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[00:00:16] **Speaker 1** And the

[00:00:30] **Speaker 2** Chris Kolakowski from the Wisconsin Veterans Museum. Thanks for coming to In Focus. Well, thanks for having me. I love the story of, you know, someone told me years ago, we all have something in common, but nobody ever talks long enough to kind of figure out what it was. And I think what brought us together is really interesting because I'm sitting at the airport, headed to Cleveland a little more than a month from this interview now, and I ended up coming across your dad. That's right, yeah. We start talking, and I'm telling him about what I do for a living, and, you know, oh, I love history and this and that. And he goes, oh my son's involved with history.

[00:01:04] **Speaker 3** So here we are. It's funny how things work out. My dad, I'm not at all surprised. My dad talks to just about anybody, and he's long taught me that everybody has a story. They just want to share it. And you guys obviously made a connection. I'm glad it worked out that we can talk today.

[00:01:19] **Speaker 2** Yeah, I love it. And I'll tell you, for anyone that doesn't know, you guys are located really just steps from the state capitol. That's right. And I've walked across that area, past that building so many times. Many times it's at night, and so it's always closed. So, but I've never stuck my head inside. And I finally went in. How would you describe what the experience is there?

[00:01:45] **Speaker 3** The museum is right at the top of State Street. So right across from the state capitol. And when you walk in, you get a, basically a tour of the history of Wisconsin veterans. We start with the civil war, and we go right around to the present day. And it's not necessarily museum about wars and battles, although we do talk about that, because it's a veterans museum. But it's really a museum about people. You get a feel for who some of these people are in uniform, a little bit about what they experience, some of the service conditions. Like I said, in all the conflicts, from the civil war right up to the present. And we always try and find a way for anybody that walks in a door to find something to connect to, at least something, if not more than one thing, in the museum. Whether it's a hometown, whether it's some personal aspect, went to the same college, whatever the case is. And I'm really glad you came in, and I know you had a great time with my staff.

[00:02:40] **Speaker 2** Yeah, I mean, I found it to be really interesting that everything there is somewhat centered on Wisconsin and Wisconsin's role. How do you guys pull that off?

[00:02:51] **Speaker 3** We actually were founded by Civil War veterans for the people of Wisconsin. We turn 125 in 2026. So we were founded in 1901 in the Capitol as the GAR Memorial Hall. Now the G.A.R. Is the Grand Army of the Republic. It's the veterans organization for Civil War, Civil War Veterans. And our mission has since expanded to include all Wisconsin veterans, all services, all timeframes. And so the stuff that we get, some of it we sometimes go out and acquire, but the vast majority of it, veterans and their families will donate to us. And so, when you have a veteran that walks in and says, here's the uniform I wore in Vietnam, or here's what my father or mother did in World War II, here's their letters back and forth. It's just a fantastic.

[00:03:43] **Speaker 2** It's a fantastic introduction. So are you still, even to this day, do you still get people that pop in and say, hey, look what I found in my attic, or look what found in this shoe box that was in the basement? Like, are you getting artifacts in that way too? That happens about every.

[00:03:55] **Speaker 3** Really? Where we either have somebody contact us by email, or you'd be amazed what walks in the door sometimes. We just had a general's aide family found stuff in the attic and was like, hey, this guy was an aide to this general in World War II. Would you be interested in collecting the material? And so we took it in.

[00:04:17] **Speaker 2** Yeah, and I was really impressed with some of the artifacts I saw and the fact that they were authentic, not replicas, and the actual items. Give us a sense of what kind of things that people will see when they walk in.

[00:04:31] **Speaker 3** Well, that's what I call the power of the authentic. The real thing, standing in front of the real thing is different than looking at it in a picture or reading about it in book. There's a power of real thing. The real place, power of authentic. Some of the stuff that we have, we've got battle worn uniforms from all the conflicts. We have a machine gun in World War I that the only Wisconsin Army Medal of Honor recipient earned the Medal of honor capturing and brought it home as a war trophy. Speaking of the Medal of Honor, we've got four of them on display from World War II and Korea. We've got a Vietnam helicopter that was in battle, has some battle damage. I don't know if they showed you that on the tail of the road. I saw that, that's amazing. How can you miss it? So it's some really incredible stuff and some really credible stories that we have on display. Yeah, and you guys have an actual cannon from the Civil War period. Right, a battle capture too. It was a Confederate cannon that was captured at Shiloh. By the 14th Wisconsin on the second day of battle on April 7th, 1862. And they brought it back as a war trophy to show off and help raise war bonds. And for years, it was every July 4th, it was the salute cannon that they'd fired down State Street from the grounds of the Capitol. What? Yeah, so it's just got this incredible story. And it's one of the first things you see when you first walk in.

