

Interviewing WWII Veterans

(Some Practical Tips)

The stories of men and women who were active in the U.S. military during World War II are valuable historical documents. Families especially benefit from the stories, but many historical archives also seek this kind of history. The Veterans History Project, at the Library of Congress, Washington DC, has been liberally funded to receive and archive histories. The University of Utah has an oral history program. The Commemorative Air Force, Midland Texas, is especially interested in the stories related to any aspect of the air war. The Saints at War project at BYU has also collected a number of veterans' histories.

Some men and women have written up their war memoirs. Most have not. But the men and women who served can tell their stories onto a tape recorder. Many WWII veterans remain reluctant to talk about their experiences, though it's become quite well known that generally, the more a person talks about the horrors of war, the better that person adjusts to the shock of war. Many veterans, as they grow older, become more willing to talk. To have been active in WWII, you must now be at least about 76 years old.

Please consider interviewing veterans you know, especially family members.

Equipment

1. Use high-quality 60-minute tapes, preferably the standard cassettes, not the micro-cassettes.
2. Make sure your tape recorder gives you clear, loud sound. It helps greatly to use an extension microphone (available at Radio Shack or other electronic outlets).
3. Before you do the interview, make sure you are well acquainted with your equipment: the best volume setting, length of tapes (when to turn the tape over), stop-and-start switches, rewind, fast forward and reverse, etc.

The Setting

4. Record in a quiet place, away from phones, noisy children, traffic noises, and other distractions.
5. Plan on about one to three hours for the complete story; have plenty of tapes on hand.

The Interview

6. Ask open-ended questions: Tell me about . . . and then what happened . . . what did you think about that . . . how did you feel about that . . . what stories do you remember from that place/time . . . how did you react? etc. Avoid yes/no questions, except to confirm or get factual information. And do get the facts, the specifics of names, dates, places, etc.
7. Stop briefly to get the spelling of names and places you don't recognize, or at least ask the person to pronounce these words as clearly as possible as he or she remembers them.
8. Don't feel obliged to follow a list of set questions. Leave the interview open, though it is usually best to go chronologically through the experiences.