

## An Oral History Project: World War II Veterans Share Memories in My Classroom

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### Abstract

Fuchs uses classroom presentations by veterans to enliven his World War II history class and enhance his students' understanding of America's participation in this war.

When I began teaching history at Northern Virginia Community College, I hoped one day to offer a course on World War II, a subject of near-consuming passion ever since I was a child during its turbulent years. Opportunity, as they say, soon knocked on my classroom door, thanks to a surge in popular interest in the war. Each year from 1991 to 1995 marked a 50th anniversary of our nation's participation in the war and witnessed a rush of veteran's reunions with buddies; organized trips to World War II battlefields; the dedication of a D-Day museum in New Orleans; and in the wake, the opening of blockbuster films and award-winning books like *Schindler's List*, *Saving Private Ryan*, and James Bradley's *Flags of Our Fathers*. The new United States Holocaust Memorial Museum joined an older neighbor, the Smithsonian's Museum of American History, in presenting exhibits and educational programs on the war; and now, accepting the reality that their own fathers and 16 million veterans like them were dying at the rate of 1,500 daily, America's postwar baby boomers could never forget their cherished, shared memories of that war.

My own professional interest also peaked about this time, thanks to the support I received from the college and the local community. For one, an oral history program had been introduced some years before on the Loudoun Campus by Dr. Bev Blois, Jr., chair of humanities, and I received his encouragement and support to move ahead and plan my World War II course with an oral history component. Equally important, near the college was an adult community for retired World War II officers, several of whom graciously volunteered to participate and whose untapped wealth of wartime experiences I wanted to tape record and keep as an historical record. Finally, as a veteran history teacher, I believed that the use of living eyewitnesses in this course could also be implemented in other courses of mine.

### Format of the World War II Course

Though this history course had been introduced in 2001, it was clear to me that revision was necessary, particularly with the addition of oral history in the new format. Under course objectives, I wanted my students to:

- Identify and analyze the factors behind the rise and/or development of post-World War I dictatorships in Germany, Italy, Russia, and Japan that sparked aggression leading to war;
- Understand the military, technological, diplomatic and civilian responses to totalitarian aggression by the major Allied nations, 1931-1945, leading to their ultimate victory;
- Comprehend the enormity of totalitarian crimes committed against humanity – especially of the Holocaust, before and during the war, and the responses of victims, Allied nations, and others to these crimes;
- Develop a deeper understanding of the legacy that the War has left on people, nations, and the world community since 1945; and,
- Reinforce and enhance their basic skills in the course.

To reach these objectives, I focused the course content on a thematic survey of the major international issues between 1918 and 1945 from which the underlying causes of the war had sprung: the post-World War I rise and nature of dictatorships in Russia, Italy, and Germany; the roots and development of Japanese aggression in Asia; the reactions of the Western democracies to the threats of dictators Mussolini, Stalin, and Hitler; the role the United States

played between the two world wars; a summary of the major military developments by the Allies and the Axis powers from 1931 (when Japan had invaded the Chinese province of Manchuria) to the defeat of fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, and Imperial Japan; the meaning of the Holocaust (which included a planned class trip to the Holocaust Museum); and, last, the Bomb, the Nuremberg war crimes tribunals, and other legacies of World War II.

For instructional purposes, I asked my students to read S.J. Lee's *European Dictatorships, 1918-1945* (2nd edition, Routledge, 2000) and M.J. Lyons' *World War II: A Short History* (3rd. edition, Prentice-Hall, 1999) as the basic texts, and assigned a paper based on a comparative analysis of Elie Wiesel's *Night* and John Hersey's *Hiroshima*. Supplementary content-based resources were assigned in the form of map studies, videotapes, and take-home exams dealing with the historical background to World War II.