[00:05:57] **Speaker 2** Yeah, and that's what I love about going through. And I told your guys, and you've got an incredible team of folks that they seem to know what they're talking about. They seem to be interesting. Oh, they're fantastic.

[00:06:05] **Speaker 3** Oh, they're fantastic. They're great, yeah.

[00:06:07] **Speaker 2** And I was telling the crew here, and I was tellin' you too, that when I came in, I kinda geeked out a little bit, nerded out little bit. I'm not ashamed to say it because I love history. And they seem to love it as well. Oh yeah. And they really just offer, I felt like I could talk to anybody in your facility and they would be able to tell me something about something that I was looking at.

[00:06:29] **Speaker 3** I would agree with that. And actually, one of the things when I came here in 2020, one of reasons I came was the staff. It is a passionate, dedicated group. It's a bunch of people that have found their calling in doing history and doing veterans history. And it's really, part of my job actually is just to direct the creativity and direct the energy in the best direction. And then I just let them go. And as a leader, that's a wonderful place to be. And it's a a wonderful team. And I couldn't be prouder of what we've been doing and what we're gonna do.

[00:07:05] **Speaker 2** Now, how many artifacts do you guys think you have in that space down there?

[00:07:08] **Speaker 3** So in our total collection, both there and in our offsite storage facility on the east side of Madison, we have 27,000 objects ranging in size from the Huey all the way down to collar insignia and everything in between. That, where we are in the museum right now, we have about 3% on display just because of space limitations. So I'm not good at math, but I'm sure your viewers can do the math and figure out what we've got there. But...

[00:07:37] **Speaker 2** So you're saying there's like 97% of all the other stuff you have is in a warehouse someplace else? Yes.

[00:07:42] **Speaker 3** Yes, think of an iceberg. You just saw the tip of the iceberg and there's this hole underneath, under the water. And we've got some incredible stories there that we'd like to put out on display. How do you know what to keep? How do know what collect? One of the biggest things when, like if you were to offer us a collection, one of the things that we look at is we look at first of all, what best tells your story? You know, photographs, letters, diaries, that's pretty obvious, but then objects. And sometimes if you're giving an oral history to us, we actually have the largest state-owned oral history, veterans oral history collection in the country. If you're talking... No, when you say oral...

[00:08:18] **Speaker 2** Does that mean like recordings of people talking about things or?

[00:08:20] **Speaker 3** Exactly, sitting down and doing an interview where I would be asking you about your military service. And if there are things that you mentioned or you hold up and say, you know, oh, I brought this back from wherever I served. We want that as well because that helps document your story.

[00:08:38] **Speaker 2** So now when you go out and seek people to tell those kinds of stories, or you guys go out in the community across the state to find those kinds people.

[00:08:46] **Speaker 3** Guys and gals go across the state. We partner with some of the local historical societies around the state as well. We partner on PBS on some things. That's us. So you guys are great to work with. You know, some of it is people come to us too. And it's part of the conversation we have is, you know, we're interested in your collection. If you wanna talk to do an oral history, it's your choice, here you go. We also look at things like condition. You know, is it, we don't wanna bring in bugs. We don't want to bring in something that's moldy, you know, that sort of thing. Condition, preservation. And then one of the other things we look at is, do we have it? You know everybody in World War II came home with what's called the Eisenhower jacket, which was the dress, you know the dress one that was cut off at the, you now at the bottom. It's a real sleek, sharp looking thing. There were 330,000 Wisconsinites that served in World War II. If every single one of them donated their Ike jacket to us, we wouldn't have space for anything else. So there's a little bit of picking and choosing about that of some of the more, I hate to say usual suspects. We may, it's like, okay, we will make exceptions in cases, but by and large, you know, that's another factor that we consider.

[00:10:01] **Speaker 2** And I'm gonna break this into two pieces here. So for you, as someone who's around this a lot, what do you feel like is the most impressive piece of the collection that's on display at the actual museum itself right now? I would say.

[00:10:14] **Speaker 3** I would say one of the most impressive things and when I do tours, one of things that people react to are the Medals of Honor. Because most people have never seen the Medal of Honor up close and personal. And we have four, and we have five in the collection. We have four on display at any given time and we rotate them. And when they see the medal, they see the stories, you can just see how it clicks. Because people know the Medal of Honor, but they may not really. They may not have ever really been exposed to it.

[00:10:44] **Speaker 2** Can you give us a sense of how unique it is for someone to.

