

# A Museum for the U.S. Army

Conceptual rendering courtesy of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill LLP



**By Dennis Steele**  
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*An artist's rendition, top, depicts the main entrance to the National Museum of the United States Army.*

Events and circumstances united Joe Mantegna, an accomplished actor, and the campaign to build the National Museum of the United States Army.

"People call it serendipity," Mantegna said, "but really, that's just a way of saying that things happen for a reason."

Early last summer, Mantegna was named spokesman for the National Museum of the United States Army project. The road that led him there started during World War II, landed him on the Memorial Day Concert stage on the U.S. Capitol grounds and, ultimately, to the purchase of a commemorative brick that will be part of the entrance path to the Army Museum, indicative of his volunteer work to help make the project a reality.

# and a Brick for Uncle Willie

**M**antegna currently stars in the long-running television series *Criminal Minds* as Senior Special Agent David Rossi of the FBI Behavioral Analysis Unit, an elite team of criminal profilers who handle the agency's toughest cases. Since 2002, Mantegna has been connected with the annual Memorial Day Concert, and he has been hosting or co-hosting the event since 2005, when the previous host, acclaimed actor Ossie Davis, passed away.

It was on the concert stage in 2002 that Mantegna said he had a life changing experience. It was the Memorial Day Concert following the 9/11 attacks, and he was narrating a memorial sequence for New York City firefighters who died while trying to save others in the World Trade Center.

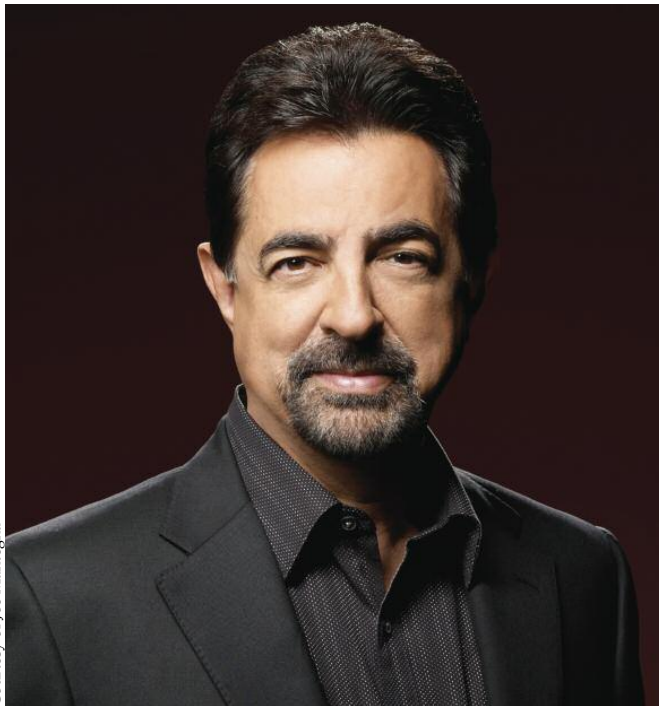
"About 300,000 people were watching from the lawn of the Capitol, and millions of others were viewing on television," Mantegna recalled. "Reading the narration about these American heroes, suddenly I was consumed by the gravity of the moment—the meaning of it, the importance of it. It's hard to explain, but it hit me, and when I was finished I was emotionally and physically drained. I was weak, shaking, and I had to inch my way down the stairs leading from the stage, grasping the handrail to steady myself so I could reach the bottom. That was my first year at the concert, and the result was that I knew that I somehow had to continue to be part of the event to help honor our American heroes ... particularly to honor the people who have made up our military since the [found- ing] of this country because without them, we would have nothing ... none of the freedoms, none of the opportunities, none of the things that we take for granted. Without the service and sacrifices that won the Revolutionary War and continue today, we would have nothing. It's just that simple."

Like every good Hollywood tale, there is a backstory.

When World War II started, Mantegna's family was settled in Chicago. His father was sick, suffering from

chronic tuberculosis—"so sick that I am lucky to have been born." His father could not serve in the military, but several uncles joined or were drafted, two in the U.S. Marine Corps, two in the U.S. Army Air Corps and another in the ground forces of the U.S. Army—William Novelli, whom Mantegna calls Uncle Willie.

With the introduction of Uncle Willie, another layer of serendipity comes into play. Novelli was a sergeant in 1944, serving as the squad leader of a mobile radar unit in the



Courtesy of Joe Mantegna

*Joe Mantegna, left, is the national spokesman for the museum project. Below (left to right), William (Uncle Willie) Novelli, BG Creighton W. Abrams Jr., executive director of the Army Historical Foundation, and Mantegna.*



Army Historical Foundation

*Memorial bricks dedicated to individual soldiers will be inset along the "Path of Remembrance" leading from the parking area to the museum's main entrance.*



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563rd Signal Aircraft Warning Battalion, which landed in France on D-Day+20. The unit was attached to the 4th Armored Division under GEN George S. Patton Jr.'s Third Army when it swiveled out of an ongoing fight in France and headed toward Belgium to relieve Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge.

