


DIGGING

INTO THE PAST ... AND FUTURE

Veterans find a new mission in teaming up for archaeology.

BY DON VAUGHAN



When Capt. Stephen Humphreys separated from the Air Force in 2010, he was planning a quick return to the military as a chaplain. But when the seminary he attended was looking for volunteers for an archaeology project in Israel, his life changed direction.

“I knew nothing about archaeology at the time,” Humphreys told *Military Officer*. “Almost immediately as we started digging, I fell in love with archaeology and archaeological field work. That was pretty life-changing for me.”

In 2015, Humphreys encountered a British program called Operation Nightingale, which placed veterans on archaeological digs based on the idea that the work can provide physical and mental health benefits. Taking part in a couple of projects, he saw firsthand the program’s potential value. A year later, he founded American Veterans Archaeological Recovery (AVAR), which serves veterans through a similar mission.

“AVAR exists to conduct world-class field work using the values and skills of military veterans under technical supervision from leading archaeologists,” said Humphreys, who now has master’s degrees in archaeology, biblical studies, and theology, as well as a Ph.D. in archaeology.

As of late 2021, AVAR had hosted more than 120 U.S. veterans and supported 19 archaeological missions around the world.

The work brings with it “substantial mental health benefits and camaraderie among those veterans,” Humphreys said.

Much of AVAR’s work has involved the search for remains of American servicemembers lost during past conflicts. AVAR has received project-specific

funding from the U.S. Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA), which works to find and identify servicemembers’ remains. Anything recovered goes to the DPAA labs for analysis, identification of remains if possible, and notifications.

“I feel strongly about this mission, as does the staff,” Humphreys said. “The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency has a lot of work that needs to be done, and we’re honored to be a part of that.”

AVAR’s relationship with DPAA is called Operation Keeping Faith, which looks at how the DPAA recovery mission can benefit veteran participants, Humphreys said.

“DPAA saw the potential in this program and has invested in us developing that idea further,” he said.

AVAR has other partnerships as well, including those with National Geographic, the Blake & Bailey Family Fund, and the American Battlefield Trust. Funding is supplemented with charitable contributions from Death Wish Coffee and private individuals.

“We are capable of being the lead on excavations aside from our DPAA work ... but we also pride ourselves on being professional and energetic partners on projects run by groups like the National Park Service,” Humphreys said. “The important feature on any project we work is that every collaborator is equally focused on doing

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Participants are told to expect “real, professional-level archaeology,” he said.

“We work hard, and we expect them to work hard, learn fast, and act professionally,” Humphreys said. “Archaeology demands high performance, and so does our program.”

‘TAKING CARE OF OUR OWN’

Spec. Gregory Ashcroft, USA (Ret), of Smithfield, Utah, took on a project as an AVAR volunteer that involved a dig to find a B-24 Liberator bomber that went down in southern England during World War II. He has also gone to Sicily to search for wreckage of downed P-38 Lightning fighters lost during WWII, and to Saratoga National Historical Park, N.Y., for a battlefield project in 2019.

“It seemed like something completely unique, and the mission really spoke to me,” Ashcroft said. “The concept of veterans taking care of our own really stood out to me, and to be part of that seemed like an amazing opportunity.”

He found out about AVAR through a friend who had seen it in a *National Geographic* article, which also inspired Staff Sgt. Megan Lukaszkeski, USAF (Ret), of Denver, who has been interested in archaeology since childhood.

Lukaszkeski has worked on some of the same projects as Ashcroft, and she was responsible for the official archaeological photography on the site of the B-24 bomber dig.

“The excavations are a great way to sharpen

Volunteers with American Veterans Archaeological Recovery (above) work at the crash site of a WWII-era B-24 bomber. Stephen Humphreys, AVAR CEO, (above right) plans site photography with a volunteer.

my excavation skills, as well as work with more experienced archaeologists and learn from them,” said Lukaszkeski, who sees AVAR as a pathway to a career in the profession. Working side by side with fellow servicemembers was a plus.

“The AVAR program presents a wonderful opportunity to connect with other veterans, as well as providing a way to give back to the military community through the recovery of servicemembers lost in previous conflicts,” she said.

Veterans bring unique skill sets to archaeological projects, Humphreys said. Foremost is cohesion and the ability to bond quickly, which is crucial for strong team-building and support.

“Another thing veterans bring is an understanding of the mission, which is what archaeology is all about,” Humphreys said. “We don’t just go out and dig for fun. We have a distinct scientific objective, set by the lead archaeologist, that we’re trying to achieve.”

The veterans do a range of tasks at the dig sites. During the B-24 bomber excavation in England, for example, they did surface reconnaissance using metal detectors, excavated the crash site, sieved the soil for relevant finds, then triaged the material that was found, said archaeologist Steve Roskams, senior lecturer at England’s University of York, who has participated in two AVAR projects. The veterans’ work is “adding to our knowledge of the past, in understudied and often ignored contexts, notably the most recent past, a sphere that is starting to get the recognition it deserves,” Roskams said.

Working on archaeological digs can be challenging, outdoors in rainy English weather or in the heat of other climates.

“The conditions on the first Sicily dig were much more challenging because we were experiencing temperatures of around 100 degrees Fahrenheit, and the compact clay was almost like digging through concrete,” said Ashcroft, who as a squad leader supervised five other volunteers. “But the adverse conditions almost made the project more fulfilling.”

Lukaszski has a bit of advice for any veteran interested in the field work.

“Be aware that the work can be both physically and mentally challenging,” she said, “but a positive attitude and having a flexible mindset are the key to success in the program.”

A SENSE OF PURPOSE

Many AVAR volunteers keep signing up for more projects, Humphreys said.

“I think a lot of it really comes down to giving them a renewed sense of purpose,” Humphreys said. “It gives them something new that they can really become passionate about.”

One of the benefits is that it’s a team activity, he said. “They get the support of their peers again, and they build really strong friendships on these projects.”

AVAR is studying the mental and physical impact of this kind of field work on military veterans, Humphreys said.

Some veterans in the program have a service-related disability rating, and the program works with them without “labeling them as disabled,” he said.

“We’re creating a program that focuses on abilities rather than disabilities,” he said.

One of the program’s stated purposes is to “help veterans find their future while exploring the past.”

Humphreys said, “We want to be sure we’re delivering on the promise we make to the veterans that attend our projects.” ■■

Don Vaughan writes on history and culture for Military Officer.



FIND OUT MORE

Visit AVAR at www.americanveteransarchaeology.org.



WANT TO GET DIGGING?

Veterans interested in participating in AVAR archaeological projects can sign up through the organization’s website at www.americanveteransarchaeology.org.

Here’s what to expect:

- The program is open to veterans and active-duty personnel from all military branches.
- No prior experience in archaeology is required, and archaeologists provide on-site training in procedures and techniques.
- Applicants will be interviewed by AVAR staff.
- They are selected for a project based on their interests and capabilities, then they are put in touch with a more experienced member of the program.
- AVAR covers the costs of participation, such as food and accommodation, as well as flight costs when possible. Volunteers may be asked to pay for their airfare if a project is within the U.S., said the founder, former Air Force Capt. Stephen Humphreys, because it’s difficult to budget as people come in from around the country.
- COVID safety protocols are observed during project work, as designated by the host nation.

PHOTOS: CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: SENIOR AIRMAN KOBEL SAUNDERS/USAF; MACKENZIE BURKHART, OPERATIONS MANAGER, AVAR; PENG SONG/GETTY IMAGES; KAISHO/GETTY IMAGES; AIR FORCE