INTRODUCTION

This guide serves as a starting point for teachers and students planning to undertake oral history interviews with veterans. It is not a prescriptive guide, but rather suggests elements to be considered in the process – from the initial planning stages to the interview and the potential products which might be created from it.

There are many valuable resources available both online and in print which detail how to conduct oral history interviews, some of which are referenced at the end of this resource.

The key principles which underpin any oral history interview are quite simple: the interviewer aims to listen carefully throughout the interview, to always ensure the well-being of the interviewee and to record and preserve their responses as best as they are able with the technology and skills available.

Offering practical advice and some examples from the Veterans’ Stories project of the Department of Veterans’ Affairs, this guide serves as a useful resource for any group planning an oral history project of its own.
ETHICS

The priority in all interviews is the well-being of the interviewee before, during and after the interview. This means the interviewee should be fully informed about the details of the project and why it is being undertaken; they should be given information about how their interview will be stored and used (for example, if the interview, or segments of it, will be used online or in another public forum); they should be made aware that they are able to withdraw from the interview or ask to turn off the camera or recorder at any point.

Veterans should be provided with the contact details for a freely available counselling service to help them cope if the interview has raised difficult memories.

The Open Arms counselling service is available to veterans and their families 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Lifeline is also available to provide advice and support to people in emotional distress – see below for available services.

Open Arms: 1800 011 046
(24 hours/7 days)

Lifeline: 13 11 14
(24 hours/7 days)
Online crisis support: lifeline.org.au
(7pm – midnight/7 nights)
VALUE OF ORAL HISTORY

... the unique and precious element which oral sources force upon the historian and which no other sources possess in equal measure is the speaker’s subjectivity ... 

Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did.¹

Oral history takes history off the page to give us the voice and the unique perspective of individuals who lived through historical events. It adds richness to our understanding of broader events by providing a personal perspective. It is a particularly valuable resource for understanding the lived experience of war.

In the decades since the First and Second World Wars, the changing nature of communication has impacted on the archive of personal stories which are available. In earlier wars, the key method of communication with families at home was through posted letters. Many of these letters, along with personal diaries, were deposited in collecting institutions during the post-war years, and as a result Australian archives are filled with rich personal accounts of war.
Today, although some may still keep a diary, or send emails or letters home, many people are likely to stay in touch through phone or video calls – a much more immediate, but also ephemeral, means of communication. As a result, the archive of personal stories we may be able to draw upon in the future will not be as large. Oral history offers one way to ensure that this archive remains a rich resource in the future.

Gathering the stories of individual veterans and contrasting their experiences helps to avoid stereotyping and generalising veterans’ experiences. Undertaking oral history with a range of people highlights diversity and similarities of experience. Two people, even if they have served in the same theatre at the same time, will have different memories and bring their own unique insight into the broader story.
Younger school-age students, in particular, are often enthralled to hear first-hand accounts of events from what to them is an exotic past. Listening helps them visit that past and better understand and appreciate their present. Older students benefit by being able to associate the personal anecdote with the wider events of Australian and world history. Not only is the past brought to life, but as every individual’s experience is different, every interview has the potential to give the student a new perspective on past events and to suggest new avenues for research.

Categorising, analysing, evaluating and comparing evidence are important parts of learning for today’s students. Interviewing Australia’s veterans will help develop these skills and also give students a sense of the past which is human and local. Interviewing veterans and their families also gives students an opportunity to analyse the extent to which the lived experience of those they interview contrasts with, or affirms, the ‘Anzac legend’. Educators, particularly those concerned with the middle years of schooling, will welcome the emphasis on local experiences, which develops critical thinking within a community setting.
UNDERSTANDING THE VETERAN COMMUNITY

The veteran community is diverse. Veterans and their families vary in age, ethnicity and socio-economic background. People's reasons for joining the Australian Defence Force (ADF) are as varied as their experiences of service.

The popular perception of a veteran is often of a First or Second World War man or woman in uniform. The experiences of those who served in the world wars are an important part of our military history, and should be recorded, but there are also many veterans with powerful stories to share who have served more recently.

The experiences of contemporary veterans are in many ways quite different to those of earlier generations. Contemporary veterans have often enlisted with the intention of pursuing a career in the ADF, rather than enlisting just for the duration of a particular conflict as many veterans of earlier wars had done. Many have undertaken multiple deployments, often spanning different countries or operational theatres.

A multi-generational oral history project would provide students with an interesting insight into the varied experiences of service, as well as those that are shared across generations.

