



WALKING IN HER SHOES

CONDUCTING ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS WITH WOMEN VETERANS

Image: US Army Women's Museum.

Women's experiences and contributions have long been undervalued and under-documented, so oral history interviews with women military veterans are a crucial component of the historical record. As the Voices Oral History Archives explains, "Oral history makes the quiet voices loud. It is an egalitarian platform that allows underrepresented populations to have their stories amplified and preserved."

In combination with other primary sources such as letters, ledgers, diaries, and public records, oral histories flesh out historical events by providing stories that are not found elsewhere, and personal perspectives not found in other types of documentation. Oral history interviews shine light upon how individuals and communities experienced events as well as their thoughts and feelings about them.

Oral histories are not conversations or journalistic interviews. The Oral History Association defines them as "a first-person account made by an interviewer with an interviewee, both of whom have the conscious intention of creating a permanent record to contribute to an understanding of the past." These accounts are considered a primary source, but because they are one person's perspective, they should be used in conjunction with other types of documentation for research.

The interviewer has the responsibility to conduct the interviews using best practices, including preparing for the interview by researching the era or topic being addressed and asking well-informed and significant questions. Interviews should be audio- or video-recorded on stable formats. So that the oral histories can be made available to researchers, release forms must be signed, and there must be long-range planning for preservation and accessibility of the recordings, ideally with indexed summaries and/or transcripts.

There are challenges specific to collecting the oral histories of women military veterans. One of the main issues is that many women do not feel like they are "real veterans" and that their stories are not important. The simple definition of "a person who has served in the armed forces" is complicated by the attitudes held by both non-veterans and the women veterans themselves as to whether their service was important compared to the idealized male "warrior hero."

Many women veterans feel insecure because even though women have been officially and unofficially part of it since our country's founding, the US military is still considered the purview of men. Thus, one of the first hurdles is convincing women veterans who believe that "they didn't do anything" that their experiences are important. Some veterans are also resistant if



they had negative experiences in the military, and others are suspicious of the intentions of the interviewer. Assure the veteran that you will respect her wishes and redact or restrict for a set time period anything they are uncomfortable with having shared.

Interviewing is a skill. Remember that the veteran is giving you the gift of her life story; be mindful of that before, during, and after the interview. Prepare a list beforehand of thoughtful questions about their time in service, their life before and after the military, and their thoughts and opinions about various issues related to women in the military. Philosophical questions such as “What does the word patriotism mean to you?” or “What would you like a civilian to know or appreciate about what it is like to serve?” can lead to interesting insights. Questions that only require yes/no answers should be avoided. If you are not familiar with the conflict era or branch in which the veteran served, do background research. Ask the veteran to provide basic biographical information and service details such as dates of assignments and job descriptions.

During the interview, it is important to actively listen and be engaged with the interviewee. You should not interrupt with your own stories or opinions or challenge them on their viewpoints. If the veteran does not remember specific dates or names, you can research them after the interview. Allow the veteran to talk about topics that are not specifically related to the list of questions because they can enrich the interview. If the interviewee continues to stray from discussing issues relevant to the purpose of the interview, gently guide them back on track.

As the interviewer, no matter how thoroughly you prepare or how experienced an interviewer you are, you must always expect the unexpected. Being comfortable during long silences and strong emotions that can come up during the interview are necessary skills to develop. Interviewers must be aware that even though women veterans endured the same physical, emotional, and spiritual injuries as male combat veterans, they also disproportionately suffer from sexual assault by fellow military personnel. It is not uncommon that the oral history interview is the first time the veteran has been asked about their traumatic experiences, and they might need a break during the interview to gather their emotions.

There are also differences among veterans of different eras. Younger veterans are more likely to share deeply personal experiences during their interviews. Many recent veterans served deployments in combat zones, and some suffer the effects of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). Women’s roles in the military have drastically changed since the WWII era’s women-only service branches (Army WAAC/WAC, Navy WAVES, Marine Corps Women’s Reserve, Coast Guard SPARs, Nurse and Medical Corps, and WASP pilots.) For example, recent women veterans have had many more job and career opportunities than did older veterans. Policy changes over the decades, such as not being automatically discharged for pregnancy, the end of anti-LGBTQ+ policies, admission to service academies, more openings in the officer ranks, and women being allowed to serve in combat roles, mean that younger veterans served in a very different military than did older veterans.

However, there are issues that cross generations. Sexism and racism are unfortunately still prevalent, and these topics are important to cover during the interview. A distressing percentage of women suffered sexual harassment and sexual violence from fellow servicemembers. Lesbians, bisexual women, and gender minorities are still discriminated against, and these veterans can be reluctant to have their sexual and gender identities on record. Their choice to not discuss their identities must be respected.

There are other problematic issues that sometimes crop up during oral history interviews. Including the names of perpetrators of discrimination or assault could lead to libel and slander charges against the repository, so redactions of individual identities are recommended. The interviewer also needs to be aware of any mention of felonious activities or possible information that is still classified as confidential and discuss that with the veteran.

After the interview, thank the veteran for their time and their participation. If you have the preservation and storage capabilities to responsibly take care of the materials, you can ask the veteran if they have any military-related items such as photographs, letters, diaries, or scrapbooks they would be willing to donate or lend for digitization. Allow the veteran to read over

the transcript or watch/listen to the interview before it is made public so that errors such as the spelling of names or misremembered dates can be corrected. Again, if there is anything they regret having said, redact or restrict those parts of the interview. If there is a full-text transcript, you will probably spend some time convincing the veteran to not rewrite the interview so that it accords with proper English construction. Speech is very different from written word.

Collecting, preserving, and making accessible the oral histories of women who served in the military ensures that the word “veteran” means all veterans. The stories of an officer with a 20-year career as well as someone who washed out or left the military as soon as they could are equally worthy of having their experiences heard.



ABOUT THE ESSAY AUTHOR

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