[00:10:47] **Speaker 3** So think about, the Medal of Honor was created in 1862, retroactive to 1861. So it's been around for about 165 years. Think of the many, many millions that have served in the armed forces. Two millions in the Civil War, four million in World War I, 16 million in WWII, and that's just the major world wars in the civil war. Then you add all the thousands in Vietnam and up to the, there's. Over a million on active and reserve duty today, just alone. Of all those millions of millions of people, less than 4,000 have earned the Medal of Honor. Wow. And it's very close to 4,008, 3,900. So that's how rare it is. And so for us to have even five in our collection is pretty significant.

[00:11:37] **Speaker 2** I was blown away by the fact that two of the ones you have are a father-son combination. That's right. From Wisconsin?

[00:11:45] **Speaker 3** Arthur and Douglas MacArthur are from Wisconsin. And Arthur was earned his in the Civil War at the Battle of Missionary Ridge in November of 1863 as an officer in a Milwaukee regiment, the 24th Wisconsin. And then Douglas, who was appointed to West Point from Wisconsin, later earned his for the defense of the Philippines in World War II. They're the first father-son Medal of Honor combination in our country's history, and they both have Wisconsin roots.

[00:12:11] **Speaker 2** Yeah, I remember seeing their photographs as you come in pretty close to the big battle cannon. You got it, yep. Going back to talking about some of the artifacts, one of the artifact that really caught my attention was an actual chain and whip, or leg, I'm not sure what you would call it, but it was from the slavery period. Yeah. And I was told that- Leg irons, basically. Leg irions. Yeah. And I told that a soldier had brought that back from the battlefield. What's the story on that artifact?

[00:12:45] **Speaker 3** So in 1863, during the Vicksburg campaign, the campaign to open the Mississippi River, so there were several Wisconsin units that were involved, and when they crossed the Mississippi river into the state of Mississippi, for a lot of these Badgers, it was the first time that they were really up close and personal with the horrific institution of slavery. And some of these guys were, if you read their letters, which we have in our collection, they were absolutely horrified by what they saw, and understandably so. And so some of these guys- Collected these things and brought them home, just so that people would see. It made that much of an impact. And what, I can't remember if the label told it, but at least some of the things on display, but also in our collection, are from Jefferson Davis's plantation, which was overrun by Union troops. So here you are, the president of the Confederacy's plantation. And you are taking not only war trophies, but you're taking examples. Hey, this is what we're fighting against. This is what we're fighting for, is to end this. And so bring it home. It's a powerful, and then having them out there and being in front of them, it's just a powerful thing.

[00:13:53] **Speaker 2** Yeah, I was surprised too, like you think of a whip, you think it's gonna have some kind of a leather or kind of material attached to it, but that particular one that you have on display is, looks like a piece of metal, or some sort of a metal, I guess.

[00:14:10] **Speaker 3** Yeah, it had a metal and like cloth in it. We have an all leather one in our collection.

[00:14:18] **Speaker 2** And it is... And I say that to say that I didn't know that they made those out of, that kind of a harsh material, I guess. Well, and it's...

[00:14:26] **Speaker 3** These are the ones you use for the extra harsh element. It's an extremely unpleasant thing to think about, but at the same time, history is not all sunshine and roses for sure. And you have to remember that piece.

[00:14:40] **Speaker 2** Yeah, and I do find when people come through, does it become an emotional experience as they're going through all these periods of war?

[00:14:47] **Speaker 3** Can be, it can be. It depends on the visitor. One of the ones that I will find that's very interesting is when you have families come through and you can tell there's several generations. And I'll use an example that I've witnessed myself is where you have grandpa stand in front of our map of Vietnam with his grandchildren and say, this is where I was, and point toward the soldier we have on display and say that's what I looked like. And I flew in one of those and point to the Huey directly above. So those kinds of connections are really incredible. Some of the stories that people can respond to, like we've got stories of people that are killed and then the family story, that's still resonant. And I actually have staff members when I talk about the death of somebody in their 20s that have children in their twenties and can get emotional when we're talking about that or when they're hearing it on a tour. So it just depends on what grabs people. But again, that's the connection we're looking for. It may be emotional, it may be intellectual, whatever, but the point is to get these stories and get people connected and realize, hey, these were people just like us. They did incredible things in the service of our state and nation. And it helps bridge that gap, the civil military divide as it's called.

[00:16:07] **Speaker 2** Yeah, and when I came through, I just happened to arrive about the same time a large classroom of kids were coming through. And I think probably those kids were probably around 10, 11 years old. And I saw Eric, one of your guides there, give them the presentation. And I was pretty cool to see these young folks learn about this. So who's the typical person that kind of comes through and how do you? Build an experience that's gonna kind of cross all the generations so everybody gets a little something out of it. That's kind of the trick in some ways. It's a trick.