The families of service people have their own unique stories. Interviews with family members show a more complete picture of service, revealing the impact for those at home while a service woman or man is deployed or when they return. Children with a serving parent, or sometimes two serving parents, often have to move to different locations every few years, which can sometimes make it difficult to form and maintain friendships. They may also be impacted in some way by the circumstances of a relative who has sustained physical or psychological wounds as a result of their service. They manage the anxiety of waiting at home while a relative serves overseas. But they also share many of the experiences of children who do not have family connections to the military. Service of a family member is a part of their life, but not necessarily the defining part.
CONTACTING THE VETERAN COMMUNITY

It is suggested that you contact veterans who already have an established relationship with the school community and are comfortable being interviewed. The interview process can be intimidating and raise traumatic memories, so it is much better to select interviewees who are comfortable with that process. The interviewer must at all times remain sensitive to the reactions of the interviewee. If the interviewer senses that an interviewee is uncomfortable with a topic it is very important not to pursue that topic any further. The interviewee has the right to stop the interview at any time. Teachers should supervise the conduct of the interview and debrief with both the students and veteran at its conclusion.
CONSENT FORM

As the copyright for the interview rests with the interviewee, they must grant permission for its use. The most effective way to do this is by creating a consent form which the interviewee can sign.

This form should include the following information:

- Description of the project and the proposed use of the interview material
- Name of the interviewee
- Name of the interviewer
- Date and location of the interview
- Any restrictions on use: for example, the interview cannot be used until a certain date. If the interviewee has any specific conditions these should be recorded on the form.
- Signature and printed name of the interviewee, countersigned by the interviewer.

CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

When preparing your research think about the cultural context of the person you are interviewing and how you might recognise and be inclusive of cultural diversity in your research. The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies offers an informative guide about conducting research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities:

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Before the interview, students might practice interviewing with each other. This is a great way for an interviewer to gain some experience of what it feels like to be in the spotlight themselves.

SUBTLE SOUNDS

Before you begin the interview, listen out for subtle sounds which might be disruptive in the recording, and try to manage them. The hum of a fridge or a ceiling fan, a television or radio in the background, someone using a mower outside, are all sounds which can be disruptive in a recording.
PATRICIA GUEST

Patricia Guest served with the Australian Women’s Army Service during the Second World War.

Pat enlisted in 1942, following in the footsteps of her father who had served in the First World War. In the Second World War, Pat worked as a driver with a signals unit and then served with the ambulance car company.

In this clip, she shares her memories of transporting newly returned prisoners of war from the wharf to the hospital. At the beginning of the clip Pat explains she was stopped repeatedly on her way to the hospital by people hoping to learn news of their loved ones.

‘You’re going to the hospital? Did you come from the wharf?’

I said, ‘Yeah’.

‘Could we find out if there’s anybody that knows … so and so?’

... They’re calling out names after names and everybody was trying to get their call first. The poor people in the back of the ambulance, they could hardly [move] ... They were just lying there like skeletons.

Then they threw in flowers, cigarettes, and chocolates. That happened three times before I even got to the hospital. [By] the time I got there I was crying so much I could hardly drive. We carried everything off. There was a lot of TB [tuberculosis] patients, very badly off with TB.

We used to take the end of the stretcher, help them out and then go back in the ambulance, go and pick the next one up. There was no such thing as booties and masks and what have you but it was terrible.
PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

The best way to prepare for an interview is to do some reading. While oral historians are concerned with subjective experience, it is helpful to understand the broader context in which the veteran lived. The Australian War Memorial website (www.awm.gov.au) is a great place to start. It includes useful summaries of numerous wars, conflicts and peacekeeping operations as well as photographs and other primary source documents. *The Oxford Companion to Military History* also offers concise summaries of events in Australian military history.

If for some reason you do not have time to undertake preliminary research, it is possible to interview someone without knowing anything about them or the events that have affected them. If the questions are asked generally enough, with enough interest, most people will open up and tell their stories. For example, ‘Do you remember what you were doing on your twenty-first birthday?’ is usually an effective opener, for someone who was on active duty at that time.

It is also important to remember that the interview is not an opportunity to showcase your own knowledge. The background research may help you to formulate pre-interview topics or questions, or help you to have a general understanding of the historical episode which the veteran is talking about, but it is very important for you to avoid delivering monologues on topics you’ve learned during the interview or ‘correcting’ the facts being remembered.

The ideal is to know a little about your subjects and the effects of the conflict on them, but not to reveal too much knowledge. This gives them the opportunity to share their stories without feeling as if you already know everything they have to say.
FORMULATING QUESTIONS

Your questions should encourage those whom you interview to speak with confidence, and to be certain that you are genuinely interested in them and what they have to say. To win this confidence it is often a good idea to begin with some basic knowledge about the person you are interviewing. For example, you may be able to discover:

- the age of the veteran at the time of the conflict which interests you
- the part of the world in which she or he served
- their rank and any military decorations they may have earned
- some details about the conflict/s in which they or their family members served
- some information about well-known members of the unit, which might prompt a conversation and show you’ve done your homework without being overbearing.

