FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

July 8, 2019

Jim Bartlinski

U.S. Army Airborne and Special Operations Museum

910-643-2676

james.bartlinski.civ@mail.mil

***Discovery and Recovery: Preserving Iraqi Jewish Heritage***

Fayetteville, NC … On July 12, 2019, the U.S. Army Airborne and Special Operations Museum will open a new exhibition, *Discovery and Recovery: Preserving Iraqi Jewish Heritage*. The exhibit details the dramatic recovery of over 2,700 historic materials relating to the Jewish community in Iraq by 16 U.S. Army Soldiers from Mobile Exploitation Team Alpha in May 2003. The Soldiers discovered the cache of cultural material while searching the flooded basement of Saddam Hussein’s intelligence headquarters in Baghdad. In addition, the exhibit showcases the National Archives and Records Administration’s ongoing work in support of U.S. Government efforts to preserve these materials. *Discovery and Recovery: Preserving Iraqi Jewish Heritage* is presented in partnership with the National Archives and is free and open to the public. The exhibition runs through September 22, 2019.

In both English and Arabic, the 1,500 square foot exhibit features 22 recovered original items and a “behind the scenes” video of the fascinating, yet painstaking, preservation process.

**Background**

**……………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………**

In 2003, then U.S. Army Reserve, Civil Affairs Corps Major Corine Wegener, while serving as an Arts, Monuments and Archives Officer for the 352nd Civil Affairs Command, formerly part of the U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC), was assigned to the military-civilian team assisting the Iraq National Museum. In addition, Major Wegener provided support to the Iraqi Ministry of Culture. Soon after the trove of Iraqi Jewish cultural heritage materials was discovered by Mobile Exploitation Team Alpha, Major Wegener was assigned to lead the team securing, preserving, and transporting the 27 trunks containing the waterlogged historic items recovered from Iraq’s intelligence headquarters.

Major Wegener’s work in 2003, with the U.S. Army’s Civil Affairs Corps, harkens back to that of the Arts, Monuments and Archives Officers, known as “Venus Fixers” and “Monuments Men” during World War II. Established in June 1943, as the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives commission (MFAA), this specialized unit of Soldiers fell under the command of the Allied Military Government for Occupied Territories branch of the U.S. Army’s Civil Affairs. The Monuments Men ranks were made up of museum curators, art historians, academics, and architects, turned Soldiers. They were sent to the battlefields of war-torn Europe to recover art, historical artifacts, monuments, archives, and to safeguard historic structures from destruction or theft by the Nazis.

Present day U.S. Army Civil Affairs has a Cultural Affairs branch found within the U.S. Army Reserve Command with a mission of cultural preservation, much like their World II counterparts.

Seeking additional guidance on the care of these important cultural artifacts, Iraq’s transitional government, established after the March 2003 U.S. led Multinational Force invasion of the country (known as the Coalition Provisional Authority), placed an urgent call to our Nation’s foremost conservation experts at the National Archives. Doris Hamburg, Director of Preservation Programs, and Conservation Chief, Mary Ritzenthaler, answered the call to assess the damage and make recommendations for preservation of the materials. Major Wegener, Ms. Hamburg, and Ms. Ritzenthaler worked closely together to mitigate any further damage to the Iraqi Jewish cultural heritage materials. Given the limited treatment options in Baghdad, and with agreement from the Iraqi representatives, the materials were safely transported to the United States for preservation and conservation. These materials were freeze-dried, preserved and digitized under the direction of the National Archives, and a small selection were exhibited by the National Archives, first in Washington, D.C., in 2013. The entire collection includes thousands of Jewish books and documents in Hebrew, Arabic, Judeo-Arabic, and English, dating from 1524 to the 1970s. The National Archives launched a special website to make these historic materials freely available online worldwide at www.ija.archives.gov.

The preservation, digitization, and website were made possible through the very generous financial support of the U.S. Department of State. The National Endowment for the Humanities in partnership with the Center for Jewish History were indispensable in providing key start-up support for the project.

