

Preserving the Memories of World War II: An Intergenerational Interview Project

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While addressing World War II U.S. veterans in 2001, Michael DiPaulo, a French consulate staff member, remarked, “We live in a free world today because in 1945 the forces of imperfect goodness defeated the forces of near-perfect evil.” The men and women who comprised the “forces of imperfect goodness” are now rapidly leaving us. The Department of Veterans Administration estimates that each day 600–1,000 World War II veterans die and each one of them takes their story to the grave. Last year, the number of living American World War II veterans slipped beneath two million. Sixteen million men and women served in uniform from 1941–1945. It is estimated that by 2036 there will no longer be living members of what broadcast journalist Tom Brokaw dubbed, “The Greatest Generation.” The youngest living veterans today are 86.

In 2004, the National World War II Memorial was opened and dedicated on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Its placement is fitting as just to the east stands the Washington Monument, the nation’s tribute to its eighteenth-century founder, George Washington. To the west, along the banks of the Potomac River, sits Daniel Chester French’s majestic figure of Abraham Lincoln, inside Henry Bacon’s temple to the sixteenth president, the preserver of the Union—the defining American story of the nineteenth-century Civil War. Between these two commemorations, along 17th Street at Independence Avenue, is design architect Friedrich St. Florian’s seven-acre homage to World War II. Unlike the Korean Veterans Memorial and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the National World War II Memorial honors not just those who served in uniform, but the entire nation’s epic story—both the battlefield and the home front are recognized in granite and bronze.

The Friends of the National World War II Memorial was established in 2007 to serve, in part, as an organization devoted to educating young people and visitors to the memorial in an effort

to ensure that the lessons, legacy, and sacrifices of World War II not be forgotten. It is now the most visited memorial in the nation’s capital. Many of the visitors are the aging World War II veterans themselves, brought to see “their” memorial through the Honor Flight Network, a non-profit that flies veterans from around the United States to Washington, D.C. at no cost.

After 32 years of teaching history at West Springfield High School in Fairfax County, Virginia, I joined Friends as their director of education in June 2012. We soon developed a groundbreaking project related to the Honor Flight program—video interviewing veterans at the memorial, and archiving these interviews online in a systematic way that permitted family members, teachers, scholars, and students to access them. In what is very much a race against time, we considered this project a golden opportunity to bring the “latest generation” in contact with the “greatest generation.” Who better to conduct these interviews than high school students?

I asked nine students that I had taught at West Springfield to join me in this project, which would help them fulfill their

senior capstone project requirement and also secure a Civics Seal on their diploma. None of us realized just how dynamic and life transforming “Capturing the Voices of World War II” would become. In its first year, students interviewed over 450 veterans and people who labored in factories and farm fields during the war. What for the students began as a high school project quickly turned into a labor of love. Inspiration became the byword as students began to empathize with men and women two generations removed from themselves. Tears and hugs were commonplace. Some veterans, who had never discussed the war with family members, often opened up for the first time, words gushing from them as a cathartic relief. Family members who accompanied their loved one would often remark to me on the side, “Dad never told me this!”

One of my former colleagues noted, “History is a contact sport.” Never had that ever been truer than for the students, veterans, and family members. Not only were the students learning history in a powerful, dynamic, and meaningful way, but they were also learning about themselves, forging deep bonds, and preserving important stories for future generations. In these special moments, the National World War II Memorial transforms from stone and metal into a living legacy.

“We believe that the student/veteran interview project is a unique and important way of preserving in our national memory the reflections of the veterans who are able to visit the Memorial,” said Rolland Kidder, a National World War II Memorial board member. “It also provides a means of linking the experience



West Springfield High School senior Shehroz Rauf interviews Navy veteran Richard Oines, who navigated landing craft ashore in Normandy on D-Day. (October 2012.)



Peter Thomas recites his poem at the 2013 Memorial Day program at the National World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C. (May 27, 2013.)

of these veterans with today's youth so that a new generation of Americans can better understand what can occur when our country is united in a just and common cause."

For 18-year-old Claire Schindler, the experience was profound. She says that she realized that everyone in World War II had a story to tell, that there were a range of perspectives, and that even those with a "more famous experience" weren't necessarily ready to talk about it. "I was particularly surprised how young these people were when they enlisted. They were actually our age, some even dropped out of high school or forged their birth certificate just so they could serve," said Schindler. "The passion and tears behind every story just drew me in more and more. ... It got to the point where I was so emotionally attached that I didn't keep track of my hours and I actually lost my hours sheet a couple of times. It wasn't about getting hours, it was about sharing history with people, which through this project I have learned is one of my favorite things to do."

Will Stone, a junior at West Springfield concurred. "I've learned that there is more

to these people than you see in front of you. Each one of them has so much to tell and teach us, but they often go unheard. This program helps put these stories out there for newer generations to see. These men and women have sacrificed too much in their lifetimes to not be heard."

Then there are the veterans themselves. Peter Thomas was 19 when he landed on Omaha Beach at midnight on June 7, 1944, as part of the 1st Infantry Division. He fought from D-Day+1 until the end of the war, receiving a Purple Heart, the Bronze Star, the French Croix de Guerre, and five campaign stars among other citations. Thomas endured life in a foxhole during the horrific Battle of Huertgen Forest, with German 88 artillery shells smashing around him, was pulled out for a week of rest and relaxation only to find himself seven days later in frigid conditions fighting in the Battle of the Bulge. On Christmas Eve Day, his platoon lost their favorite squad leader, Sergeant Stamborsky. Before the war ended, he participated in the liberation of the concentration camp at Noordhausen. Like most veterans, the war was the defining moment of his life.