Clarify the purposes of your research. For example, you may be interested in:

- an aspect of the war, such as the hardships of life at the front
- friendships between service people
- why individuals enlisted
- living conditions for a prisoner of war
- a particular battle
- attitudes among the ranks towards conscription
- Anzac Day or other forms of commemoration
- the general experience of someone who had served with the Australian military forces, or that of their family members.
PRE-PREPARED QUESTIONS

Pre-prepared questions, or a topic list, are written based on the background research you’ve conducted about the veteran and their service. The questions should be open-ended and address the key topics the interviewer is hoping to cover. They should have a subjective focus rather than one that centres on facts. So rather than asking, ‘On what date did you enlist?’ you might ask, ‘Why did you decide to enlist?’ A veteran may not necessarily recall the date they enlisted, and asking for that kind of precise detail may fluster them, but they are likely to have a story to tell about what inspired their decision to enlist.

The final question should give the veteran an opportunity to add any information that has not yet been covered. It can be something as simple as, ‘Is there anything else about your service/your family member’s service we haven’t talked about that you would like to mention?’.
THE FOLLOWING IS AN EXAMPLE OF PRE-PREPARED QUESTIONS THE AUTHOR USED IN INTERVIEWING VETERANS OF THE SIEGE OF TOBRUK. THESE QUESTIONS MIGHT PROVIDE A PROMPT IN CONSIDERING THE KINDS OF PRE-PREPARED QUESTIONS WHICH MIGHT BE FORMULATED BEFORE AN INTERVIEW:

Why did you decide to enlist?

Had any members of your family served in earlier wars?

Did you have other family members serving in the Second World War?

Can you tell me about your journey over to the Middle East on the ship? (Follow-up prompts: What did your average day on the ship involve? What did you eat on board the ship? Where did you sleep?)

What were your impressions of Tobruk when you arrived?

What was your role?

What did a ‘typical’ day at Tobruk look like?

Can you tell me a little about the living conditions at Tobruk?

Did you spend any time in the outer defensive positions (Red Line)?

What were your impressions of those you served with, in particular those from other nations, e.g. Britain and Poland?

Did you have any contact with German or Italian soldiers or prisoners? What were your impressions?

Was there a time when you were particularly frightened? What happened?

Did you ever experience an attack from a Stuka dive bomber? What happened?

Did you go on any patrols into no-man’s-land? Do you remember any of those in particular?

Were you ever wounded in action? What happened?

Do any particular memories of your time in Tobruk stand out?

Did you lose any close friends during the siege, or in later campaigns? How did that affect you?
FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

Listening closely to the veteran’s responses will help you to identify follow-up questions much more easily. To do this effectively you need to listen and judge if a veteran might have more to tell in a story and if that story is relevant to the interview topic.  

The ‘reason why’ is an effective follow-up question. This style of question asks an interviewee to tell you the reason they made a particular decision. For example, a veteran might say, ‘I found training difficult’. A good follow-up question is simple: ‘What was it about the training that you found difficult?’

You might also ask a clarifying question, summarising the information to ensure you understood it correctly and then asking the interviewee to confirm your understanding was correct. In other cases you may wish to clarify whether an interviewee was directly involved in the event they are narrating and thus establish if it is a first-person account.
Tea and Cake

Sharing tea and cake with the interviewee before an interview could almost be considered a rite of passage for all interviewers. It’s a great way to break the ice and develop rapport with your interviewee. Think about bringing something to share with you to the interview – it can be a nice gesture of thanks to the interviewee for giving their time for your project.

Visual Listening

Good listeners show they are listening. We often do this verbally, by saying ‘yes’ or ‘uh huh’. When editing the interview later, these sounds can interrupt the flow of the story being told. So it is best to show you are listening visually – by nodding or smiling, or looking appalled – rather than by verbally responding while the interviewee is telling you a story. Then, if they finish responding to a question and don’t appear ready to say anything further, make sure you leave a small gap before you speak – if you overlap their response with your next question, you won’t be able to edit out your questions later, should you wish to.
The Leyte [Gulf] was the first time that we came across the suicide [planes] – the kamikazes. The landing at Leyte, I can see it as plain as [day], if I shut my eyes now. This suicide plane coming towards us and I suppose he’s about fifty metres away. The pilot, everybody, lots of ships firing at him and I remember the pilot pulled the hatch back and he got up like this [lifts himself partially out of the chair]. I can still see his [face]. He had a leather [cap] on, he had goggles and you could see the bullets hit him. And he was coming straight for the side of the ship where I was [standing] … It wasn’t scary because, by the time the bullets hit that bloke, poor Jap, he swung around and sank into the water about fifty feet astern of the ship. Now that didn’t worry us, but on the way to Lingayen [Gulf] … Those bloody suicide planes. When they come down, nothing stops them. Doesn’t matter what you hit them with. Bits fly off, but they still keep coming, down and down. And when they come down they [explode]. They hit an aircraft carrier that was up on the starboard side, it hit just on the water line. It immediately listed over. And I remember writing in my book ‘frightened’. For the pilots in the plane that had flown up to tackle them, wondering how the hell they were going to land, because the deck would have been like this [on an angle] … That was the only time I was ever frightened during the war. I think back now, never any other time was I ever frightened. And there was a damn sight more going on in lots of other cases, but they were … Something different about them, you know.
INTERVIEWING

There is an intensity to an oral history interview. It requires listening closely and carefully as someone shares their story. The stories can be funny or serious; sometimes they are incredibly sad. Occasionally the stories are too difficult to tell, even decades after an event. Often an interview includes all of these emotions, as you and the veteran navigate together along a rich emotional trail.

