

# **NEW YORK STATE ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM SELF INTERVIEW GUIDELINES**

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## **PREFACE**

History is really about people and things related to them. In a democratic society the experiences of the people who lived and their daily affairs are the very lifeblood of history. Oral history is oft neglected ---although criticized as being tainted by bias or subjectivity—it portrays a microcosm of the larger historic framework.

On Veterans' Day, 2000, Governor George Pataki established the New York State Veterans Oral History Program to preserve the story of New York's veterans in their own words for future generations. Governor Pataki noted, "The recollections and experiences of New York's veterans are a precious and irreplaceable resource...(the veterans') history is our state's history..."

Military service was memorable and often had a great impact on the veteran's life. A Plane Handler Gary A. Bauer, who served on the U.S.S. *Essex*, 1957-1961, recalled, "I was only four months past my 17<sup>th</sup> birthday...when I joined the Navy...it turned out to be an experience that I would never forget in a lifetime."

"An experience of a lifetime"; this service to country was oft the seminal event of a life, and is therefore an essential part of our state and national heritage worth saving. The primary mission of this packet is to provide guidelines for the creation of a resource for historians, educators, students, and family members to use. It also preserves a lasting tribute to the men and women who served so future generations will be ever mindful of their dedication and sacrifices.

These Guidelines are developed for the New York State Veteran Oral History Program's self interview packet. The self interview packet and the forms noted in Guidelines are available from the Veteran Oral History Office. New Yorkers are encouraged to participate in the state's Veteran Oral History program. For further information, contact:

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## **ORAL HISTORY GUIDELINES AND TECHNIQUES**

### **I. Introduction**

Oral history interviews are an important, yet often neglected, aspect of the process of collecting historical information. Interviews collect information from the past, ground in the memory of participants. Although subjective in nature, it provides different perspectives since experiences often tend to be unique. Oral history provides an important voice to individual participants. Oral history is a primary source sharing similar characteristic of all primary sources. They, however, like diaries and letters, make the historical record more personal and human in quality. Oral history makes history more real and alive.

An oral history interviewer has a unique role in the historic process by helping to create a primary document for future use. Therefore, the interviewer should contribute as little as possible to the material provided by the interviewee since it is a documentation of the participant's involvement and experiences.

### **II. Pre-Interview**

1. Find out about the interviewee.
2. If possible, do some research about the topic prior to the interview.
3. Prepare a list of questions or follow the included Sample Interview Questions.

4. Set up and check equipment before the interview. Have extra tapes readily available.
5. Provide a glass / bottle of water for the interviewee.
6. Have a pen / pencil and paper available for notes by interviewer.
7. Make sure the interview site is quiet and there will be no disturbances.

### III. Interview

1. The interview should be approximately 45-60 minutes in duration.
2. The interviewer is more of a guide; allow the interviewee to provide the majority of the narrative. The interview should be as much of a monologue as possible.
3. The interview environment should be a comfortable and relaxed.
4. Be an attentive listener.
5. Discuss the purpose of the interview; what do you want to know.  
i.e. Their experiences during the war.
6. Do not interject your personal opinions into the interview.
7. Use open-ended questions.
8. Begin the interview with essential information:
  - A. Name of interviewee
  - B. Branch of service
  - C. Dates of service
  - D. Place and date of interview
  - E. Name of interviewer
9. The interview itself should begin with general, non-threatening questions.  
Examples: Where and when were you born?  
What was your pre-war education? Where?  
How did you learn about Pearl Harbor?  
Where were you?  
What was your reaction?
10. See Sample Interview Questions sheet, which is included in the packet. Remember these are guidelines, some questions may not be appropriate and the interviewee may cover the topic of a question without being asked. (It is important to be as little involved in the interview as possible.)
11. During the interview, if a particular point is unclear, or a term is used that is unclear, immediately ask that it be clarified.
12. Be flexible, follow-up on topics introduced by the interviewee, even though they are not on your question worksheet.
13. Moments of silence are part of the interview process.
14. Avoid judgmental comments.
15. Keep notes—list important topics covered, write questions, however save them for the end of the interview.
16. Copy any photographs or important articles brought by the interviewee. Ask if letters or diaries are available. If so, ask if they can be copied.
17. Encourage the interviewee to donate all or any important items to the New York State Military Museum and Veterans Research Center in Saratoga Springs, New York.

18. Remember to have the release form signed and dated.
19. Thank the interviewee. Continue conversation with the interviewee; do not interview and rush interviewee out. Escort interviewee out.

#### IV. Post Interview

1. Label all tapes.
  - A. Interviewee's name, service branch, and dates of service.
  - B. Interviewer's name.
  - C. Date and place of the interview.
  - D. Number of tapes and tape number.
2. Label any photographs, documents as to date taken, place, and subject.
3. Immediately following the interview, write-up the interview. Make it as specific as possible, listing significant dates, places, names mentioned by the interviewee. Include date, time, place of interview along with names of interviewee (branch of service, dates of service) and interviewer.
4. Place all materials—pre-interview communications, NYS Individual Record Form, Release Form, copies of all photographs, documents, etc. and post-interview write-up along with any notes taken during the interview in a clearly marked folder with the interviewee's name on it.