[00:16:43] **Speaker 3** It's a trick. How do you do that to engage everybody, senior citizens all the way down to children? And that's the trick, I call it the trick. One out of every three of our visitors are school children. And I'm really, really proud of that because that's The Next Generation. What we do is diminished if The Next generation doesn't understand or appreciate what this history is. And so for some of the younger kids, it's not necessarily. It's more, this is what they use. This is what the wore. Focus in on those concrete examples. Think of what it would feel like to wear a wool uniform. Don't you think you'd be hot on the battlefield? Things like that for them. High schoolers, you can do something different with them. You can focus on geography, you can focus different things. And then for other audiences, it's just tailoring your tour to what you wanna do for the audiences. And that's why we present it the way we present. Even if you walk through the galleries unguided, there's enough there. If you wanna play on some of our digital interactives, you can play on the digital interactivs. If you just wanna walk and look and see what catches your eye, you can do that too. That's also why we put the maps out there so people see kind of where's Vietnam? Where's Korea? Where's the Pacific Theater in World War II? And so it's kind of, we try and create kind of a choose your own adventure and let you kind of guide yourself from there.

[00:18:15] **Speaker 2** And why do you think it's important for these young folks to learn about all this? And why is it important for them to learn specifically about Wisconsin's role in previous conflicts? I think it is important.

[00:18:24] **Speaker 3** And for two reasons, to educate and to inspire. To educate, people need to understand that the shoulders that we stand on as Wisconsinites and as Americans are the generations that have gone before us. And when you think about what Wisconsinites have stood for, have raised their right hand and said, we're gonna defend the state and the nation and serve the state in the nation, you need to what that is and what that has entailed. The other thing I would point out is the state symbols that we look at every day that are callbacks to Wisconsin veterans. Our state flag, our state song on Wisconsin, both callbacks Wisconsin, but old Abe has a civil Wisconsin civil war tie. So there are things like this that we see every single day that most people don't realize comes right out of the service of Wisconsin veterans, so that's the education piece is get that appreciation. What has made us who we are and what we are and where we're going and the shoulders we stand on. The other piece is inspiration, because some of the most incredible stories that you'll come across are some of the stories we have in the museum. I tell people, if you wanna read some absolutely incredible stuff, read Medal of Honor citations and be very thankful that people like that have existed and have been capable of doing that. That's something that's educational but it's also very inspiring. When you realize some of what has gone before and hey, we've gone through this or hey, the frozen show sin, they survived that horrible winter, we can do the same thing. Whatever's going on in front of us, it gives us perspective. And so that's the inspiration piece. And I think that's both of those you can find at the Veterans Museum for sure.

[00:20:13] **Speaker 2** And I wanna hit on something, two things actually you mentioned that I was gonna bring up later, but since you brought it up, you were talking about old Abe. And for those that don't know, maybe give them a brief little history of who old Abe was.

[00:20:32] **Speaker 3** And what he represents. Old Abe the war eagle. When most people think of Wisconsin in the Civil War, they tend to think of the Iron Brigade in the East, but old Abe was the mascot of the Eighth Wisconsin which served in the Western Theater, including in the Vicksburg campaign we were talking about earlier. And on the way to Camp Randall when the unit was forming, a company out of Eau Claire bought an eagle and they carried old Abe into battle alongside the unit colors all through the unit's service. Old Abe at the end of the war came back. He had a price on his head. The Confederates had given a bounty if somebody can kill what they called the Yankee Buzzard. He survived unscathed, came back, lived out his days in the basement of the Capitol. He died of smoke inhalation in the first Capitol fire. His body was burned up in the second Capitol fire, but we still have some original feathers from him. We do have a replica, full scale replica in the museum.

[00:21:25] **Speaker 2** You can't miss it. It's one of the first things.

[00:21:29] **Speaker 3** Old Abe, there's a statue of Old Abe in the state assembly chamber that's right above the Speaker's dais. And so Old Abe watches over the state legislature. You'll see Old Abe pop up in a few other places. The mascot, one of the high school mascots up in Eau Claire is the Old Abes. So it's one of great symbols of Wisconsin. And he still goes into battle because of the connection to the 101st Airborne. I don't know if they explain that to you or not.

[00:21:57] **Speaker 2** They did. And I wanna make sure people get this too. And correct me if I'm wrong, but was Old Abe flown in battle as a symbol of here we come kind of thing? Or what did it represent when he was? So Old Abe.