RAPPORT

Building a rapport is a key component of the interview. This begins with the pre-interview conversation, but the most important stage of building rapport is on the day. When you arrive, you should take the time to chat with the veteran informally on a simple topic. This might be something about the veteran that you learned during your research phase, such as the place they grew up. This will illustrate that you have done your research and taken the time to learn about them. Or it might be a more generic ice-breaker, something that stands out about the interview location or a recent event, such as a local community fair. This helps both you and the veteran relax as you set up for the interview.

Listening and responding empathetically is paramount during the interview. If possible, you should respond non-verbally, to avoid causing problems with the sound recording. A smile, nod or sympathetic look can convey empathy and interest without interrupting the flow with a verbal acknowledgement like ‘I understand’. But sometimes you can respond verbally without interrupting the narrative flow – if you are asking a follow-up question, for example.

Rapport can be lost if the interviewee feels as if you are not listening, or not understanding the story being told. Good follow-up questions, building on something the interviewee has just said, is one way to avoid this. Sometimes non-verbal cues can damage rapport – for instance, an interviewer displaying a judgemental expression when the interviewee reveals a piece of information. You must maintain awareness of your body language and facial expressions to ensure that both convey interest and do not inadvertently imply disrespect.
**NAVIGATING THE CONVERSATION**

The interviewer serves as a guide for the interviewee, asking questions which prompt them to tell their story. In this way the interviewer does not drive the interview, but rather serves as a navigator, keeping the interview focused on the topic and providing prompts when necessary.

Sometimes, it is okay to allow an off-topic story to continue for a short while, as this builds rapport with the interviewee, reassuring them that you are interested in their stories. However, if the interviewee stays off-topic for too long, you may need to re-focus the interview and bring it back to the topic at hand.

The best way to navigate the interview is to avoid sticking rigidly to prepared questions. The questions should be a guide or prompt, to remind you of the topics you want to cover, but a good interviewer allows the interviewee to tell their story in the way they prefer. Focusing too intently on your questions also means you will lose eye contact with the interviewee — this will lower your ability to observe non-verbal cues, and you will risk appearing uninterested in their responses.⁸
MANAGING DIFFICULT MOMENTS

In difficult moments the onus is on you to allow your interviewee to pause and take a breath, a tissue, or a sip of water. You need to be able to read the energy and emotions of the interviewee, to know if they are uncomfortable. Keen observation helps to gauge the comfort of the interviewee, who may fidget, or yawn, check their watch or start to give much more clipped answers, or shift their tone, if they become tired of the interview process.  

As an interviewer, you need to learn when to move on to a different topic, ask a lighter question, offer to turn off the recording, or simply give the interviewee a moment to compose themselves and finish the story. It takes practice to know what to do in these situations, but drawing on empathy is a good starting point.  

The main guide for any interview should be ensuring the well-being of the interviewee. If there is a topic that is too painful to discuss or one that unexpectedly causes distress, you should give the interviewee the option to steer away. As Alistair Thomson rightly pointed out in his landmark work on Australian veterans of the First World War, oral historians are not trained counsellors and unlike a therapist ‘would not be around to put together the pieces of memories which were no longer safe’.

TRUST

The interviewee is investing a significant amount of trust in you as an interviewer – trusting you to listen with respect and empathy; to maintain interest and attention; and to know when not to push too far. They are also trusting that if the story is shared with a broader audience, its context and integrity will be preserved. As the interviewer, you need to respect that trust. It is always a privilege to interview someone, to hear their stories and to ask questions about the experiences in their lives.
TRAUMA AND SUITABLE TOPICS

Veterans and their families have a wide range of experiences to share. If they have agreed to participate in the interview they are likely to be fairly comfortable sharing their stories with young people. Some veterans may be experienced interview subjects and be well practiced in telling their stories and managing emotions during an interview. However, it is important to note that war is, by its very nature, violent and traumatic. Veterans and their families may have been through some harrowing experiences. Treading this varied emotional ground can be tricky for any interviewer, let alone a young person. Students are not counsellors and are not able to offer emotional support.

In helping students formulate questions, teachers might find it useful to ask the students to reflect on these issues and how a direct question about combat might lead to emotional answers for which neither party may be prepared. Combat is only one part of a veterans’ experience of war. In undertaking a project interviewing New Zealand veterans of the Second World War, Megan Hutching astutely observed that ‘interviews that concentrate on combat experiences reflect a very narrow concept of war. Most time in uniform is spent out of action’. A range of topics can be explored with veterans or their families which do not centre on combat. Topics might include, for instance, food and conditions during deployment, communication with home, and friendships made during service.

