

Helmets Across History

ROBBY WILSON HOPES WORLD'S LARGEST COLLECTION OF MILITARY HEADGEAR IN WEST LITTLE ROCK WILL HELP PUT AN END TO WAR

BY ERIC FRANCIS | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ARSHIA KHAN

*First to fight for the right,
And to build the Nation's might,
And The Army Goes Rolling Along.
Proud of all we have done,
Fighting till the battle's won,
And the Army Goes Rolling Along.*

— "THE ARMY GOES ROLLING ALONG," OFFICIAL SONG OF THE U.S. ARMY

The U.S. Army helmet sitting on the table in Governor Mike Beebe's conference room on a late October day at the State Capitol is not, at first glance, terribly remarkable.

But consider its provenance: Normandy; the Brécourt Manor Assault; Operation Market Garden; the Battle of the Bulge; Berchtesgaden. And take a look at the name stenciled above its rim: WINTERS.

This is the helmet of Major Richard "Dick" Winters, commander of Easy Company of the 101st Airborne Division — the famed Band of Brothers. And now, more than sixty-five years after V-E Day and not long after Major Winters's death, the helmet has come to Arkansas, where it will be a vital part of a collection unique within this country, and possibly the world. And it's all because of the man who is stepping up to the podium, shaking the governor's hand, and addressing a roomful of media and onlookers with clear enthusiasm.

"This piece," says Robby Wilson, "is probably the holy grail of military headgear."

Wilson should know. He's spent most of his life amassing a collection of helmets, hats, caps, berets, and every other conceivable piece of military headgear — a collection that now numbers more than fifteen thousand pieces from more than one hundred countries. And, he will tell you with a gleam in his eye, he's just getting started.



A few weeks after the Governor's Office press conference, Wilson cheerily welcomes visitors to his nonprofit Wilson History & Research Center. It's located, of all places, in a West Little Rock



Robby Wilson stands in front of display cases in his office that show some of the 15,000 pieces of military headgear his nonprofit Wilson History & Research Center has collected over the years.

shopping mall he owns, in offices that double as the headquarters of the law firm Wilson built as the pioneer of nonjudicial bankruptcies in Arkansas.

Not that Wilson is trying to hide the headgear away from the public; at the press conference, he prompted Governor Beebe — not for the first time, apparently — to help him find an adequate venue for a museum to display the collection. But for the time being, Wilson and

his staff — including a historian, a conservator, a photographer, and several graphic designers — are busy putting together lavishly photographed and carefully detailed books on various nations' military headgear. They've already published a book for Germany and are now working on one for France.

The collection was inspired by Wilson's uncle, General Winston P. Wilson, who gave his nephew any number of souvenirs from his combat tour

in the South Pacific and postings in Europe. Wilson says that as a boy he “defaced everything he gave me,” but that after he finished law school he realized “my uncle had left me a great thing, and I started trying to replace it.”

Today, given the slightest excuse, Wilson will eagerly dive into the various displays and storage rooms, guests in tow, to discuss the minutiae of helmet history, design, and trivia.

“People say a helmet is a helmet. It’s not true,” declares Wilson from inside what he calls “the Indiana Jones room,” actually a series of rooms crammed full of a maze of shelves stacked to the ceiling with clear plastic boxes, each one holding a helmet.

The profusion of hats — that’s how Wilson’s staff refers to the headgear, for simplicity’s sake — is frankly mind-boggling. There are military helmets stretching as far back as Waterloo, modern French dress caps called kepis with elaborate embroidery, simple cloth hats of every persuasion, and high-tech helmets for fighter pilots. The staff knows who wore many of the items, such as the admiral’s hat worn by U.S. Senator John McCain’s grandfather, or the kepi of World War I supreme allied commander Marshal Ferdinand Foch of France, or the Fedayeen helmet worn by Uday Hussein, son of Saddam.