Thomas has followed the project closely from his home in Naples, Florida. His interview took place on Memorial Day, 2013. "Many of us veterans have kept so many memories of that time to ourselves. But through the love and caring of these students, veterans have shared so many long ago memories—many for the very first time," said Thomas. "As I was interviewed in the shadow of the World War II Memorial, I looked around and felt the overpowering nearness of that generation. We came out of the Depression with very little. Our parents couldn't help us because they didn't have anything to give. So we learned to depend on ourselves. That is why we were great soldiers. We knew the answer to everything we faced came from within ourselves."

Eckehard Muessig, 90, a member of the First Marine Division, saw heavy fighting in the Pacific at places like New Britain and Peleliu, sustaining a wound of such severity on Okinawa that he spent seven months recovering in a hospital. He echoed Thomas's sentiments. "The young people conducting the interviews made me realize that

whatever we achieved will be carried forth by this generation and improved upon.”

Parents, too, see the value of this project. “As a parent of one of the first students involved, I have had the privilege of watching this project develop from the beginning,” said Susan Simmons. “With each interview, each life captured, I have witnessed history being documented. What an incredible honor for our daughter and our whole family.”

After the war, American poet Archibald MacLeish, also a veteran, wrote “The Young Dead Soldiers Do Not Speak” a eulogy to the carnage. Like others, MacLeish was searching to make sense of such a human catastrophe. His line, “We leave you our deaths, give them their meaning,” is the apogee of the meter and was part of the World War II Memorial’s initial design to be etched in granite above the field of 4,000 gold stars, each one representing a hundred lives lost, during the war. As is often the case in the give and take of national memorial building that quote was abandoned. However, the students and veterans who have participated in the “Capturing the Voices of World War II” project have resurrected MacLeish’s words in a way that no one could have foreseen.

You can locate “Capturing the Voices of World War II” on the Friends of the National World War II Memorial’s website, www.wiimemorialfriends.org

Friends of the National World War II Memorial wants to encourage teachers across the nation to engage in similar activities and encourages educators and students to reach out to local Veterans of Foreign War and American Legion Posts to find veterans in their own communities to share their stories with young people in an equally dynamic fashion. It is the hope of our organization that we can be the repository of these video interviews and will work to help students and teachers facilitate such a project.

As a teacher, I always enjoyed the moment when a student’s preconceived notion was turned on its head, like when Andy Chen, who confided in me, said, “I thought that this would turn out like any other project.... I didn’t realize the importance of the lessons that this project held until my very first interview. During that first interview, I could hear the emotion in the veteran’s voice as he recalled his memories of the war. I still remember some of what he said, and I hope that I will never forget the lessons and sacrifices of these veterans.”

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OMAHA BEACH

By Peter A. Thomas

When we went in, the beach had been taken
The living fought on, the dead forsaken
We were dropped into water up to our shoulders
We waded in—a group of green soldiers
Onto that thin strip of beach
So many had tried to reach.
They were the ones who went in first
Among the machine gun fire and shell burst
They went to watery graves
Sinking under the waves
The water was red
Red from the dead
Red from the dying
In agony crying
Those who made the land
Were not able to stand
They fell on the sand
Writhing in pain
Screaming for help in vain.

Every advantage was on the hill
They murdered our men at will
The rain of death from the cliffs never stopped
But we just kept coming in from the sea
Wave after wave, as far as you could see
Sheer courage and determination
Not believing they were done
Dictated the victory that day.
Others in the future will say
When they stand on that mighty height
And look down on that thin strip of beach
They’ll say, “I don’t see how they ever did it.”
They fought for every inch of it
Up the sides of that fortified wall
Over the tops of those cliffs so tall.

I’ll never forget that beach
I’ll never forget the men
In the ships
In the air and on the land
And those who died on the sand
And in the water.
They lie now beneath thousands of white crosses
And Stars of David
Above the beach
Those wonderful soldiers who died so young
They died so we
Could be free

How can we ever forget what they did
We honor them this day
We salute them
And we humbly beseech
Dear God, bless the men who died on
Omaha Beach.

Ten years after disembarking his landing craft and trudging up the bluffs of Omaha Beach, at midnight on June 7, 1944, Peter Thomas penned a poignant tribute to the events of D-Day on the shores of Normandy, France. A member of the 1st Infantry Division, the Big Red One, Thomas fought across all of Europe engaged in heavy combat in the breakout from France, in the Huertgen Forest, the Battle of the Bulge, and liberated the concentration camp at Nordhausen, Germany. During World War II, he received the Purple Heart, Bronze Star, Five Campaign Stars, and the Croix de Guerre.

While you might not recognize his name, you would his voice, as Thomas is the most ubiquitous voiceover narrator in the United States of the last 50 years. Thomas has narrated hundreds of TV commercials for Coke, for Listerine, for IBM, and Cool Whip among many others. His voice is heard in numerous documentary films produced for the History Channel, PBS, and Discovery. Born in 1924, and still active in veterans’ affairs, Thomas works from his home in Naples, Florida. To see and hear Peter Thomas recite “Omaha Beach” visit the Friends of the National World War II Memorial website: www.wiimemorialfriends.org and go to the May 2013 Memorial Day Ceremony Video, Part I, at 22 minutes.