### **GUIDELINES FOR EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS**

#### I. Educators

- A. Familiarize yourself and students with the entire contents of the New York State Oral History Program Packet.
- B. Perhaps have your student's role model and rehearse interviews to become familiar with interview methodology.
- C. Ensure that your students are prepared for the interview process:
  1. Read the Individual Record Form and discuss.
  2. Prepare an outline of questions and topics to be covered.
  3. Assign and discuss pre-interview readings on related topics.
- D. Familiarize student(s) with use of video/audio equipment. A team is needed for each interview; one to operate the equipment, one to interview.
- E. Observe the first interview of each group and make suggestions if necessary.

#### II. Student

- A. Each student involved in the interview process should:
  1. Become familiar with the use of video/audio equipment.
  2. Be familiar with the interview methods and techniques.
  3. Understand the importance of oral history as a primary document.
- B. Be prepared for the interview:
  1. Read through the Individual Record Form.
  2. Read related materials on the topics noted in the Individual Record.
  3. Prepare a list of questions for the interview.

4. Make certain all electronic equipment is set up and working prior to the interview.
5. Have a supply of extra tapes readily available.
6. Be familiar with:
  - a. Interview procedure.
  - b. Have pens/pencils and notepaper.
  - c. Remember to have the Release Form signed.
  - d. Follow the Post-Interview procedure.

### **SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR OFFICERS AND ENLISTED MEN**

1. Remember to begin all interviews with essential interview data:
  - A. Name of interviewee, branch of service, dates of service.
  - B. Place of interview, date, and time.
  - C. Name of interviewer.
2. Begin all interviews with simple, non-threatening questions:
  - A. What is your full name?
  - B. When and where were you born?
  - C. What was your pre-war education?
  - D. What was your occupation?
  - E. How did you hear about Pearl Harbor? Where were you when you heard this? What was your reaction?
3. Interview
  - A. When did you enter service?
  - B. Enlist? Draft?
  - C. Branch of service? Why?
  - D. Where did you receive basic training? Tell about experiences; feelings.
  - E. Military service:
    1. Dates of service.
    2. What was your specific training?
    3. What was your unit / ship assignment?
    4. What theater of action—battles in chronological order.
    5. How did you feel about combat?
    6. Medals/ citations—where received, why?
  - F. Military life:
    1. How did you keep in touch with those at home? How often?
    2. What was the food like? Supplies?
    3. What was your most memorable experience? Why?
    4. How do you feel about your military experiences? Why?
    5. Pacific Theater:
      - a. How did you feel about the use of the atomic bomb? Why?
      - b. How did you learn about V-J Day? Where were you? Feelings?
    6. European Theater:
      - a. Were you aware of concentration camps? What was your reaction?

- b. How did you learn about V-E Day? Where were you? Feelings?
- G. Post-War Period:
  - 1. What did you do when you arrived home?
  - 2. Occupation(s).
  - 3. Do you belong to any veterans' organizations? Which? Active?
  - 4. Have you attended any reunions? When? Where?
  - 5. How did your military experience change/ influence your life?

**SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR CIVILIANS**

- 1. Read the NYS Individual Interview Record for Civilians.
- 2. Follow the same initial interview procedure as for Officers and Enlisted Men (Suggestions # 1 and 2).
- 3. Interview:
  - A. What was your wartime work?
    - 1. What was your specific work/activity?
    - 2. How were you trained?
    - 3. Where did you work?
    - 4. What did you like/dislike about your work? Why?
    - 5. How did you feel about the war? Why?
    - 6. How did you feel about your fellow workers? Why?
  - B. How did you learn about:
    - 1. V-E Day? Feel?
    - 2. V-J Day? Feel?
  - C. What were some social activities during the war?
  - D. How did you cope with shortages? Rationing?
  - E. In what ways did the war change your daily life?
  - F. Tell about some memorable wartime experience.
  - G. How did your wartime make your life different? Why?
  - H. Are there any additional wartime experiences you wish to share?

**POST INTERVIEW FORM FOR VETERANS**

Name of Interviewee\_\_\_\_\_

Branch of Service/Unit\_\_\_\_\_

Dates of Service\_\_\_\_\_

Place of Service\_\_\_\_\_

Date and Place of Interview\_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer\_\_\_\_\_

Number of Tapes\_\_\_\_\_

(Interview Notes and Summary and Observations Attached.)

**POST INTERVIEW FORM FOR CIVILIANS**

Name of Interviewee\_\_\_\_\_

Wartime Occupation\_\_\_\_\_

Dates of Employment\_\_\_\_\_

Place of Employment\_\_\_\_\_

Date and Place of Interview\_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer\_\_\_\_\_

Number of Tapes\_\_\_\_\_

(Interview Notes and Summary and Observations Attached.)

**10/27/04**