



A STORYTELLER'S TALE

By Sasha Maggio and Jacqueline Whitt, August 17, 2021
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Jacqueline Whitt: Hello, and welcome to A Better Peace, the War Room podcast. I'm Jacqueline Whitt, Associate Professor of Strategy and Editor-in-Chief for WAR ROOM. So some days it seems like social media has taken over our lives. And we talk about doom scrolling, and tweet storms, and threads, and likes and impressions, and advertising, and blocking, and sub-tweeting as if those things have always existed. Of course, we use social media to keep in touch with real-world friends and colleagues to cultivate new networks and to speak to people in positions of authority, to get responses from customer service, to tell stories, celebrate accomplishments, share grief, and of course, to share pictures and videos of cats. So social media is changing the way we interact, and it also offers new possibilities for communicating, especially around stories. And so today, I'm really pleased to be here in the virtual studio with Sasha Maggio, who is an Army contractor working at the Mission Command Training Program and works in the Scenario Design Division.

But she also tweets as, her Twitter handle is [@Mother_of_Tanks](https://twitter.com/Mother_of_Tanks). And she has been working on, I think, perfecting a form of serialized storytelling on Twitter. And she's worked on some very long threads with the 18th Airborne Corps on a few of their series, including the Atomic Age Army series from June of last year and the Market Garden series from last September. And she's also going to talk about a project she's working on currently. So Sasha, welcome to the War Room.

SM: Thank you.

JW: All right. So we're really happy to have you here today. And I would like for you to talk about... First you could just give us a brief overview of the project. Where did the idea come from and what was the goal of these long-serialized narratives on Twitter?

SM: With the longer series, we try to share different parts of the Army's history in a way that makes history a little bit more digestible for a broad audience, so that people that don't normally enjoy history will be drawn to it and still get something out of it. And with the current project with last year being so pandemicy, I was working from home for most of that time and I wasn't feeling as productive as I could. So I just started researching and the research developed into a

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series that I saw so much potential with, and I brought it to the Combined Arms Center and that's what we're doing.

JW: So Sasha, I am on social media for work and for all sorts of things, and I use Twitter differently than I use Facebook and LinkedIn and all of that. And I imagine that might be the same for you. Can you tell us a little bit about your social media story, and then how did you get involved with the 18th Airborne Corps on Twitter?

SM: Sure. So, I had been on social media for a long time because before I did the work that I do now, I worked in content development. And when I started to become more active on Twitter, a couple of years ago, I decided that I was going to create a new account that had a much more focused design. So I wanted to share more about armor history and history in general, but especially military history because I enjoy it. So I created this [@Mother_of_Tanks](#) account and it just developed from there. And then, I believe it was last year in 2020 in January, a friend of mine on Twitter volunteered me for a friendly competition with the 18th Airborne Corps Public Affairs Officer or PAO that led to us becoming friends. They had been doing a series on the Battle of the Bulge and the month prior, they had a little bit of a slip with a less than popular tweet.

And so this gave me an opportunity to bring them some good publicity and some positive engagement because my account is seen as generally positive. I don't tend to get into trouble, I don't get into fights, that kind of thing. So they sent me a thread on the... is it the 391st Engineers? Maybe it's 391st. I forget. It was the one that's a Damned Engineers. I think it was 291st. And they go, "Here's our thread. This is what we're going to do. Why don't you create a thread also on this topic and then we'll see which thread does the best?" So I made the thread-

JW: And so it grew a friendly competition.

SM: Right. A friendly competition. And my thread was longer. It was full of gifs because that's how I like to do the storytelling. It reinforces the tone that I'm going for and I like to throw in some humor because these topics get a little dark and I try to lighten it so that people are a little bit more comfortable with the topics. And so my thread did well. They decided that I was the winner and we became friends from that point. So we kept working, just collaborating on different threads.

JW: And so through this collaboration, you worked with them, as I said, on a couple of series about the Atomic Age Army, about Operation Market Garden, and this sort of introduces a different style of storytelling in some ways, like you said, that you're trying to make it accessible, make it interesting, and really reach a different kind of audience. Can you talk a little bit about what things you keep in the back of your head as you're writing these Twitter threads?

JW: Sure. I am. I like to... It's important to remember that the audience, especially for an official military account, is probably less than 50% Army. It might be 50, 50, but that's probably a generous assumption. So you want to make sure that what you're presenting is not just for the military, because these accounts, the Public Affairs Officers especially, they have a responsibility to bridge that gap between the civilian audience and the military. And so we need to share, and I say, we, I am not a Public Affairs Officer. I have never been, it's just... But I understand that role and I do a lot of collaborating with them. So when you're writing for that audience, you have to keep that in mind.