Teachers should monitor the interviews as they are being undertaken and also check in with the veterans and students after the interview, as part of the process of reflection, to ensure the well-being of both.

Open Arms: 1800 011 046
(24 hours/7 days)

Lifeline: 13 11 14
(24 hours/7 days)
Online crisis support: lifeline.org.au
(7pm – midnight/7 nights)
VIDEO RECORDING – TECHNICAL ADVICE

The nature of the recording equipment used will vary depending on budget, but there are a number of key principles which can be applied to ensure that video-recorded oral history is of a high quality:

- Good sound is vitally important. To achieve this, it is best to use an external, unidirectional microphone or lapel microphone, preferably connected to the camera, to keep the audio in synch with the footage.

- Lighting is also important. Daylight is the best, but interviews should be conducted indoors wherever possible, to avoid background noise. A basic lighting set-up can be helpful in rooms with insufficient light. This would consist of a portable light placed to the side of the veteran and a backlight behind and above them. Ensure that the camera is positioned so that it does not look directly into the lights, as this will affect the exposure.

- Whenever possible, use a tripod to keep the camera still. If using a tablet or a phone, try to find a way to secure the camera after you have set up the framing of the shot.

- If a second person is managing the camera and sound, they should wear headphones in order to ensure the sound quality does not diminish during the interview and no external sounds cause an issue.

- Avoid using auto-focus settings because the camera may choose something other than the interviewee as the focal point.

The following sources provide useful information about video recording techniques:


https://www.theverge.com/2017/7/26/16026238/smartphone-video-editing-apps-how-to-tips-iphone-android

REFLECTION

One of the most important stages of any oral history program concerns reflecting on the process after the interview has taken place.

It is an opportunity to think about how well the project worked, what might have been improved and how that could be incorporated into the next project. For instance, during the editing process the project team may realise the sound recording was not as strong as it could have been. This might lead to adjustments in the next set of interviews which could include using an external microphone, or controlling the ambient noise more effectively.

The interviewer might adjust their questions in the future, to ensure they are more open ended, or focus more closely on a particular theme.

Reflection is also the first step in the process of analysis. Post-interview reflection might include summarising the themes which emerged in the interviews and making tentative connections between common themes raised across interviews.
Karen Horn argues that oral history offers an opportunity for learners to enhance their understanding of ‘hard’ historical facts, by analysing subjective experience and linking that to the broader historical context and significance.

The foundational process for analysis of the oral histories can begin before the interviews begin. Students should undertake research, using appropriately rigorous sources, before they conduct the interviews. This will give them some broader historical context by which to understand the responses being given.

They can also begin by formulating a research question and use that as a guide to creating their interview questions. A sample research question might be: ‘What affect did captivity have on Australian prisoners of war?’ The students might then formulate a thesis, based on their research, which they might test against a number of oral history responses. Such a task will prompt them to use critical thinking skills, analysing varied responses. It is likely to elicit in students an understanding about the varied nature of veterans’ experiences and the difficulties inherent in making generalisations about experiences of an event.
follow the conversation, **NOT THE QUESTIONS**

Don’t stick rigidly to your prepared list of questions.

The art of the oral history interview involves following the interviewee’s train of thought and asking appropriate follow-up questions to help them tell the story.

**POP QUIZ**

When constructing your questions, remember you are looking for a person’s memories and lived experience, not facts and figures. Try not to bombard them with factually focussed questions. Create open questions which encourage stories about their experiences, rather than questions which seek factual information. For example, ‘Why did you decide to enlist?’ rather than ‘What date did you enlist?’
Nesta Summerhayes (née Mackey)

was born in Hobart, Tasmania. Already a trained nursing sister, she joined the Royal Australian Army Nursing Corps (RAANC) in April 1952, and served in the Korean War. Working initially in a camp hospital in Australia, Nesta arrived in Japan in November 1953, where she worked as a nursing sister at the British Commonwealth General Hospital (BCGH) in Kure. This was the main base hospital for British Commonwealth casualties during the Korean War and in the post-armistice period.

Between February and May 1954 Nesta served at the British Commonwealth Communications Zone Medical Unit (BCCZMU) in Seoul, Korea. Although casualties at the BCCZMU were reduced after the armistice, medical staff remained busy tending to patients who suffered injuries or illnesses such as frostbite, caused by the freezing Korean winter.

