

GVSU Veterans History Project Guidelines and Instructions for Interviewers

1. Find someone to interview—relative, neighbor, family friend, etc—who is willing to be interviewed and have the interview archived and made available to researchers. The project encompasses veterans of all conflicts that this country has been involved in over the past century, as well as those who served in the armed forces in peacetime. We're also interested in talking with civilian witnesses to these conflicts, and to civilian contractors and people involved in war-related activities on the home front.
2. Do some homework—get some information in advance regarding what branch of the service and what unit the veteran served with, when he/she served, where he/she went, etc., and look up some basic background on the unit, campaign, etc. This will help you to understand what they talk about and to recognize some of the places and events they refer to.
3. Paperwork: In order to archive your interview, we will need you to complete three of the forms from the Library of Congress project field kit, which you can find on their website, www.loc.gov/vets. Specifically, you need the biographical information form, the veteran's release form, and the interviewer's release form:
 - Bio form: You can fill some of this out in advance with whatever information you already have. You can add some of the specifics while talking to the veteran before actually starting the interview. This will help you to learn more about the veteran's story and to know specific things to ask about during the interview. You can also add information after the interview. Be sure to include the interviewers' names on this form. This makes our job much easier later on.
 - Veteran's release form: The veteran must sign and date the form. You can fill in the rest for them. Without this release, we can't show the interview to anyone. Basically what the form does is that it lets the Library of Congress and its designees, in this case the GVSU Veterans History Project, make the interview available for people to view, along with any other materials that they give you or let you make copies of for that veteran's individual file.
 - Interviewer's release form: Please fill out a separate form for each person conducting an interview. Interviewers under the age of 18 need to have a parent or guardian sign the form for them.
4. Pre-interview: Before starting the interview, talk to the veteran and look over any pictures, documents or other materials that the veteran has from his/her time in the service. This will help you to get acquainted and learn more about their stories before starting the interview. Just be careful that they don't tell you their whole story before you turn the camera on. You don't want to wear them out before you start recording. If it's convenient, you can do this prior to the date of the actual interview. Otherwise, just do it on the date of the interview before you record it. If you are able to conduct a separate pre-interview session before the date of the interview, or if you have the veteran's completed biographical information form in advance of the interview, try to do some

background research on the unit the veteran served with, and/or on the battles or campaigns that he or she participated in or witnessed aspects of. This will enable you to ask more specific questions, and will tell the veteran that you are taking the job seriously. There is a good deal of information available online for individual army and Marine divisions and regiments, air force units and naval ships, so if you have some basic background information, you can often get a good idea of where veterans went and what they did before conducting the interview.

5. Recording and setup:

- If at all possible, record the interview on video. We will take audio recordings, but camcorders are pretty cheap these days, and even cheap ones will work to create something that we can archive, and being able to see the veteran talking adds a lot to the impact of the interview. It is also possible to record videos over Zoom and similar systems, which can enable you to do interviews remotely. It is best to do the interviews in person, but this is not always practical.
- Choose a place to interview the veteran where there is not much background noise or activity. Don't have the veteran in front of or right next to a window, since this makes the rest of the image very dark.
- If the interviewee wears glasses and needs them to see you while you are talking, try to avoid having too much glare from the glasses. If they are comfortable without their glasses, then they can just take them off if there is a glare issue.
- Set up the camera pretty close to the interviewee, preferably not more than six feet away. The interviewee's face should be at the center of the shot, or slightly above center. You basically just want the head and shoulders. Being this close helps to give good resolution on the face itself, and helps to make sure that the camera's microphone picks up what the interviewee says, even when he/she speaks quietly.
- The interviewer should be next to the camera, not in the shot. The interviewer should speak fairly loudly so that the microphone will pick up the questions, and so that veterans with hearing problems will understand the questions better.
- If you are conducting the interview remotely, make sure before you begin that the veteran can be seen and heard clearly.

6. The interview:

- Have a basic set of prepared questions to work from, but be prepared to deviate from the plan to ask followup questions when the veteran skips over things too quickly or says something interesting that you'd like to know more about.
- Start by asking about the veteran's background, especially where and when they were born, what their family did, where they went to school, and what they were doing before joining the military. This helps to get them comfortable and makes it easier for you to then follow them through their military careers.
- At least to start with, follow the timeline and keep the interview in chronological order. You may get away from this at times, or want to go back after getting to the end of the story to ask followup questions, but keeping things in order tends to make the interview easier to follow and to use later.

- If the interviewee does not want to talk about something, or gets upset when remembering bad experiences, either change the subject and move on, or give them a chance to pull together. Be aware that most veterans will leave things out of their stories, and that we have to let them do that. Whatever information they give us is more than what we had to start with.
- Toward the end of the interview, ask the veteran what he/she did after getting out of the service. This tends to help close out the interview and put the person's military experience into some sort of perspective.
- There is no standard length for these interviews. Sometimes a veteran will only talk for a few minutes. Others can go on for two hours or more. Our current record is 10 hours, but that was with a career officer who continued in military related activities after his service. The majority of the interviews that our more experienced interviewers conduct last between about 40 and 80 minutes. When making your interview appointment, you should plan on being there for at least two hours, especially if you need to do the pre-interview as part of the appointment. If necessary, you can always return to re-interview someone to get the rest of their story, at least as long as they are willing and able to talk with you again.
- Some veterans have photographs or documents that they are willing to let us archive. If they wish to keep the originals, the best thing for you to do is to scan them to create pdf files that we can archive, although legible photocopies are OK. If you are including such materials for your interview, be sure to fill out the photo log and/or manuscript log from the Field Kit located on the Library of Congress website. If they are willing to donate original materials, we will take care of any additional paperwork needed for archiving purposes.

7. Archiving: Once the interview is completed, you will need to submit the interview and completed forms in to the GVSU Veterans History Project Director, Dr. James Smither. The forms should be submitted as pdf files attached to an email message to smitherj@gvsu.edu. The videos should be saved in MP4 format or something compatible with it, and shared with Dr. Smither via an email prompt. Once we receive the video, we will check it for basic quality and formatting, and then post it to our YouTube channel. Once it is their, one of our staff will transcribe it, and the video and transcription will be posted to our main online archive.

8. If you have any questions about the project or the interview process, please contact the project director, Dr. James Smither, at the History Department of GVSU. Tel.: 616-331-3422, email: smitherj@gvsu.edu