[00:22:10] **Speaker 3** Bald eagle, so representing the United States. Old Abe, Abraham Lincoln. And it's that extra, you're not just carrying the colors, you're carrying the national mascot, which is also the unit mascot. And the 8th Wisconsin was officially known as the Eagle Regiment for that reason. And so it creates that esprit de corps, that sense of teamwork, that sense a pride in the unit, that hey, we're the only ones carrying an eagle into battle in the entire Union Army. We're the only regiment that does this. And it just adds something extra. It adds that extra oomph that sometimes carried them on to victory.

[00:22:49] **Speaker 2** It's pretty sad that he survives all that war and all those things, and then loses his life in a fire at the Capitol.

[00:23:00] **Speaker 3** It's, in some ways it's very ironic. You survive all that, and then this is what happens.

[00:23:06] **Speaker 2** Now do you get a sense that there's a, any wow type of moment or exhibit at the museum that people tend to drop their mouth at every time they see it, or they, you know, make some stop and maybe pay attention to that exhibit a little bit longer than some of the other ones. Anything stand out to you on that?

[00:23:23] **Speaker 3** I think one of the things that stands out to people. That's kind of a tough one, because again, it's different for different people, but I will say there are two or three that people stand around and look at. One of the ones is the Vietnam exhibit, but one of the other ones, and one of ones that I notice people linger at quite a bit, is Mark Nieto and the USS Cole. During the USS Coal attack, October 12th, 2012, sailors were killed during the terrorist attack at Aden, Yemen. One of them was Fond du Lac's Mark Nietoe. And they come back, he's cremated. Half of his ashes are spread in the family cemetery in Fond du Lac. The other half are buried at sea. And one of the things that we have on display is one of Nieto's uniforms. We have some other things from that day and that event. But we also have the box that carried his ashes that were put over the side. And his mother, right before it was carried on board ship to go be buried at Sea, she kissed the tag. And the lipstick is still there. And it's the mom's final kiss goodbye to her son. And that really, that's the reaction we get from a lot of people. And that's one of those, we were talking earlier about impacting families. That's one those where I've actually, I've seen mothers get very emotional because they can relate. I mean, it's an easy thing to relate to if you're a parent. And the final kiss good bye to your child that has died before his time.

[00:24:55] **Speaker 2** Yeah, I was really impressed by the realism of most, well, all of the exhibits, especially the ones that involved people and the mannequins and things that are wearing their uniforms. I mean, there's one of a soldier on his knee, it's to the left when you walk in to the main exhibit hall there. And it literally startled me because it looks like a real person.

[00:25:22] **Speaker 3** A lot of those actually are real people. When the museum was done, there's a company on the East Coast called Studio Ice and they can do castings of your face. And so we had people get their face molded, just some staff members, volunteers, some other prominent veterans that helped construct that museum in 1993. And they put them in the gallery. There's one in the Mexican border with the Mexican, the. Guy on horseback and the guy with the motorcycle. Yes. The guy on horse back still visits every now and then to check on himself.

[00:25:58] **Speaker 2** Are you sure you haven't replaced him with someone else? Exactly, yeah. I love that. Give me a second here to look at my notes because I was gonna go someplace and I just. Oh, I knew what I was gonna ask you. I'd love to talk a little bit about the state as sort of a source for all this great military history. We hear Camp Randall Stadium. We hear, I live on the East side near Union. Union Corners. Union Corneres. And I've got the big gold statue right there in my neighborhood. What can you tell us about. Some of the remnants of that history that's still amongst us. And like when I think Camp Randall, I don't know if people realize that that was a place where Wisconsin soldiers went to get trained and prepared to go to bat.

[00:26:50] **Speaker 3** Absolutely, if you look around not just Madison, but around the state, you will find traces of the state's military history. Camp Randall being one of the best examples. Half of Wisconsinites that went off to war mustered in Madison and then went off to the front. The other half were in Milwaukee. And actually during the Spanish-American War, the state fairgrounds, everybody goes to the state Fair. Everybody loves the state fare. That was the Camp Randall of the war with Spain in 1898. And there's a little plaque on the exhibition hall that commemorates that service. But Camp Randal, the parade field at Camp Randill during the Civil War is today the gridiron. It's actually the playing field in the stadium. And for those who are familiar with military installations, the paradefield is really kind of the beating heart of life at the installation. And so for they to be on the same spot. Every time I go to that stadium, it just, it hits me on a little extra level. You know, you talk about street names and location names, Union Corners, Fairchild Street, Civil War veteran, later became governor. You know you start going down the list and you see a lot of these names.