A lead element for the 4th Armored Division was the 37th Tank Battalion, which would be the first in Bastogne through a daring final push ordered by its commander, then-LTC Creighton W. Abrams, an esteemed Army leader who, decades later, commanded the Military Assistance Command-Vietnam and went on to serve as U.S. Army Chief of Staff.

Today, his son, BG Creighton W. Abrams Jr., U.S. Army retired, serves as executive director of the Army Historical Foundation, which leads the effort to fund and build the National Museum of the United States Army. The foundation was searching for a spokesman to help propel the funding campaign, and BG Abrams sought Mantegna as a potential candidate. According to BG Abrams, Mantegna stood out because of his long-standing support for America's military, his professional standing, and his work with the Memorial Day Concert.

"Joe was simply a very good fit, and I was struck by his sincerity," BG Abrams said. A meeting was set up, and Mantegna brought Uncle Willie, now 90 years old.

"Because he was with the 4th Armored Division, Uncle Willie was absolutely thrilled to meet Abrams' son, and the meeting was one of the few times Uncle Willie talked

about his own World War II experiences," Mantegna recalled. "It not only increased my appreciation for Uncle Willie's service; it increased my appreciation for every American's military service."

The match was made, and Mantegna enthusiastically embraced the effort.

"Like I said, to me it was serendipity," he explained. "Things led me there."

**T**oday, Mantegna calls the effort to fund and build the museum "a passion ... I'm really just contributing whatever name recognition that I have to the cause. My responsibility is to go around and talk with people, to get individual and corporate sponsors to join the effort."

So far, he has recorded a number of radio and television public service advertisements to gain public attention for the Army museum, and other projects are planned.

And Uncle Willie got a brick.

Mantegna purchased a commemorative brick that will be part of the museum and honor Uncle Willie's service for the life of the museum. It reads:

William J. Novelli  
World War II  
Chicago, IL

It will join thousands of others that will be inset along the "Path of Remembrance" section of the museum during construction. The path will lead visitors from the parking area to the main entrance, honoring veterans for their service and setting the overall tone of the museum—recognition of the service of individuals in the collective history and wider contributions of the U.S. Army to the people of the United States.

BG Abrams said plans call for the museum groundbreaking ceremony to be held in 2014 with a target opening in 2017, "depending on the construction schedule and fundraising."

About \$68 million has been raised thus far toward the \$175 million target.

### How to Help

**The Army Historical Foundation recently launched a commemorative brick program to help pay for the museum. More information is available at the foundation's website at [www.armyhistory.org/bricks](http://www.armyhistory.org/bricks) or by phoning 855-ARMY-BRX.**



Left, the “Wall of Remembrance” depicted in an artist’s rendition. The black marble wall will be etched with the names of all the U.S. Army’s campaigns. Below, a depiction of the “Army in Society” gallery.



and campaign streamers etched on its face, and set against a backdrop of “The Soldier’s Creed.”

The second gallery differentiates the National Museum of the United States Army from other military museums, according to BG Abrams. Named the “Army in Society” gallery, it will depict the U.S. Army’s collective impact on social and cultural areas and advancements in science, technology and medicine, along with examples of American society’s support for the Army.

The third gallery—“Fighting for the Nation”—comprises six sub-galleries that depict the Army in wartime from the American Revolution to “Uncertain Battlefields” that extend from the period of the 9/11 attacks into the future.

The site has been selected and approved. The museum will occupy 41 acres on the northern side of Fort Belvoir, Va., with its own public entrance to facilitate accessibility.

According to the plans, a ceremonial parade ground will flank the main building, which will have an interior space of about 185,000 square feet. The museum is slated to consist of three main lower-floor galleries.

The first gallery, which starts at the entrance, continues the theme of individual service that begins with the commemorative bricks outside. It presents a sequence of 42 soldiers’ stories from the span of Army history. These displays will be adjacent to a massive black marble wall named the “Wall of Remembrance,” with all of the Army’s campaigns

The museum also will contain a learning center. In particular, it is designed for middle school-aged students and integrates collaborative and competitive problem solving challenges in geography, science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

Other features of the museum’s plan include an Army Theater, where visitors can see a 15–20 minute introductory presentation; a Veteran’s Hall, which can accommodate special events; and on the museum’s rooftop, a Medal of Honor Garden will honor Army recipients of the nation’s highest award for valor.

The plans are ambitious, but as BG Abrams put it, “A great Army deserves a great museum.” ★