The Jews of Iraq have a rich heritage, extending back to Babylonia. These materials provide a tangible link to this community that flourished there. In the second half of the twentieth century, the Jews of Iraq were dispersed throughout the world. Today fewer than five Jews remain in Iraq.

**Exhibit highlights include:**

* A Hebrew Bible with Commentaries from 1568 – one of the oldest books in the trove;
* A Babylonian Talmud from 1793;
* A Torah scroll fragment from Genesis – one of 43 Torah scroll fragments found;
* A Zohar from 1815 – a text for the mystical and spiritual Jewish movement known as “Kabbalah”;
* An official 1917 letter to the Chief Rabbi regarding husbands breaking curfew to summon midwives;
* Materials from Jewish schools in Baghdad, including records for two students;
* A Haggadah (Passover script) from 1902, hand lettered and decorated by an Iraqi Jewish youth; and
* A lunar calendar in both Hebrew and Arabic from the Jewish year 5726 (1965-1966) – one of the last examples of Hebrew printing produced in Baghdad.

***Discovery and Recovery* is divided into six sections:**

**Discovery:** The dramatic story of how these materials were found by the U.S. Army and preserved by the National Archives, one worthy of a Hollywood blockbuster. A short film captures these heroic efforts. This section includes the actual metal footlockers used to ship the documents to the United States.

**Text and Heritage:** This section explores Iraqi Jewish history and tradition through recovered texts, including a Torah scroll fragment, a Hebrew Bible with Commentaries from 1568, and a Babylonian Talmud from 1793.

**Iraqi Jewish Life: Constancy and Change:** Using recovered texts, this section explores the pattern of Jewish life in Iraq. Highlights include a Haggadah (Passover script), siddur (prayer book), and an illustrated lunar calendar in both Hebrew and Arabic (one of About 20 found that date from 1959-1973).

**Personal and Communal Life:** Selected correspondence and publications illustrate the range and complexity of Iraqi Jewish life in the 19th and 20th centuries. Original documents and facsimiles in flipbooks range from school primers to international business correspondence from the Sassoon family.

**After the Millennia:**  Iraqi Jewish life unraveled in the mid-20th century, with the rise of Nazism and proliferation of anti-Jewish propaganda. In June 1941, 180 Jews were killed and hundreds injured in an anti-Jewish attack in Baghdad. Persecution increased when Iraq entered the war against the new State of Israel in 1948. In 1950 and 1951, many Iraqi Jews were stripped of their citizenship and assets, compelling the community to flee the country en masse. This section includes the 1951 law freezing assets of Iraq Jews.

**Preserving the Past:** In this section learn how the National Archives’ expert conservators transformed these materials from moldy, waterlogged masses to a carefully preserved, curated, and accessible enduring historic legacy of the Iraqi Jewish community. View the National Archives state-of-the-art treatment, preservation, and digitization of these materials.

This exhibition was created by the National Archives and Records Administration, with generous support from the U.S. Department of State. More information is available at www.achives.gov and www.ija.archives.gov.

The U.S. Army Airborne and Special Operations Museum will have a lecture series related to the recovery and rescue of the Iraqi Jewish materials, as well as how the U.S. Army Reserve Command’s Cultural Affairs branch has worked to safeguard cultural heritage from Iraq to Afghanistan to Syria. Also to be explored in this lecture series will be the vital role the Monuments Men played during World War II, recovering and preserving European cultural heritage. Look for the lecture series schedule at www.asomf.org for additional information.

Situated in downtown Fayetteville, NC, the U.S. Army Airborne and Special Operations Museum is a proud member of the U.S. Army Center of Military History’s Army Museum Enterprise. Admission to the Museum is free. Museum hours are Tuesday through Saturday from 10:00 am to 5:00 pm and Sunday from 12:00 pm to 5:00 pm.

U.S. Army Airborne and Special Operations Museum

100 Bragg Boulevard

Fayetteville, NC 28301

(910) 643-2778

# # #