### Oral History Project

I now developed a more structured and integrated oral history component within the course framework, as follows:

- A total of sixteen participants – ten World War II veterans, two military experts (one retired, the other on active duty), a wartime correspondent-journalist, an Office of Strategic Services (OSS) member, and three educators who had grown up during the war – volunteered to share their experiences with my history class, which began with 35 students, two auditing students, and visitors (faculty, staff and, occasionally, spouses, and parents).
- The presentations (each about an hour in length) routinely began with handouts (the speakers' or mine), giving the class background information, maps, and photographs.
- My students videotaped the presentations, and we gave individual copies to the participants and a complete set to the college library for student/faculty use and inter-library loans.
- My students were asked to provide ongoing evaluations of what they had learned from the speakers about the war that contributed to their knowledge – writing brief weekly assessments of the individual presentations and an end-of-semester final summary that, along with a ranking of the presentations, contained written evaluations of the most favored topics. Informal evaluations were based on my observation of the quality of student participation in the Q&A sessions and other classroom activities.
- As an option, my students were also offered an opportunity (in place of one final exam essay question) to engage in a related research activity on a topic they found most rewarding.

### The Participants

The following volunteers participated in the oral history component:

**Mrs. Betty M.** discussed her wartime experiences as a journalist who had witnessed the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, a White House correspondent, and a wartime member of OSS in India. She is the author of *A Sisterhood of Spies*.

**Col. Frederick M.**, USAF (Ret), shared his experiences as a combat pilot in the U.S. Eighth Air Force in Europe and described his role flying his favorite P-47 "Thunderbolt" in attacking German military sites in France after D-Day. He flew 102 missions in the war.

**Ens. Stacey H.**, USN (Ret), told the class about his experiences aboard a destroyer and the action he faced against Japanese kamikaze attacks at Leyte in the Philippines. He wore his old Navy pea coat and hat at his presentation.

**Col. Elmer S.**, USAF (Ret), described his role as the co-pilot of the first Presidential aircraft and his experiences taking Presidents Roosevelt and Truman to the Yalta and Potsdam conferences with Soviet leader Stalin in 1945. He showed a tape on the evolution of Air Force One.

**Col. Perc J.**, USAF (Ret), explained his role as a navigator aboard a B-29 in "fire bombing" raids over Tokyo before the U.S. dropped the atomic bombs. He used a hand-drawn map showing the air routes to Japan and wore his old Air Force jacket with ribbons at the presentation.

**Ens. Shaun C.**, the youngest of the participants, still on active duty, informed the class about his job as a Navy SEAL

and his missions in Central and South America, Europe, and Africa. He is currently assigned to the Pentagon. Wearing his Navy uniform, he reported on the history of underwater demolition teams since World War II.

**Capt. Louis T.**, USN (Ret), a Naval Academy graduate, talked about his wartime service aboard destroyers in both the European and Pacific theaters and about his work as a gunnery officer aboard the *USS Benham* assisting naval battle forces and marines in the Marianas and off the South China coast.

**Col. Perc F.**, USAF (Ret), first shared his experiences growing up in the Great Depression, how he became a "90-day Wonder" (a commissioned 2nd Lieutenant), and the nature of his work as a maintenance officer assigned in North Africa. He showed photographs to the class.

**Prof. Arnold B., Mrs. Benita F., and Mrs. Diane F.** recalled what it was like to be children who grew up during the war in Boston, Massachusetts; Cleveland, Ohio; and Racine, Wisconsin. They shared their memories of the air raid drills, rationing, war bond sales, anti-Semitism, victory gardens, and sudden death of President Roosevelt. They displayed memorabilia.

**Col. Clem I.**, USAF (Ret), a B-17 navigator, described how he was shot down over Germany, and after his capture, enduring the last year of the war as a prisoner in the German Stalag Luft III in Poland. He showed a videotape and wore his Air Force jacket at his presentation.

**Col. Charles M.**, USAF (Ret), talked about his role as a lead pilot in the air raid over Ploesti oil refineries in Romania in 1943 and why his units suffered the highest casualty toll in the air war and received the most Medals of Honor, some posthumously. He showed a videotape on the mission.

**Col. Harrison M.**, USAF (Ret), first described the circumstances that had led him to leave the Citadel to become an Air Force cadet in 1938, how he ended up in the Philippines a month before Pearl Harbor, his escape from Japanese forces, and his subsequent arrival in Australia. He showed photos of his crew and aircraft to the class.