Like many of the nurses who served in Korea, Nesta recalled burns being the most heart-wrenching injury to treat. Many patients were burnt by the kerosene heaters they used in their tents to keep warm. In this clip, Nesta explains the challenge of caring for patients with deep and painful burns:

There were a lot of burns emanating from Korea. Burns [suffered by] the actual soldiers who, during the fighting time, had been burnt by exploding bombs. Also Korea was very cold in winter time and our troops were housed as best [they could be]. Clothes and the uniforms were manufactured as best [as possible using] the accepted technique in those days. So they weren’t really that warm, and they really did suffer. And so there were a lot of pot belly stoves in use. Now they would sometimes explode. Other times through sheer, what amounts to neglect, but it wasn’t, it was necessity to get warm. These cold soldiers you know, would get up close, and the feeling goes a bit when your extremities are very cold.13

On her return to Australia in July 1955, Nesta continued her career in the RAANC, working at a military hospital in Brighton. In April 1957, with her initial period of engagement complete, Nesta discharged from the RAANC. She continued her civilian nursing career working at Launceston General Hospital in Accident and Emergency, then at St Luke’s Hospital, and continued on in various arms of the profession until her retirement in 1991.

www.anzacportal.dva.gov.au/history/special-features/veterans-stories/nesta-summerhayes
A tracker dog enjoys a cooling rinse from his handler during the Vietnam War, November 1967. (AWM SKE_67_1139_VN)
CATEGORISING THE INTERVIEWS

It can be helpful to categorise interviews after they are recorded. Ultimately the way interviews are categorised will determine how others will be able to access them. They might also provide a starting point for thematic topics which could be explored in analysis. Categories could include the year of the war, the regions in which events took place, and the attitudes toward patriotism which were evident at the time.

Basic information collected should identify each veteran’s:
- name
- gender
- date of first military involvement
- rank upon leaving the armed forces
- place/s of war service
- date of interview

It should also include the main topics covered, e.g. frontline experiences, friendship values/attitudes, food, recreations, Anzac Day memories, etc.

If the interviewee is a family member rather than a veteran, then you should identify their relationship to the veteran, e.g. parent, child, sibling.
SYNTHESIS

Having researched the topic using secondary sources and categorised the interviews, students can then take on the task of synthesising their research with an analysis of the oral history interview.

Students should ask questions of the interviews. Some examples of analytically focused questions they may want to explore might be:

- What are the silences in the interview? Are there particular topics the veteran does not address? Why might this be?
- How is this account similar, or different, to others you have collected, or to what you learned in the research phase?
- Are there themes which emerge over a number of interviews? List some of the themes – why might they be important?
- What does this interview tell us that other sources can’t? What doesn’t it tell us?
- What can you learn from the body language and tone of voice of the veteran?
- What role might I, as the interviewer, have played in shaping the story? Would the veteran have told a different story if they were speaking with a different person?
- How might the ‘collective memory’ of an event have shaped the veteran’s storytelling? Does the veteran challenge the dominant collective memory at all?
The process of analysing the interviews and synthesising the content with the information gleaned in background research can be an enlightening one for students. Canadian student Noelia Gravotta worked on an oral history project interviewing survivors of the Cambodian genocide, which culminated in the production of a short educational film. Reflecting on this project, she eloquently expressed the powerful impact it had on her education:

Before I took this course, genocide was just a concept to me. The traditional – and thoroughly inadequate – approach to studying history in high school is a focus on numbers and facts in textbooks. Of the genocide in Cambodia, the encyclopaedia states: ‘1.3 to 1.8 million deaths’. I couldn’t even imagine that many people, let alone imagine that many people being slaughtered. The transformative power of genocide education emerged when we actively engaged with life stories, particularly in our synthesising and analysing information, working with both facts and the emotions in the stories so as to create a narrative.15
SHARING THEIR STORIES

Following the interview the team should create a transcript or topic list summarising what was said. Time codes should be included throughout the document to allow people to navigate more easily through the recorded file. A copy of the transcript or the interview should be provided to the veteran, where possible.

There are many ways the stories that are collected can be shared with a wider audience, if permission to do so was given by the interviewee. Podcasts and short films are particularly engaging options, which allow the listener or viewer to hear the voice of the interviewee, and in the case of film see their body language and expressions.

A simple option is to edit the raw interview into short clips and combine them with a short biography, which might be uploaded to a website. Some examples of biographies and clips which are hosted on the Department of Veterans’ Affairs commemorative website are interspersed throughout this publication.

Planning and editing a short film requires making critical choices about what information to include and what to leave out. The filmmakers need to make decisions which balance offering a compelling narrative with the need to keep the context and integrity of an interview’s segments. This requires the filmmaker to draw on their knowledge of the broader historical context and to use historical judgement in constructing a narrative using a mix of primary and secondary sources. Films provide the opportunity to draw on and incorporate primary sources such as photographs to intersperse throughout the narrative. Doing so gives students the opportunity to undertake research to find appropriate photographs and seek permission for their use.

Students may already possess the technical abilities required to use editing software. Teacher Megan Webster notes in her discussion of the short film project in which Canadian student Noelia Gravotta participated, that two members of the group were already experienced editors.

One of the strengths of a more complex project like a short film is that it might allow students to showcase or further develop skills they already possess.