But not everything is military — there are helmets worn by French sewer inspectors, complete with built-in headlamps; replicas from TV shows and movies, including Robert Duvall’s hat from *Apocalypse Now*; and those given to VIPs, such as the hat presented to President Ronald Reagan by the U.S. Army’s 10th Mountain Division. And there are other items that came in lots bought for the helmets, or picked up because they were uniquely interesting — such as uniforms, accessories, and even a tuba played by a member of Hitler’s personal military band, pawned after the war by the musician because he didn’t wish to be associated with the dictator.

The United States, England, France, Germany, Egypt, Croatia, Poland, Russia, the Dominican Republic — name a country and Wilson probably has one of its hats or helmets, staff historian Jordan Winter said. But the center has had to modify its mission, which was to collect one example of every piece of military headgear produced in the twentieth century.

“Our original goal was ten thousand hats,” Wilson says. “Then we learned there were a million standardized hats, with ten variations on each, developed in the twentieth century. Ten million hats!”

And that, regardless of how enthusiastic you are, is way too many, Wilson acknowledges. So he and this staff altered their approach: While they still acquire headgear and are especially on the lookout for exceptional pieces like the Winters helmet, now the center’s plan is to



A British ceremonial dress helmet from 1834, one of the more elaborate pieces in the collection.

photographically document as many of those ten million variations as possible. And even that, Wilson says, is a Herculean effort.

“The history of the world is disappearing before our eyes, no matter how hard we try,” he says. “There is no codex anywhere on the planet of what [military headgear] existed, except what is here.”

And what’s more, Wilson is working against a deadline — quite literally. He has esophageal cancer, and sooner or later it is going to kill him.

Mind you, when he was diagnosed in March of this year, he was told he had six weeks to live, so he’s rather optimistic that it’s going to be later.

“My prognosis is good,” Wilson says with a remarkably cheery tone for someone who, since the diagnosis, has had five rounds of chemo, two courses of radiation therapy, and a nine-hour surgery on his lymphatic system. “I’m no longer Stage IV. I’ll probably remain terminal all my life, but that’s just a word — it means you have cancer.”



Engineers working at the federal government's Oak Ridge, Tennessee, facility decorated and signed this helmet after they finished their part of the top secret Manhattan Project. Wilson says it is his favorite from the entire collection.

And Wilson is happy to share his optimism with other cancer patients — in fact, he was named one of the American Cancer Society's Faces of Cancer for 2011.

"My goal is to spread the word that cancer is no longer a death sentence in America," he says. "Cancer is an opportunity for you to face your

fears, be strong with your family and friends, and strengthen your ultimate beliefs, whatever that may be for you."

Wilson has applied similar introspection to his collection and has come to realize that in addition to serving as a valuable education and research tool, it could also serve a greater purpose: to help

end conflict. And it began with the realization of why unique and easily recognizable headgear is so important to the military — it provides a quick and easy symbol of who's on your side, and who's not.

"I began to realize I was witness to a much bigger truth than whether or not this was an authentic hat or had been worn by Hitler," he says. "My goal is that a future president will be overwhelmed by this and say, 'We're going to put a stop to this nonsense.'"

"We think this should be the place research begins; we think it should be the place war ends," Wilson says emphatically. "Ten million pieces of [military] headgear for one century? Why?"

Wilson, himself, is a veteran. In fact, one of the helmets in the collection is his own, worn at President Richard Nixon's second inauguration. Wilson understands the imperative to serve, so the center works to honor the warriors who wore the helmets without glorifying the wars they were sent to fight. His ultimate hope is for he and his staff, as gatekeepers to the future, to help head off conflict for future generations of young people.

In the meantime, Wilson and his staff are striving to bring their collection of helmets and photos to one million pieces before the end of his life.

"All of us at the center have struggled with what my mortality might mean, and we've decided just every day to go on," Wilson says. "We've got a mission that's a lot bigger than me being sick."

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