[00:28:01] **Speaker 2** The Molthouse Bar, I understand is that, is that really a old post office? I thought I heard someone say.

[00:28:08] **Speaker 3** It was one of the old post offices. You know, and then you go to other places around the state, Argonne, the town of Argon in Northern Wisconsin, named after the World War I battle. Dorchester has a monument to the famous four chaplains that die at sea from Dorchester. None of them were directly connected to Wisconsin, although there were badgers that died in the shipwreck. But because it was the SS Dorchester that sank, they raised a monument there. There's the Korean War Memorial up in Plover. You know, there's an admiral has a park named after him in up in Stevens Point. You know, Mitchell Airport in Milwaukee. General Mitchell, right? General Mitchell. Billy Mitchell. You know and you start going down the list and then you look at the national cemeteries and the state veterans cemetries, you know, that are around the state. Bob Euker is now, because he was an army vet, is now buried in the national cemetery right by the stadium. You know so if you look, you can find reminders and the presence of Wisconsin veterans in the very physical fabric of what this state is.

[00:29:17] **Speaker 2** Now that one spot where a lot of the graduates from UW take their photographs coming into Camp Randall with the big pillars. Yep. Is that remnants of the original Camp Randle?

[00:29:30] **Speaker 3** That's part of the original Camp Randall. As a matter of fact, that arch that people walk through to get to and from the stadium is very famous was raised by the GAR and Civil War veterans in 1911 to commemorate. And most people don't stop and look at it, but the statues are really, you know, really well done. And then the plaques list all of the units that came through Camp Randle.

[00:29:53] **Speaker 2** I was gonna say how many soldiers do you think walked through those arches?

[00:29:56] **Speaker 3** Well, I'll give you an idea. There was 81,000 Badgers that served in the Civil War for the United States. Wow. And if about half of them came through Camp Randall, so that's about 40,000 people. And if you think about that society at the time, it wasn't as mobile as we are. You know, you and I have both talked about how we moved around for our career and there are a lot of people that move around or travel. For a lot these people, they'd never really been out of the county. Until they go to the big city of Madison or the big City of Milwaukee, and then from there to the front lines. And so for a lot of these veterans, and I would argue even for later generations, this is one of the defining things in their life. There's a song that comes after World War I that is written called, How Can We Keep Him Down on the Farm After He's Seen Petrie? So in other words, how can all these returning servicemen are they really gonna stay in their small town when they've seen Paris, when they're seen other parts of the world? You know, and that's another human piece of it that people don't necessarily think about.

[00:31:06] **Speaker 2** And earlier you mentioned On Wisconsin as a battle cry. I had no idea that that song comes from Wisconsin Military Explained That History.

[00:31:17] **Speaker 3** We talked about Arthur and Douglas MacArthur. This is actually from Arthur MacArthur's Medal of Honor action. They're going up the Missionary Ridge outside of Chattanooga, Tennessee, and it's an 800 foot that slope, 45 degrees or better. And as they're going, the color bearer of the 24th Wisconsin who's in his 40s gets tired, understandably so. But the problem is in the Civil War, you're trained that wherever the flag is, you are. So if the flag stops, you stop. So he stops for a second to catch his breath. The unit stops under fire. Arthur MacArthur is 18 years old. He's full of all that teenage energy, right? So he comes over and grabs the flag and yells, I'll take it, and turns to the unit and yells On Wisconsin. Leads him up the hill. One of the first two flags to break atop Missionary Ridge, or one of the two flags seen atop Missionary ridge is the 24th Wisconsin. And he gets the Medal of Honor for that leadership under fire, it's that story that inspires the state song and the fight song. So now does that mean that whole, that regimen, they were all Wisconsinites? Yep, they all came from Milwaukee. Every, most Civil War units were recruited from a specific, either specific region or a specific city. In the case of Milwaukee, you could get everybody from Milwaukee County because it's a big enough city. You get some units, like one of my ancestral units, the 21st Wisconsin, is from the counties around Manitowoc, between Manitawoc and Lake Winnebago. And so that's where that comes from. You get Madison units as well, but they all are very, and a lot of these guys grew up together or served in the same, or knew the same neighborhoods, knew the city.

[00:33:01] **Speaker 2** So you're serving with friends. Yeah, a lot of people don't realize that these are all volunteers back in those.

[00:33:05] **Speaker 3** That's correct. That's right. The draft, most of the 250 year history of the United States military, from 1775 to the present, only about a third of that has been the draft. The rest of the time, it's been volunteer. And we think of the draft because they had the peacetime draft all the way through Vietnam. That is the exception rather than the rule. The volunteer military we've had since 1973 is very much the rule and so you get these people that make a conscious decision to raise the right hand and go.