You also want to keep it interesting and it's not going to be interesting when you have a large audience, if you're just targeting a very small part of that audience. So you have to keep in mind, your target audience might not be the target audience that you wanted. It's the target audience that you have. So 18th Airborne Corps now has, I think, over 40,000 followers. And that's a substantial growth because when we did that competition, I think there were less than 7,000. But they have to remember that their audience is those 40,000 plus people. It's not just the military or it's not just the civilian audience. And-

And that, I mean that widespread audience that you don't know a ton about, you know the number and you know what people are responding to, it's so diverse that seems like a real challenge for PAOs and for anyone who's on Twitter because you never know who's going to come across one of your tweets. What are some of the things that Twitter enables you to do in a storytelling way that other things that PAOs have access to, maybe you don't allow them to reach that same really broad public audience?

SM: I think that some PAOs don't necessarily catch on right away that every platform has to be different. So what they're putting out on Twitter is going to be different than what they put out on Facebook or on Instagram, if they're on Instagram. And then there are some PAOs that just focus on, what is it, DVIDS? Is it the-

JW: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

SM: Yeah.

JW: The official side of-

SM: Right, the official side of things. But if you want to actually reach your broadest audience, you need to understand that the content that you're putting out has to adapt to each platform, and you can use the same type of storytelling but you have to just adjust it for each. So with the series that we're doing now with the Combined Arms Center, I'll do the threads on Twitter. And then I will also reformat some of that to fit on Facebook and to work on Instagram. And

Instagram has a different character limit too, which I wasn't aware of that until we did the series. So when I found out that that was a problem, so now I have to do a different thread, a different post for Instagram to show that it fits.

JW: And Instagram, right, is around images, Twitter is this combination of words and gifts and pictures. The threading is a little bit different. So each of them offer, I think different, opportunities, right? For storytelling. How would you characterize yourself as a storyteller? That seems to be at the heart of most of the threads you're doing, is you're trying to take readers or the audience on this narrative journey to tell stories. Do you have... I don't know. Do you have a background in storytelling or is that something that you think explicitly about as you're working on this?

SM: It's a little different than storytelling because with history everything's already complete. So like I can build it a little bit, but I want to make sure that the... My number one priority is the facts are correct. As long as the facts are correct, then how I presented is going to be like, that's my next priority. And with Twitter, especially because the threads can get really long because you're limited to, I think it's 280 characters or spaces now. With Twitter, I would rather... Especially if the thread is going to be long, I would rather give them one sentence in a tweet to encourage them to read the next one than to jam pack every tweet with max characters, max spaces.

JW: Right. Yeah, there's a pacing on Twitter too. And I always find threads easier to read if there are complete sentences or complete thoughts and that they lead you through and they make you want to keep reading rather than, like you said, lots of abbreviations and lots of tricks to get your character count down under that limit.

SM: Yeah. I would rather make it a longer thread with shorter tweets to encourage people to read it than to jam pack it to make it a shorter number of tweets. Because if they're all paragraphs and 280 spaces is not that much when you look at it, but when it's jam packed into a tweet, it looks like a lot. And it's a very small commitment to ask someone to read just one sentence and then to read this one more sentence, especially if you're filling it with pictures and gifts. So that's part of the storytelling aspect is to shape it so that it's a little bit more comfortable so that people are like, "All right, this is very small commitment to read just one sentence at a time." Some people at work have told me, they're like, "I don't really like that style." They're not the target audience.

So that's how I decide. Yeah, that's how I decide. If you don't like it, you are not the target audience, because a lot of people do like it. And I know that there are some people who have said that they prefer when there are all historical pictures and not the gifts, but I like that type of storytelling because it takes the guesswork out of whether or not the person that composed it was

trying to be funny. So if I write something and I think it's amusing, I want to make sure that I'm reinforcing that and that's why I use the gifts.

JW: The gifts can help signal tone, right?

SM: Right.

JW: In a way that's really hard to sometimes capture in text and even with historical pictures, right? Because they're part of the archive.

SM: Exactly.

JW: And then the gifts break it to use a theater reference. They break a wall between the fourth wall, between the narrator and the audience, maybe. So was your thinking about telling stories and telling history on Twitter? How has it changed over time as you've been working on these projects?

