

Research

Capturing WWII Veteran Memories

Diane L. Richard looks at what you can do to ensure your veteran ancestors' stories are preserved for future generations.

AS FAMILY HISTORIANS, we really enjoy first person narratives, stories and other tidbits from life that add color to our ancestral tales! Additionally, when there are record losses through fires and other means, sometimes narratives, interviews or other first person recollections are all that may survive to help us know about a certain bit of history.

This has become increasingly true with our World War II veterans. For many WWII veterans, the records of their service were lost in the 1973 fire at the National Personnel Records Center — 80 percent of Army records for those discharged (1 November 1912 - 1 January 1960) and 75 percent of Air Force records for those discharged just after the war and with names alphabetically after James E. Hubbard (25 September 1947 - 1 January 1964) are now lost. For more information, go to <http://www.archives.gov/st-louis/military-personnel/fire-1973.html>.

And, with your average World War II veteran in his 70s to 80s, increasingly their memories are starting to dim and some memories have already been lost! I have heard that of the 16.5 million soldiers who served in WWII, there are only 2.3 million left — it is estimated by the Department of Veterans Affairs that more than 700 WWII veterans pass away every day and in about five years, there will only be about 1.1 million left, <http://www1.va.gov/opa/fact/amwars.asp>. So, the need to record and preserve their stories has become urgent.

Within a span of a few days last fall, I was reminded of this when I received an e-mail about an Interview-A-Vet Campaign and also saw a local newspaper article describing a similar initiative:

"Veterans who served in the military in all the wars are invited to Raleigh Elks Lodge #735 to record their histories of military service and experiences ... There is no charge for the DVD recording and a copy will be sent to the family with a permanent copy forwarded to the Congressional Library of Congress for permanent retention. Over 97 local veterans have already been interviewed since January as a community service partner-

Her four WWII novels, *The Liberator Series*, were all based on true events told to her by veterans as she traveled across the country to veteran's reunions. The veterans were so enthusiastic that she found herself inundated with more stories than she could use. In 2006, she launched a website to share some of those stories with the world — www.triciagoyer.com/ww2stories. Though the campaign



Above: The author's grandfather, John Richard Fountain, a WWII veteran from the UK, is the middle of the first row.

ship between Raleigh Elks Lodge and the National Veterans History Archival Institute. Interviews are open to all veterans, including the Merchant Marines, regardless of their war or peace-time experience."

Interview-A-Vet

The Interview-A-Vet campaign is the brainchild of historical fiction author Tricia Goyer, who seeks to preserve Veteran's stories of their service to our country through her novels and a national campaign.

for stories ended March 31st, visit her website to learn more about her books and the collected veterans' stories.

Veterans History Project

The Raleigh Elks Lodge program is part of what is called the Veterans History Project (VHP), www.loc.gov/vets/, sponsored by the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress (LOC). In addition to preserving oral and audio histories (as mentioned for

the Raleigh Elks Lodge), veterans are encouraged to share documentary materials, such as letters, diaries, maps, photographs and home movies of their experiences. The overall mission of VHP is to collect, preserve and make accessible the personal accounts of American war veterans so that future generations may hear directly from veterans and better understand the realities of war.

When you search or browse and find a person of interest, a new page opens with summary information about that person and his service, and then links to any additional materials available such as multimedia recordings, audio interviews, photos and highlights, official documents and other materials. Note that the material available in the collection is greater than what is accessible online — only about 2,400 collections of material have been digitized, spread across the various formats. Information is provided on how one can physically access the collection or obtain desired copies at <http://www.loc.gov/vets/researchinfo.html>.

One does not have to work through an affiliate, such as the Raleigh Elks Lodge, to participate. Details on how to participate directly or as a volunteer organization, including a brochure that can be printed out for those without Internet access, are available at <http://www.loc.gov/vets/kit.html>.

Related repositories and oral history projects can be found at <http://www.loc.gov/vets/relatedrepositories.html> and there are other projects with similar objectives, such as the Veterans History Institute.

Veterans History Institute

Although the Veterans History Project, from its inception until 2008, has only collected about 55,000 of veterans' stories, or less than 0.3 percent, the National Veterans History Archival Institute, <http://veteranshistoryinstitute.org>, has embarked on expanding the project to include peacetime veterans. Full details on what they are doing and how you can partic-

SIMILAR INITIATIVES

Projects and programs to preserve veterans' memories are not limited to the US. These are a few of the similar initiatives — remember that soldiers all over the world participated in WWII and other conflicts and that our ancestors may have served with a non-US military unit.

CANADA

Veterans Affairs Canada, through "Heroes Remember", <http://www.vac-acc.gc.ca/remembers/sub.cfm?source=collections/hrp>, has recorded almost 1,600 hours of video and audio conversations with approximately 75 veterans of the First World War and another 675 Second World War and Korean veterans. These interviews offer rare and personal memories of those individuals who lived the experience, first-hand.

UNITED KINGDOM

The Imperial War Museum in London, <http://www.iwm.org.uk/server/show/nav.704>, maintains a Photographs, Film & Video, Sound Archives, which holds retrospective interviews with service personnel and civilians,

as well as contemporary archive recordings and miscellaneous recordings from radio and television, and of lectures and poetry readings. Over the past 30 years, interviewers have recorded, and are continuing to record, the memories of men and women, civilians and service personnel with regard to their experiences of conflict.

AUSTRALIA

The Australian War Museum, <http://www.awm.gov.au>

NEW ZEALAND

From Memory, War Oral History Program, <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/hands/from-memory/from-memory>

NETHERLANDS

Interviewproject Nederlandse Veteranen, www.veteraneninstituut.nl or <http://interview.veteraneninstituut.nl>

FRANCE

Service Historique de la Défense — Archives orales, http://www.servicehistorique.sga.defense.gouv.fr/02fonds-collections/archiviorale/central_orale.htm

ipate are available on their web page.

Conclusion

Whether you have a military veteran in your family whose memories have not yet been collected, are researching a deceased veteran or recognize the importance of preserving veterans' memories, please contact one of these projects or one of the many local initiatives that exist, such as the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County's Veterans History Project, <http://www2.cincinnati.library.org/vets>. At the local level, many libraries, veterans' organizations and others have, or are establishing, initiatives to capture veterans' memories. And, though many of the local and state projects are connected to the LOC's program, many maintain their own websites and have posted

their own digital collections for you to access — so do check them out!

The legacy and memories of those who served in and with the military during the various conflicts is an important part of everyone's history and richly supplements any documentary records available!

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