[00:33:39] **Speaker 2** Yeah, and one of the things I learned from and listening to your team is some of these regimens were built on community and people were pulled from the same communities and part of that community includes a lot of diversity in terms of people of color.

[00:33:54] **Speaker 3** That's right. And that's something that we try and showcase a lot and try and point out where we can. There are entire companies recruited out of the Indian reservations, the native reservations. It's really interesting how they, no written language, but how you transliterate that in the records. There's a company of United States color troops that comes out of Milwaukee to go serve in the United, and a couple of black. USCT Wisconsinites are at Appomattox, the surrender of Lee's army in 1865. And there's some that are liberated as slaves and end up here in Wisconsin after working or enlisting in the Union army and end appear as Wisconsinites and are treated at no different than any other civil war veteran. And that's something that should be mentioned is the GAR never segregated in any way? They actually had a few women members as well. And the same was true of a veteran's organization since. And it's so, you know, you sometimes hear veterans say, I see no color, but green or blue, or whatever the service is. And you see that also in some of these veterans communities too. It's a really incredible story.

[00:35:13] **Speaker 2** What do you see, Chris, future wise in terms of how this museum continues to be curated and how it grows and what's it gonna look like moving forward, especially, you know, a hundred years from now?

[00:35:29] **Speaker 3** That's actually, it's funny you bring it up that way because that's something that I talked to the team about, particularly when we collect, is I say, when we collected, what do we want people 160 years from now to know about this generation? What are we gonna need to tell that story? And we have an idea of that because the civil war 160 years ago, what do have and what did we wish we had? So there's that. The other thing is when we take... Like if you were to donate, if you're a veteran and you donated me your uniforms, we take on a legal and ethical obligation to make sure that a hundred years from now, it's in good shape and can be studied. Your story is preserved and can shared for future generations. And that's something we take very, very seriously. In terms of where we're going, we are actually have been working with the state legislature on, and in the latest budget, they gave us some money to do some engineering and planning. To look at the next generation of the veterans museum and expanded veterans museum, to do more display spaces, to make even more programming space, to really take us to the next level. And to the point I just made, when we looked at what we needed and we started looking at what's gonna be required, I said, we're not thinking 10 years, we're thinking 30, I want you to think 50 years and beyond. This is a once in a generation project. And so let's think about it in those terms and give those future generations, set them up for success to be able to carry it, to stand on our shoulders and be able carry it forward and continue the important mission that we do.

[00:37:03] **Speaker 2** And you talked about artifacts and things you wish you might have. Is there something out there that you feel like you'd love to get in that collection over there that you'd like to see come your way? One of the things that I'd like...

[00:37:18] **Speaker 3** I'd actually like to see... That's a tough question. Oh, come on, you can handle this question. So one of the things that we'd like, actually, we'd to see is we'd see more from the current conflicts. One of the thing that you'll find is that from Desert Storm forward, they have trouble thinking of themselves as historic.

[00:37:43] **Speaker 2** Yeah, because it's all, we're all kind of living it, right?

[00:37:45] **Speaker 3** We're still living it. And it's still in the fairly recent past. But Desert Storm is over 30 years ago. 9-11 is gonna be 25 in 2026. So getting those stories now from that generation of veterans is something that we'd really like to, we'd like to see more of. That's a part of the collection that we're still trying to...

[00:38:10] **Speaker 2** Is there a Wisconsin piece of history, military history that's connected to 9-11 that you can think of off the top of your head?

[00:38:16] **Speaker 3** We had several badgers that were in the Pentagon on that day, and we have their oral histories. That's probably the most prominent thing that I can think of off the top of my head. And we did actually have, we have at least, we have oral histories from several Wisconsin veterans that joined because of 9-11. And they talk about it. I saw the towers come down and it motivated me to join up and serve my country. And we actually have somebody who joined the army who survived the trade center. Was from Wisconsin, had moved to New York, was there, and then joined the army and afterwards retired back home. So that's probably our closest tie.

[00:38:58] **Speaker 2** And we talked about what you thought was, you know, one of the more impressive kind of artifacts on site. Let's go to that warehouse. You've got so much stuff in there. What is the most impressive thing you think you feel like you have in that space?