SM: Well, initially I was drawn to the Twitter historian crowd, because I like that type of... I like history. But one thing that I noticed was that it was even for someone that likes history like myself, it's a lot to sit there and read some of their tweets. And-

JW: This is like hashtag Twittestorians, and it's like these are-

SM: Right.

JW: ... academic PhD, often like university professors on Twitter.

SM: And I love it. I love what they're putting out, but I also know that for me in the middle of the day, it's a lot to sit there and read some of the stuff that they put out. And so I wanted to have a different style because I'm not a historian, at least not at the moment. And so I do this for fun, and if I'm sharing something for fun it should be enjoyable to engage and read. And so that's my... I want to make sure that the history is correct, the story that I'm telling is correct, but I want it to be a little bit different. I want it to be enjoyable for people that... And I do get that compliment a lot. People will tell me that they don't normally like these types of threads, but they really enjoy mine. And so that to me is a big compliment because it shows that what I'm trying to do is at least working for some people.

JW: Yeah. I think that's a great feeling to have somebody say that they like what you're doing or they think what you're doing is really valuable. So let's talk a little bit about this. The series that

you're working on now, Building an American Army, which is if you're a historian, if you're a military historian, it's fascinating. I love them. I read them a lot.

SM: Thank you.

JW: And I said, tell us about the origins for that specific project, and where are you now, and where do you hope the project ends up?

SM: Sure. So last year in about February, I started reading a book called the Tank Killers. I think the author is Harry Yeide. I'm not sure if I'm pronouncing his name right. But the book was really interesting, but in the very first chapter, he mentions the 1941 GHQ Maneuvers. And he mentioned them in such a way that they seemed really important and I didn't have enough background on that to just instantly know. So I started to research the topic. And then the following month, late March, early April, I moved to change jobs, and in the middle of a pandemic were working from home. I had all this extra time because everything was closed. So, not much of a social life when there's a pandemic going on. So I just started to keep researching. And as the research grew, all the information that I was gathering, I started to sort of shape it in a way that I could see all the potential to do some good for the Army with this type of storytelling and telling this particular part of the Army's history, the massive mobilization period from 1939 to 1941.

And a little bit of the interwar years to reinforce that history and explain what was going on. And then there was also potential to support all of the Army's messaging through the Chief of Public Affairs Office and support... Telling the Army's history is important. It's important for the nation, but it's also important for people that are in the Army to know where the Army comes from. Plus during this time period, we started to really focus on Combined Arms, which is still extremely relevant. And the shift a few years ago from COIN to Counterinsurgency to LSCO, the Large-Scale Combat Operations. I've got the words. I know I do.

So, that shift and the relevance of this history to what we're doing now, I saw all the potential and I started to shape it in that way. And then before I knew it, I had this massive amount of information, these threads that were mostly compiled. And I went... I brought it to Lieutenant General Rainey, who's the Commander of the Combined Arms Center and also Fort Leavenworth. And he supported it. He told me to... He had me work with his Public Affairs Office staff. And here we are with the series.

JW: Yeah. So the series includes lots of different topics. There've been recent ones on Army education, the one on logistics is really phenomenal. Do you have a favorite thread that you've done so far? Or they're all special to you?

SM: To be honest, I am only doing threads that I find interesting. So there are topics that I will absolutely just ignore or brush off because if they're not personally interesting, then I'm going to have a harder time making them interesting for other people. But I started, in late February, with... And the funny thing is I'm doing this as a hobby. So I have my actual job too.

JW: This is literally a side gig, right?

SM: Yes.

JW: It's not your job.

SM: This is not my job. But I love it so much and I see how important it can be. And I want to share this story so bad, so I'm making it happen. But I started talking a little bit about the history of the maneuvers and then talking about the interwar years and talking about... And that's something that I wasn't too knowledgeable about before I did this research. And so some of it I've learned as I go. And then we've talked about... We started with logistics, I've got more logistics topics. I've started some of the officer education. I've got NCO education coming up. I'm going to talk about key players, McNair who is extremely important to shaping the Army that we have now, Marshall and so many others.

But I also want to talk about what the different branches of the Army were doing during this time period, but also give an idea of what they each do. And in my mind, I mean, maybe the Army has a different idea, but that shows USAREC potential because recruiting can use this content to show, "Hey, we still do some of this stuff. Here are the types of jobs that we've got available."

JW: Mm-hmm (affirmative). This connection between the past and the present.

