



This document is an adaptation of materials developed by the [Veterans History Project](#) of the Library of Congress, working in consultation with the American Folklife Center and the Oral History Association. Special acknowledgment is extended to Donald A. Ritchie, associate historian, United States Senate, and author of “Doing Oral History” (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), and Barbara Truesdell, author of “Oral History Techniques: How to Organize and Conduct Oral History Interviews” (Center for the Study of History and Memory, Indiana University).

How to Do a Successful Oral History Interview

- **Divide the interview into segments.** Dividing an interview into segments provides organization and improves the chances that important details will not be overlooked. Your goal is to capture the recollections of a veteran’s military service—especially the most memorable moments. You should also hope the interview will shed light on how the veteran’s service influenced his or her post-military life.
- **Structure the interview around a series of specific questions.** This helps jog their memory and keeps the interview on track. It’s important that you write your questions out in advance, but don’t hesitate to create new ones as the interview proceeds. The questions should be straight forward, easy to understand, and on a single topic (compound questions strung together are much harder to answer). Use open-ended questions that cannot be answered with a simple yes or no.
- **Let the veteran tell his or her own story.** The questions below were developed to provide general guidance only, so don’t feel obliged to ask all the questions we suggest or to limit yourself to these questions. If the veteran wants to expand upon a topic, allow him or her do so unless it is completely off topic. Likewise, if the veteran becomes uncomfortable with a question or line of questions, don’t press the matter. The veteran needs to feel that he or she is in a “safe place.”
- **If possible, communicate with the veteran beforehand and tell him or her what to expect.** Share a few of the questions that you plan to ask. Often interviewees are more comfortable if they know what kinds of questions you might ask.
- **If the veteran participated in a war or armed conflict, prepare yourself for the interview by reading about the war(s) the veteran served in and by reviewing maps and atlases.** This will not only help you formulate the right questions, but enable you respond more effectively during the interview itself.
- **Do sound checks before you get started.** Is the volume set at the right level? Is the voice quality good? If it is a video, is the light level adequate? **MAKE SURE** that your voice and the veteran’s voice is clearly audible during a test and playback before you launch into the formal interview.
- **At the conclusion of the interview, complete the [Oral History Release Form](#).** After you and the veteran have signed it, forward it to the Minnesota Military Museum along with the tape. Also include a photo, if possible. We recommend that you make a copy for yourself and for the interviewed veteran.

Segment 1: For the record

Make an introductory announcement at the start of each audio or video recording. Record on tape the date and place of the interview; the name of the person being interviewed; his or her birth date and current address; and the names of the people attending the interview, including yourself and the name of the camera or recording operator if different than you.

Segment 2: Warm-up questions

Begin with questions that are relatively easy to answer.

Were you drafted or did you enlist?
Where were you living at the time?
Why did you join?
Why did you pick the service branch you joined?
Tell me about your boot camp/training experience(s).
Do you recall your first days in service?
What did it feel like?
Do you remember your instructors?
How did you get through it?

Segment 3: Experiences in combat

After you completed your initial training, what unit were you assigned to?
Where were you stationed?
What was your job/assignment?
Which war(s) did you serve in (WWII, Korea, Vietnam, Persian Gulf, Iraq, Afghanistan)?
Where exactly did you go?
Do you remember arriving and what it was like?
Did you come under fire/see combat?
Were there many casualties in your unit?
Tell me about a couple of your most memorable experiences.
Were you a prisoner of war?
Tell me about your experiences in captivity and when freed.
Were you awarded any medals or citations?
How did you get them?
Higher ranks may be asked about battle planning. Those who sustained injuries may be asked about the circumstances.

Segment 4: Military life

Ask questions about life in the service and/or at the front or under fire.

How did you stay in touch with your family?
What was the food like?
Did you have plenty of supplies?
Did you feel pressure or stress?

Was there something special you did for "good luck"?
How did people entertain themselves?
Were there entertainers?
What did you do when on leave?
Where did you travel while in the service?
Do you recall any particularly humorous or unusual event?
What were some of the pranks that you or others would pull?
Do you have photographs?
Who are the people in the photographs?
What did you think of officers or fellow soldiers?
Did you keep a personal diary?

Segment 5: After the service

Appropriateness of questions will vary if the veteran had a military career.

Do you recall the day you were discharged from the service?
Where were you?
What did you do in the days and weeks immediately afterward?
Did you go right to work or go back to school?
Was your education supported by the G.I. Bill?
Did you make any close friendships while in the service?
Did you continue any of those relationships?
For how long?

Segment 6: Later years and closing

What did you do for a living after you left the service?
Did you marry and raise a family?
Did your military experience influence your thinking about war or about the military in general?
Did you join a veterans' organization, such as the American Legion or VFW?
What kinds of activities does your post or organization have?
Do you attend reunions?
How did your service and experiences affect your life?
Is there anything you would like to add that we have not covered in this interview?

Thank the veteran for sharing his or her recollections.

Please be sure that the veteran, interviewer, and photographer (if any) sign the [Oral History Release Form](#).