



A publication of the Archaeological Institute of America

Conversation: Soldiers in the Laboratory

Volume 63 Number 6, November/December 2010

departments

How archaeology helps returning veterans adjust to civilian life

More than 47,000 boxes full of archaeological materials excavated at sites across the country by the United States Army Corps of Engineers have been sitting in storage, some of them since the early 1950s. With thousands of soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan needing job training and, in some cases, rehabilitation to help them reenter civilian life, corps archaeologists saw an opportunity to help veterans and get their collections ready for study. In the summer of 2009, the corps, working with their contracting partners, Brockington and Associates, the nonprofit Central Savannah River Area Wounded Warrior Care Program, and Veterans Affairs, started the Veterans Curation Project. Former soldiers including Staff Sergeant Walter Sinnott, a Purple Heart recipient and veteran of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, are receiving on-the-job training in processing archaeological collections. Sinnott spoke with senior editor Zach Zorich about being part of the program.



Staff Sergeant Walter Sinnott (Courtesy U.S. Army Corps of Engineers)

Were you already interested in archaeology before joining the Veterans Curation Project?

Absolutely. I've always been interested in American history. I was born and raised in Connecticut, so we got a good, healthy dosing of history. While the foreign stuff never really interested me, I liked North American culture because it's so young and new and it evolves so fast. I like the settlement period.

Did they let you work with anything from that period?

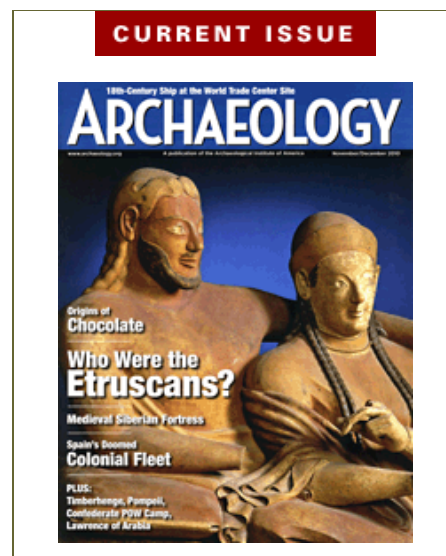
The stuff we're working with is from, I think, 3000 to 8000 B.C., Late Archaic. There are a few of us who had Indian human skeletal remains in our collections. They took them out initially because they didn't know how we would react. Some of us who were working with the artifact collections got to marry them up with the human remains collections. That was extremely interesting. It brought everything together and made it a lot more personal.

Has there been an artifact or collection that really caught your interest?

Actually, I find the archives that accompany the artifacts to be the most fascinating thing. Even if, initially, the artifacts are what you want to get your hands on—wow, these things are 8,000-year-old projectile points. That's pretty cool. But if there are field notes or other documents, it just gives you a little bit more background: how they found it, what kind of condition it was in.

What do they have you doing in a typical workday?

The collection is mainly projectile points, scrapers. There's a lot of broken pottery and stuff like that, mostly from along the Ohio River. We're basically taking the collection and rehousing it, recataloging it, uploading it into a database, taking forensic photography of anything that needs



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to be taken.

What have you gotten out of the program other than a paycheck?

I suffer from PTSD. Typically, there's a lot of isolation and depression and whatnot, so sitting down with people and interacting with them on a normal level can help anyone with the disorder a lot.

Have you thought about your next step?

Right now, I'm contemplating moving back to Connecticut to be with my family, or I'm going to go back to school.

And what do you think your future field might be?

I'm thinking of maybe taking some classes in anthropology and journalism. Then I'd like to go back to work for the Army Corps of Engineers.

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