from an auto-parts store, said museum director Nick Goodwin.

The volunteers get a kick out of entertaining visitors by using propane to create a harmless belch of flame out of a tank gun. They said the Center of Military History used to frown on car-crushing demonstrations, concerned that a historic artifact might be harmed. But the volunteers argued that a 55-ton machine that was once NATO's main battle tank doesn't have anything to fear from a junked minivan.

"It doesn't hurt the tank. The tank doesn't even know it's going over it," Mr. Goodwin said.

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