

Guidelines to Interviewing WW-II Air Veterans

Air-war experiences seems to fall into several major chronological segments:

You don't need to ask all the following questions, in the order listed. Just try to touch naturally on those that prompt responses, as the interview proceeds.

Above all, try to ask the questions in an open-ended way, so that the informant has to "tell" what happened, not just answer "yes" or "no." **Always ask for stories!** Try to get approximate dates of major changes in assignments and of major events.

1. Getting into the war

- Where were you living and what were you doing in the late 1930s and early 1940s?
- When did you graduate from high school, and what did you do between high school and induction/joining?**
- Were you following the war in Europe? To what extent? Did you see the U.S. involvement coming?
- How did you hear about the bombing of Pearl Harbor? What were your reactions?
- Why and how did you join the air part of the Army, Navy, Marines?
- To what extent were you involved with airplanes while growing up? Model building? Airplane rides? Hanging around airports? High school or college airplane programs?
- Did you have a girlfriend, a fiancée? Were you married? Did you get married or put off marriage because of the war? Explain.

2. Induction, basic training, first assignments

- Where were you inducted, and where were you then sent? Any special recollections of those early days in the service?
- What do you remember about basic training? Any stories?
- What kind of testing were you put through? What were the results of the testing, and how did the results affect your assignment?
- Did you hope to become a pilot? If you didn't qualify, or weren't sent to pilot training, what were the reasons? How did you feel about that?
- If you were "washed out" of pilot training, why? How did you feel about not being able to become a pilot? What was the alternative assignment?
- What schools and special training (other than flying) were you involved in? Describe that training. How good was it in preparing you for what you later did in the war?
- How was the food? The housing? The instruction? Association with other soldiers? The weather? The towns near where you were stationed?

3. Pilot training (follow a chronological pattern)

- Take the cadet through primary, basic, and advanced pilot training: airplanes flown, places of training, details of flight training itself (instructors, successes, failures, tensions, dangers, hopes, and general circumstances—especially stories).
- Getting the wings (family present?)
- Fighter or multi-wing assignment? Why?

4. Training in other flying assignments: bombardier, navigator, radioman, flight engineer, gunner.

- How did you take to the air? Enjoyment? Air sickness? Other adjustments?
- Describe your training for each of these assignments.
- As always, stories. Details. Open-ended questions.

5. Actual assignment

- Simply talk about what the informant did—chronologically—through the war.
- If sent overseas, get details on mode and conditions of transportation.

6. Combat experiences: pilot, crewmen

- Ask about the crew-rapport, memorable personalities, officers' interaction with enlisted men, etc.
- Missions: numbers, kinds, places (flown from and to), memorable missions, thoughts and feelings, damage to aircraft, enemy resistance (fighters, flak), close calls, stories, etc.
- If shot down, get details (escape and evasion, prisoner of war, etc.)
- Life on the base.
- Time-off activities.
- Interaction with local populations.
- The work of ground crews, and other support personnel.

7. The winding down of the war, and separation (discharge)

- Review reactions to changes in assignments, finishing quota of missions, transfers to other areas, memories of V-E Day and V-J day, returning to the States, leaves and furloughs, dates, places, and reasons for discharge, returning to civilian life, whether or not joined the reserves (and why or why not).
- How did the dropping of the atomic bomb affect you?
- To what extent have you kept in touch with the people you served with? Reunions? Friendships maintained?

8. Brief overview (five or ten minutes) of life after the war

- Activities on returning home (schooling, training, work, marriage, etc.); get a brief summary of eventual vocation(s).
- Important: How did your military service affect your life: your outlook, your vocational choices, your maturity, etc.

If your informant is female, of course the interview will be different. Certainly ask about attitudes toward women serving in the military.

Sometimes there are good insights and stories on the treatment of African-Americans (Negroes, as they were then called) during the war. Some informants sense immediately what kind of things you're after, and they need little prompting; other informants expect and need guidelines.

If a veteran breaks down, simply say, "That's all right. I understand," or wait till he regains composure. Sometimes it's helpful to shift quickly to some factual questions, then perhaps return to the sensitive areas.

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