The Department of Veterans’ Affairs has produced a number of short films incorporating veterans’ stories. One example is this short film telling the stories of some of the Rats of Tobruk: https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/history/special-features/veterans-stories/rats-tobruk
ORAL HISTORY AS A MOTIVATOR

Conducting an oral history project, particularly one which includes a product at the end, can be a motivating, challenging and exciting experience for students and their teachers. A good oral history project shows the dynamic nature of history, its complexities and its subjectivity. History becomes something much deeper and more meaningful than an ‘objective’ list of facts and dates.

Greg Whitman argues that oral history gives educators the opportunity to ‘bring into the classrooms and programs of the twenty-first century a historical process once used by Thucydides to chronicle the Peloponnesian Wars’.17 This traditional method of history is well suited to the digital natives of the 21st century generation – students who are content producers as well as consumers:

The twenty-first century student is restless and eager to utilise the latest technological tools, from iPods to digital recorders, to advance their learning. They are ‘digital babies’. And when asked to apply this knowledge and skills to their learning, their curiosity, commitment, and initiative are enhanced.18

An oral history project has the potential to be a transformative educational experience. It offers challenges and rich rewards. It can engender empathy and listening skills as well as critical and analytical thinking. Most of all, it has the potential to connect students with lived experience of history, bringing it to life.
ORAL HISTORY AND THE CURRICULUM

Oral history projects align strongly to the history skills outlined in the National Curriculum.

The curriculum acknowledges the value of listening to oral stories in the inquiry and skills section as early as the Foundation year and throughout the primary years.

For example, the ‘Achievement on a Page’ document for Year 6 indicates students should be able to:

... identify a range of primary and secondary sources and locate, collect, organise and categorise relevant information to answer inquiry questions. They analyse information or sources for evidence to determine their origin and purpose and to identify different perspectives.19

An oral history project which includes an audio-visual production element may also contribute to the Media Arts strand, in which:

Students work collaboratively using technologies to make media artworks for specific audiences and purposes using story principles to shape points of view and genre conventions, movement and lighting.20

In secondary school, skills developed in undertaking oral history projects relate strongly to the sub-strands ‘Analysis and Use of Sources’ and ‘Perspectives and interpretations’ in the Year 7–10 history sequence of content.21

The principles outlined in this guide can be more broadly adapted to oral history projects undertaken with people outside of the veteran community.
Avoid correcting an interviewee during the interview – it can make them uncomfortable and self-conscious when sharing their story, and can break their train of thought. If you are concerned someone has said something factually inaccurate, make a note in square brackets in the transcript, or use a different section of the interview in the final product you create.

Pictures can be powerful prompters for memory. When organising the interview, encourage the interviewee to bring along photographs of their service that they are willing to share. Pieces of memorabilia they have collected can also help prompt them to tell a story.
PATRICK O’HARA

Patrick O’Hara was 18 years old and working in the Australian Public Service when he was conscripted for two years’ National Service in the Australian Army. The news came as a huge surprise. Patrick had assumed that his birthday would be missed in the ballot as he had never been picked for anything before. At the time, he did not even know where Vietnam was.

From April 1967, Patrick was posted to 108 Battery, 4 Field Regiment, training at Puckapunyal and in Sydney as a gunner before his deployment to Vietnam. As an artilleryman, he served as a Forward Observer with B Company, 2nd Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (2RAR) at Nui Dat. He recalls that the National Servicemen (‘nashos’) and regular soldiers got on very well and respected each other, despite the differences in backgrounds and ages of the men. This led to some lasting and valuable friendships.

In this clip Patrick describes the tension and apprehension he felt while on patrol in Vietnam:

For me, walking around on patrol, I loved. Loved going through the jungle, loved the walking, loved crossing streams, loved listening to the radio in the background and hearing what was going on and nothing ever occurred to me. When we would have a contact, apprehensive, I’d say, more than [anything]. Just wondering about what’s going to happen.

I remember one day we got into a contact and initial contact was straight on, but then as the contact kept going, the gunfire started to move around. It was obvious that they were trying to get around us. So just that feeling of apprehension. And I suppose another day where it really dawned on me, a Vietnamese sniper had obviously figured out where we were going and he’d shot three forward scouts in a row. And one bloke had been hit and the bullet had hit something, his shovel or something, and it had gone into his skull, and when you looked in you could see the bullet just sitting. And then the officer just wheeled around – and he couldn’t pick me because I was part of the FO [Forward Observer] party – he just wheeled around and said [to another soldier], ‘You – take us out’. And I thought then what would I have done if he’d said, ‘Patrick, you take us out’. So, fear and apprehension, but not a specific ‘what if I get hit in the head? What if I get hit in the stomach? What if I lose a …? Just that fear, and apprehension.”