**Col. Peter C.**, USA (Ret), discussed his years at West Point and then his missions in two tours in Vietnam. In his talk, he drew parallels between America's patriotic reaction to Pearl Harbor and to the tragic events of September 11, 2001.

**Col. Philip F.**, USM (Ret), who was born in China, served in the Marine Corps and fought on Okinawa, described combat against the Japanese from a soldier's perspective.

### **How Much Was Learned?**

The project's design, as noted, incorporated sequential and interrelated evaluations that, individually and collectively, sought to enhance the students' knowledge and understanding of the course on the war and its objectives.

#### *Informal Observations*

Often before class or during the break, students would meet in small groups to talk about a particular presentation they had enjoyed, like Mrs. Betty M.'s humorous description of her rendezvous with culinary expert Julia Childs in India as OSS members or of Col. Clem I.'s drawings of daily life in a prisoner of war camp. Other observations came up after our trip to the Holocaust Museum: students new to the experience expressed shock at seeing exhibits on Nazi atrocities and sought opinions on what had caused Hitler and his henchmen to institute a state-led program of annihilation of Jews and others. This concern sparked a class discussion on anti-Semitism. Additionally, some students who were war buffs or active members of WWII reenactment groups put on a community college version of "Show and Tell" by recommending highly-prized war books and demonstrating authentic World War II uniforms worn by infantrymen and pilots.

These informal observations did, I believe, provide good class enrichment and contributed to a positive learning environment all semester.

#### *Weekly Evaluations of the Presentations*

The two important evaluation questions were: "Did this presentation specifically increase your understanding of World War II or any of the course's weekly themes, topics, or objectives?" and "What was the highlight of the presentation or the part you enjoyed the most? Give examples."

I discovered that the students' evaluations often went beyond the scope of the course material, texts, and handouts by focusing on how the eyewitnesses had personally reacted to actual combat conditions and to different, often technical, assignments aboard ships and aircraft. Students wrote about their increased understanding of a prisoner of war camp, the attacking kamikaze planes off the Philippines, the horrors of seeing buddies wounded and killed, and the hardships serving aboard different aircraft.

Here is a brief sampling of some evaluations. After listening to Mrs. Betty M., one student wrote, "I had a pretty good idea of what the OSS was all about and what it could do, from gathering secret information from the enemy to sabotaging ...," while another added that "her presentation brought forth the role women played in the war... and the emotions Americans were feeling." Col. Fred M.'s talk on his 102 European combat missions elicited the response that "my uncle stormed a beach just up from Normandy and my grandfather flew B-24s ... so the whole presentation was a highlight." Col. Percy F.'s discourse on life aboard a ship enlightened a history buff by telling him about "the condition of the ships when troops were transported across the Atlantic... and people camped in their quarters sometimes natives would come around and take some of the stuff," while others got a personal idea of what it was to see men wounded and killed in the war.

There was praise too for what students perceived to be examples of wartime bravery, such as Capt. Louis T.'s tale of "the 23 Kamikazes shot down by his friend which helped save a ship," and Clem I.'s story of how the Ploesti raid "reinforced my knowledge of courage, patriotism and the ingenuity of the U.S. fighting men of WWII." One student was intrigued by Col. Pete C.'s candid discussion of the Bomb and the draft (which sparked widespread class debate), while another stated that his talk "gave me one more insight into the American feeling of war." There were positive reactions to the recollections of growing up on the home front, to Mrs. Benita F.'s story of living next door to German-American Bund members in Cleveland, Ohio, and the details about how her father "punched out the Nazi" over who would win the Battle of Britain; to Prof. Arnold B.'s and Mrs. Diane F.'s vivid memories of wartime rationing, recycling, living next to German war prisoners on Wisconsin farms, and the joy of VE and VJ days ending the war in Europe and Japan. Finally, several statements demonstrated a greater understanding of the events of December 7, 1941, thanks to Mrs. Betty M.'s eyewitness account of the Japanese attack.