SM: Right.

JW: I think Twitter and the threads that you're putting together makes those connections pretty clear and they're interesting to think about.

SM: Later this year... And I've pushed them forward to the fall so that they line up with when they happened, but I'll talk about the different maneuvers. So the Louisiana Maneuvers, there's also Tennessee and Arkansas before that, the Carolina Maneuvers. And then I figured that there's so much content that I can bring this series up to December and end it with the talk of the 80th anniversary of Pearl Harbor and the official U.S. entry into World War II. So 2021 is 80 years later, so that 80 years from these maneuvers, 80 years from that Pearl Harbor attack, 80 years from the time that we said, "All right, that's it, now we're in war." And I just thought that was a good place to end it because we're talking about a part of the history that a lot of people don't

focus as much on. At least not on Twitter, than I've seen. So everybody wants to talk about the war, but they don't want to talk about how we built up and how we prepared for that war.

JW: And again, we know that this is... If you study the period at all, that period of waiting and anticipation, especially where Roosevelt and the executive, you can see this march to war and this preparation. So Pearl Harbor is, of course, a surprise, takes everybody, right? It's a shock to the system, but the Army has been prepping for a long time to figure out what it needs to do.

SM: And that's something that... I try to drive that theme too, that the senior leaders in the Army at the time, they knew that we would have to prepare, and they were doing everything they could to help the Army prepare, even when things like funding were not available. So the people developing doctrine continued to develop doctrine, even though they didn't have the money to test it, because they knew eventually the money would be available, but things like that set us ahead instead of just waiting. And then when the Germans invaded Poland in 1939, and it would be over two years before we were attacked at Pearl Harbor. So we had more than two years where we knew that it was coming and so we had that pre-war mobilization period that we never had before.

JW: Mm-hmm (affirmative). So I think it's such an interesting time period to pull forward. The anniversary gives it some salience in terms of the contemporary moment. And then I liked the way that they fit together. You can read a thread and they make sense. It's complete. It gives you, maybe new knowledge or new information or a new way to think about something, but then you can read them together, right? You can start to serialize the little mini-serial threads and start to put together an entire story of the picture. Do you ever think about what you might do with these after they're all done in December? Are they just going to stay on Twitter?

SM: Well, I am saving them all in order on the Combined Arms center account as a Twitter moment. And I had talked to Army University Press about maybe finding a small corner of their website to recompile these as, reformat, rather, as articles and save them as PDFs and just hang them there. And if that doesn't happen, then I will put them on my own [website](#). But also, I mean, the research is good and it's a good start. And next year I'm working on a similar series that'll focus on what the British Army was doing.

JW: Oh, great.

SM: And then I'm thinking about taking all of this research experience. I mean, I've got two master's degrees and so it's... I'm no stranger to research and writing and I'm thinking of trying to get into a doctorate program for maybe 2023.

JW: Great.

SM: Yeah.

JW: That sounds like I've not... Yeah, 2023 sounds both very far away and very close.

SM: Yeah.

JW: When I think about time, that sounds really interesting. Well, Sasha, we are about out of time today, but it has been so delightful to talk to you. I would really encourage everyone who is a listener of A Better Peace, if you are not already familiar with the threads that we've been talking about today to go find them. You can find them on Twitter. Again, her Twitter handle is [@Mother_of_Tanks](#), Mother of Tanks. And I think you can also find them. Sasha, is there another way for people to find the things that we're talking about easily?

SM: Yeah. All the threads are posted on the Combined Arms Center account. So that's [@USACAC](#) and they're also on the Combined Arms Center Facebook page and Instagram account. But I have all the links saved on a linked page on my website, which is just motheroftanks.com.

JW: Great. Fantastic. So please go seek these out, find them and think about if you're a historian and if you're a Public Affairs Officer, if you are in the social media space as part of your organization, as part of your job, I think it offers real opportunities for communication, but also for storytelling and identity building and all the things that Sasha has been talking about today. So with that, I'm going to wrap us up for today on the conversation with A Better Peace. So thank you all for listening in. We'd ask that you send comments on this episode or others that you listened to, and please send us your suggestions for further episodes. We're always really happy to hear from you. Please subscribe to A Better Peace if you've not already done so on the pod catcher of your choice, and after you've subscribed rate and review this podcast so that others may find it, and so that we can continue to grow the community for conversations like the one you've just heard. Today's conversation is over, but we will continue the conversations next time. And so from the War Room, I'm Jackie Whitt.