Following his service, Patrick studied to be a teacher, becoming the first person in his family to attain university qualifications. He has an enduring admiration and respect for the Vietnamese people and their culture.

www.anzacportal.dva.gov.au/history/special-features/veteran-stories/patrick-ohara
REFERENCES


FURTHER READING

Australian War Memorial, ‘Guide to Recording Oral Stories’

Oral History Society, ‘A guide to oral history for schools and youth groups’
http://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/how-to-do-oral-history/
[Accessed 15 November 2018]

Willa K Baum’s interviewing rules
https://guides.library.duke.edu/c.php?g=733290&p=5258643
[Accessed 19 November 2018]
CHECKLISTS

PRE-INTERVIEW CONVERSATION

✔ Arrange a time suitable to the veteran to have a conversation via their preferred method – phone/skype/email.

✔ Explain the purpose of the project and why you are doing it.

✔ Send out the pre-prepared interview questions, the oral history rights agreement and an information sheet explaining the project – a week before, if possible.

✔ Make it clear that they can stop their involvement in the project at any time.

✔ Ask if there are any particular topics they might want to share – if there are, make sure you note that in your questions.

✔ Encourage the veteran to gather together any photos or memorabilia that may help them tell their story during the interview.

✔ Arrange the interview time and location, and provide advice on any details on the location such as transport and parking. Send a map if the veteran has not been to the location before.

✔ Contact the veteran again a few days before the interview to confirm the time and location.
Create a checklist to ensure you take all the gear required for the interview and return it. Depending on the equipment you’re using, your checklist might look something like this:

- Recording device – video camera/tablet/audio recorder
- Additional recording equipment – SD cards, charger/spare batteries for the camera/camera bag
- Lights, if needed to boost the ambient light
- Tripod
- Microphone
- Headphones
- Information sheet and permission form for veteran
- Interview questions
INTERVIEW CHECKLIST

- Check for the most suitable location for filming, taking light and ambient noise into account.
- Meet the veteran at the location, and have an informal chat before you begin the interview.
- Ensure you have a glass of water available for the veteran during the interview.
- Before you begin, explain the project again and the reasons for undertaking the interview.
- Seat the interviewer beside the camera and ask the veteran to look at the interviewer when responding, not the camera.
- At the end of the interview ask the veteran to sign the permission form. Leave them a copy of the information sheet, with your contact details.
- Provide information about freely available counselling services – e.g. Open Arms or Lifeline, and encourage the veteran to contact the service if the interview has caused them any concern.

POST-INTERVIEW CHECKLIST

- Save a copy of the interview, permission form and interview details sheet.
- Send a thank-you letter and a copy of the interview to the veteran.
- Reflect on the process and make notes on what went well and what might be improved in the future.
STOCK PHOTO IMAGE CREDITS

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WELL-BEING OF THE INTERVIEWEES

Throughout the interview the well-being of the interviewee is of primary importance. The interviewer should monitor the interviewee for signs of fatigue or distress and stop the interview if necessary. Never push the interviewee to answer a question they are uncomfortable answering.

ROLES FOR EVERYONE

Not everyone is comfortable taking on the role of interviewer, but there are many roles in an oral history project. Students who are uncomfortable conducting an interview can make a valuable contribution as a camera operator, a transcriber, an editor, or a project manager who can organise the scheduling and administration.
Daniel Keighran was born in Nambour in Queensland in 1983. He joined the Australian Army in December 2000, shortly after he finished high school. During his service, Daniel was deployed to Malaysia, East Timor, Iraq and Afghanistan, with the 6th Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (6RAR). On his second deployment to Afghanistan Daniel was part of an Afghan and Australian fighting patrol engaged by a numerically superior and well-coordinated enemy force near the village of Derapet, in Uruzgan province. Throughout the action, Daniel exposed himself to enemy fire so that he could direct suppressing fire, identified targets and drew fire away from a mortally wounded comrade.

For his actions on this day, Corporal Keighran was awarded the Victoria Cross for Australia. His citation reads:

For the most conspicuous acts of gallantry and extreme devotion to duty in action in circumstances of great peril at Derapet, Uruzgan province, Afghanistan, as part of the Mentoring Task Force One on Operation SLIPPER.

In this clip, Daniel talks about the quick decision making process he went through before he moved to draw fire away from his wounded comrade:

It was necessary, I felt. I had no other courses of action available to me at that point in time. I certainly wouldn’t recommend people doing it – however, for me, you know, it was a conscious decision. Well, this is how I justified it. I had a helicopter coming in to pick up my mate already; I had qualified medics and my team around me that could look after me, if something happened to me. And I had plates, or ballistic plates, front and back and hoped if I got hit, I’d get hit in the plate rather than it actually hit me. So it was a decision based on those things, it wasn’t just a ... you know, ‘this is what I’m going to do’. So there was a thought process and a plan, even though it did occur really quickly, before I did what I did. So bravery, for me – I don’t think what I did was really brave, it’s what was required at that point in time.

Daniel discharged from full-time service with the army in 2011, but continues to serve as a reservist.
ENDNOTES