[00:39:11] **Speaker 3** So I'll give you two things. Number one is the, we have the flag from the 24th Wisconsin that Arthur MacArthur carried up Missionary Ridge. So I, when I show it on tours- And that's dating back to when again? That's to be 1863. So it's 160 year old silk flag. And so I pull it out and say, this is the origin item. And it's incredible the reaction we get. One of the other things that we have is, you know, the iron brigade was known as the black hats because of the tall black hats that they wore. The only battle worn black hat still in existence is in our collection. Wow. And it was carried at Gettysburg by the color bearer of the second Wisconsin who was shot five times and actually was shot six times because the six bullet went through the brow of the cap but was too high for him to, you know, for him strike his head.

[00:40:02] **Speaker 2** And give us a quick lesson on the iron brigade for those who don't know that.

[00:40:06] **Speaker 3** So the iron brigade is very famous unit. It's the second, sixth, seventh Wisconsin, 19th Indiana and 24th Michigan. And they were known, again, we were talking about signatures earlier with the eagle regiment. They were known as the black hat brigade and later the iron Brigade because of their tenacity in battle. But their signature was wearing the tall, it's called a hardy hat, dress hat. And so in fact, the Confederates at Gettysburg, one Confederates recorded as saying to the other, there's those damn black hatters again. This ain't no militia we're fighting. This is the army, the Potomac. So everybody on both sides knew who they were. They were very famous. And even today, a lot of people, when they think of Wisconsin in the civil war, that's the first thing they think.

[00:40:48] **Speaker 2** So, and as far as the name itself, they became the iron brigade because of their toughness or how did they get that?

[00:40:54] **Speaker 3** Because of the toughness in battle. Actually it was the battle of South Mountain in 1862 as they're climbing the mountain under Confederate fire and going up very steep. One of the Union generals looks at it and says, those must be men of iron to do that. Wow. And the name stuck.

[00:41:12] **Speaker 2** We're gonna wrap you up because I know you've been there a little bit talking to us. I'd love to hear just, why are you so passionate about all this?

[00:41:21] **Speaker 3** To be honest, reasons personal and professional, both. The professional piece, I think we've already talked about some, the power of a great story, the power being able to share these stories. I'm very passionate about teaching and educating and getting people as excited as I am and to understand the importance of this stuff. But this is also personal. My ancestors have been in Wisconsin since 1845. I have Wisconsin ancestors, Wisconsin veteran ancestors in my family tree, all services from the Civil War all the way up through the Cold War. And so for me, it's a way to honor that and honor my family and honor their service as well. And so those two things, those two thing make it very easy to come out of bed, get out of every day.

[00:42:13] **Speaker 2** And if you had one superpower to kind of make something happen that you'd like to see happen over in your space, what would that be? And are you any plans to move anytime soon or to move into a bigger space, anything like that? So the current.

[00:42:26] **Speaker 3** Our plan is we're working to exercise the option to buy the building where we are. And once that's done, where the engineering is, the concept is, we're gonna tear down the existing building and build new and build a new purpose-built facility to the requirements that we talked about. If I could wave a magic wand, it would be fully resourced tomorrow and we'd be able to get underway. But we're still working through the engineering and we're working on raising the funds. It's gonna be a public-private partnership with our foundation and with the state. As I tell people, we're on the same path as the History Center, which is under construction across the street from us. We're just a few years behind. But it's gonna exciting.

[00:43:11] **Speaker 2** It's gonna be very exciting. Well, Chris, I appreciate you stopping in and I appreciate the team that you guys have over there. You're doing some incredible work. Thank you very much. Thanks for having me. I'm an old man, but I went in there and I learned things that I didn't know before and I'm gonna have to come back and spend some more time. Don't be a stranger. We appreciate you stoppin' in.

[00:43:41] **Speaker 3** It went fast, however.

[00:43:43] **Speaker 2** It did go fast. I didn't have to look at my notes hardly at all. There was just, I had to look a couple times because there was just some things that I wanted to make sure I got in. If I had a guess, I would think that was about 45, 40, but I don't know.

[00:44:01] **Speaker 4** Murr, do you need any cutaways? Are there any questions you need to re-ask?

[00:44:05] **Speaker 2** I think I'm good as far, but I was curious, how long was that? Do you have a time on that?

[00:44:11] **Speaker 4** About 45 minutes.

[00:44:13] **Speaker 2** Yeah, I think I'm good. Let me take a quick look at my notes here just to make sure since we're all here. Whatever you need, Murr, whatever you need. I appreciate it. And you offered, Willie. I think I got everything in there. There's one question I did. That's one I didn't ask, but it's okay. I think I'm good, man. All right. Is there anything that you wanted to get in there that we missed that- I think we covered it. I think we covered it.

[00:44:45] **Speaker 3** I think I think, we hit it. We had great.

[00:44:47] **Speaker 2** Yeah. Yeah, I think I'm good. I'm a good guy. I appreciate it.