#### *Final Student Evaluations: Selecting and Researching The Top Presentations*

In summary questionnaires, the class was asked to rank *all* sixteen presentations, which would give me (for future consideration) a non-scientific, relative, and confidential final assessment of the most important down to the least important topics and participants – from the students' perspective.

For the purpose of illustration, this is the students' final ranking of the five most enjoyed topics and participants (the lower the number, the higher the ranking):

Mrs. Betty M	Pearl Harbor, OSS	87
Col. Clem I	Prisoner of War	90
Col. Philip F	Marine on Okinawa	96
Ens. Stacy H	Fought Kamikaze attacks	109
Col. Charles M	Ploesti Raid	111

The remaining eleven topics and participants were *collectively* ranked as follows:

- Four were ranked from 136 high to 142 low;

- Three were ranked from 162 high to 165 low;
- Four were ranked from 187 high to 201 low.

The students were then asked to respond to the question, "Which three participants have most enhanced your knowledge and understanding of this course on World War II and its objectives and why?" and the five most valued choices were:

VOTES RECEIVED	FIRST CHOICE	SECOND CHOICE	THIRD CHOICE	TOTAL POINTS
Mrs. Betty M	3	5	3	11
Ens. Stacy H.	1	3	6	10
Col. Clem. I.	0	7	3	10
Col. CharlesM.	4	3	2	9
Col. Elmer S	2	3	2	7

Again, for illustrative purposes, it was shown that, of the remainder, five participants received a collective total of 14 first, second and third place votes, and the six others received none at all.

Judging from their summary evaluations, the students were greatly impressed with the exciting wartime stories experienced and shared by these participants: observing the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and serving in the clandestine OSS; fighting Japanese kamikaze attacks; facing extremely difficult conditions in a German prisoner-of-war camp; participating in the Ploesti raid, perhaps the most daunting air mission in the war; and flying as the co-pilot of the first Presidential airplane used by Presidents Roosevelt and Truman in early 1945.

In my planning, I had wanted to go one step further in the evaluation process: after choosing their favorite participants, how many of the students, I wondered, would also elect to write a final research paper (of any length and choice of sources) on one of the World War II experiences spoken about in class? This evaluation, even more than the others, would clearly show me how powerful the "pull" of a particular presentation topic had been.

The results were, indeed, positive in their direct relationship to classroom presentations and the total of sixteen students (about half the class) who opted to engage in extra, personally satisfying research: five students investigated the OSS in more detail; three others discovered more about the Ploesti raid; four got a better perspective of air combat in the Pacific, such as the firebombing of Tokyo; two students looked into the role of U.S. Marines in land battles against the Japanese; and of the remaining students, one followed Mrs. Betty M's suggestion by exploring more about the events on Oahu, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941, and the other read about the Allied conferences held at Yalta and Potsdam in 1945.

### Looking at the Results of the Oral History Project

I had spent about three months preparing the structure and substance of the oral history component and, when the course began, I found myself micro-managing the weekly routines: first revising the original course of study to establish a firmer groundwork for the participants; developing the sequential parts of the oral history component itself, from its overall rationale and format to the different forms of evaluation; finding, then inviting, and scheduling the war veterans and the others from the community; developing a videotaping activity (really a component-within-the-component) that, from week one, depended on my trusty SONY camcorder, the student-cameramen, and the semester-long support of Mark Worthington, the college's audio-visual specialist.

The project's benefits more than outweighed the challenges, and constructive results were demonstrated in six

different ways:

