

Guidelines to Interviewing WW-II Veterans

War experiences seem 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! We tend to remember feelings in the form of 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 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 military?
- To what extent were you involved with military activities growing up? Playing "war"? Model airplane building? Hanging around airports? Family in the military? Studying WW-II in school? Following the European war (Sept 1939 till Pearl Harbor)? Etc.
- 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 did you join, or where were you inducted, and where were you then sent? Any special recollections of those early days in the service? Why did you join that branch?
- 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?
- If in the Army Air Corps, 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?
- Were you "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 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. Training (follow a chronological pattern)

- Take the soldier through the training experience: schooling, hopes, results, and general circumstances. **Especially stories.**

4. Actual assignments

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

5. **Combat experiences** (if in combat)

- Ask about acquaintances and leaders in the unit, rapport, memorable personalities, officers' interaction with enlisted men, etc.
- A combat chronology, with emphasis on stories. Dangers? Risks? Injuries?
- Time-off activities.
- Interaction with local populations
- The work of support personnel.

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

- Review reactions to changes in assignments, transfers to other areas, memories of V-E Day (May 7, 1945) and V-J Day (Aug 14, 1945), returning to the States, leaves and furloughs, dates, places, and reasons for separation, the return 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?

7. **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 kinds 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 or she regains composure. Sometimes it is helpful to shift quickly to some factual questions, then perhaps return to the sensitive areas.

Don't hesitate to interview people on the homefront (back home): spouses, families, people deferred for defense or health reasons, community leaders, workers in the defense effort—in general, anyone who remembers the war vividly. Ask about rationing. Ask about any kinds of contributions to the war effort.

A number of recent, very readable books touch on WW-II: Studs Terkel, *The Good War*; anything by Stephen E. Ambrose; Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation*; and others.