

History of SMA is squared away in new book

By Sgt. Jimmy Norris

For Command Sgt. Maj. Dan Elder, the June release of *The Sergeants Major of the Army*, a book chronicling the history of the office of Sergeant Major of the Army and those who've held it, marked the end of more than a year and a half of hard work, frustration and lost weekends.

But despite the effort expended, Elder, the general editor and author of much of the book, wouldn't have had it any other way.

"It was a project I really felt compelled to do," he said. "I enjoy NCO history and for me to be able to go through those archives and do the research, it was great."

Elder, an amateur historian who has written several articles for the *NCO Journal*, was first approached about the project by Dr. Andrew Birtle, a senior historian from the Center of Military History in Washington, D.C., after a recommendation from Dr. Robert Bouilly, the historian at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy (USASMA), Fort Bliss, Texas.

"I feel very strongly that NCOs should write their own history," Bouilly said. "A book about NCOs has more credibility when it's written by an NCO, and as an NCO, Elder has a different perspective than an academic would have."

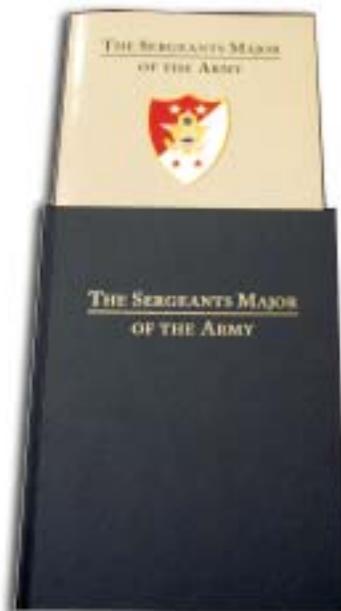
Bouilly said he recommended Elder based on the fact that he won the 1998 USASMA Military History Award and the 1998 Association of the United States Army Writing Award.

When he was offered the project, Elder said he jumped at the opportunity, not only because of his interest in NCO history, but because he felt it was his duty as a soldier.



Photo by Master Sgt. Lisa Hunter

Dr. Robert Bouilly and Command Sgt. Maj. Dan Elder discuss Army history covered in *The Sergeants Major of the Army* during an August book signing at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy, Fort Bliss, Texas.



The Sergeants Major of the Army book

"The order for the revision came from the Sergeant Major of the Army's Office," he said. "Being a soldier, when a superior asks me 'Will you do this?' I salute and say 'Roger that.'"

Originally written in 1995 by a group of civilians and commissioned officers, *The Sergeants Major of the Army* was in dire need of an update. Three sergeants major of the Army (SMAs) have held the office since the original printing (Sgt. Maj. of the Army Gene McKinney, Sgt. Maj. of the Army Robert Hall and Sgt. Maj. of the Army Jack Tilley), and a lot of the history in the first version of the book was inaccurate, said Elder.

While the task before him would prove to be arduous and time consuming enough to be a fulltime job in itself, he still had his duties as a sergeant major. By day, he performed his duties as the 541st Maintenance Battalion's command sergeant major at Fort Riley, Kan. Barring field exercises and deployments, his nights and weekends were devoted to the book. The project included four new interviews, which in some cases took as long as two days to finish. Elder also made phone contact with each of the living former SMAs, and spent countless hours sifting through the archives at both Carlisle Barracks, Pa., and the Center of Military History.

"There's no central repository for NCO history," said Elder. "It's out there in the archives but it's not cataloged according to rank, so it could take weeks of going through warehouses trying to validate one sentence or find a document that would prove a statement or claim. The hardest part was taking all of that research material and turning it into something understandable that would be useful in the book."

Elder said he's happy with the way the book turned out, especially since the former SMAs he's been in touch with approve of the way he depicted them.

"If I did right by them then it's a great product," he said.

In spite of his success, Elder said he's still not satisfied with the documentation of NCO history.

"There really isn't a lot out there written by NCOs, for NCOs about NCOs. It's not something we do," he said. "Sure you can go to clothing sales and find books about how to win the board or *Ranger Joe's Guide to Eating Bugs in the Field*, but NCOs don't tend to share their history or the lessons they've learned outside of their circle of friends. My challenge to other NCOs is to start writing about NCO-related topics."