- From the sixteen participants, the class as a whole acquired a richer and deeper understanding of our nation's multi-faceted involvement in World War II. The eyewitnesses' personal stories complemented the information and source material in the textbooks and helped the students to reach most parts of the course objectives by semester's end. For example, some participants referred to the dictatorships in Germany and Japan as catalysts in shaping wartime attitudes, especially patriotism (Objective 1). They gave the students a good overview of the military, technological, and civilian responses to totalitarian aggression from 1941 to 1945, when all of them served, in their collective memories and anecdotal references to our nation's fighting forces as well as the phenomenal economic expansion and the superb roles that civilians, especially women, played in producing the vast quantity of weapons, ships, and aircraft to defeat the enemy (Objective 2). When the speakers answered questions on what the war has meant to them, then and today, and on how the global conflict had brought about postwar changes and new challenges for humankind and on how they came home to lead successful civilian lives, they added to the students' comprehension of the legacy of World War II (Objective 4). Finally, those participants who commented on or described the Bataan Death March, the treatment of Allied prisoners-of-war, the Holocaust from their perspective, and the devastating impact of nuclear power in the wake of Hiroshima did give my class a greater awareness of the brutality experienced in the war (Objective 3).
- Slightly more than half the class voluntarily went beyond the scope of the course of study and stated assignments to become involved in extra research projects on presentations that had appealed strongly to them. This is further evidence of the value that this oral history component had in motivating students to exceed the norm in a desire to enhance their knowledge of yet another World War II topic.
- My ongoing evaluation of the students' written work (essays, book analyses, and the optional paper) revealed improvement in basic skills, but not for everyone; the older, more advanced students displayed superior writing skills and a few also demonstrated very good oral skills in the way they participated in classroom discussions. But several others continued to show mild to serious deficiencies in writing, which (in my belief that every teacher has to be an English teacher) I tried to deal with by having them rewrite and resubmit essays to me and getting extra help in the Writing Center.
- Perhaps for the first time in their lives, my college students and the participants (all of whom, save one, were senior citizens) came together in a shared academic and social activity. The veterans spoke highly of the students, who in turn were always respectful. At no time did any of the participants, openly or privately, express fault with the program or the course (save for the one or two suggestions for me to leave even more time for their presentations and use a classroom closer to the parking lot). In sum, what I found gratifying was every participant's personal satisfaction with the overall quality of the students and their collective interest in World War II issues, and especially with the opportunity they received to share memories (with clarity and a remarkable ability to recall details) from the distant past – but for them, it was only yesterday. One could not help but enjoy the pleasant merger, however temporary, of the two generations on the Loudoun Campus. Though I did not attempt to measure or gauge this marvelous rapport with any scientific accuracy, I did observe – week after week – a "mutual admiration society." Hopefully, having more seniors on campus for inter-generational classes like this one is a college project worth repeating.
- The successful participation of eyewitnesses showed its potential as a valuable teaching technique in the other American history courses I teach. Thanks to my ties to Falcons Landing, the retirement community from whence most of the participants had been drawn, and to a local senior center, I can invite others to speak as eyewitnesses to significant historical issues and topics in the curriculum, like the Great Depression, our military involvement in Korea and Vietnam, the assassination of President Kennedy, the resignation of President Nixon, and the demise of the Soviet regime. The instructional aim will be the same: to enhance student knowledge and understanding of significant events in history.

#### Recommendations for Project and Course Improvement

Given the opportunity to teach the same integrated course and oral history project in the future, I would make these revisions:

- Instead of having so many (ten) veterans who had officer status in World War II, I would seek more diversity in the selection process and invite other participants, including lower-ranking veterans, to get their different perspectives on the war; working women who, like the symbolic Rosie the Riveter, played an enormous role in wartime factories; Holocaust survivors, farmers, teachers, and – why not? – a receptive former wartime enemy who just might happen to live in our community. The students suggested other speakers, such as James Bradley (author of *Flags of our Fathers*), a wartime Washington, D.C. correspondent, a war crimes expert, and other veterans who had fought in the British army, on submarines, in the D-Day landing, or the Battle of the Bulge.
- In seeking a better balance between my instructional methods (lectures, student reports, film analyses, map activities, class debates) and the oral history component, I would have fewer presentations – no more than six or seven – which, along with a more selective choice of World War II speakers, could achieve the same objectives.
- Because relatively few history colleagues and others in the college observed the program, I would have to publicize it more than I did this semester to elicit their involvement, get their reactions to the library collection of the videotapes, offer my assistance in any experimentation with oral history activity they may wish to undertake in, say, English, political science, and, of course, Western Civilization and American history.

In conclusion, based on what has been achieved in my World War II class, an oral history project is, in my judgment, worthy of further exploration, experimentation, and implementation in community college courses across the curriculum.

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