

HIST 3452 The Second World War

Oral History Project 2018

Due in paper copy in class on **April 30** *and* by email to your TA by 10:00 am. on **April 30**

READ ALL THESE INSTRUCTIONS CAREFULLY!

What was it really like to be a soldier in World War II? That is a question we can only answer by gathering evidence from those who experienced the war. But even when they tell us their personal stories, we as historians have to sift the material they give us and place it into a broader context.

This assignment gives you an opportunity to delve into the personal accounts of American WWII veterans as they tell their personal stories about what they saw and lived through during the war. The assignment, however, is not simply to gather up stories but to interpret them. That is the hard part.

If you could interview a group of American WWII veterans about a specific topic, battle, or episode in the war, what would it be? The topic is wide open. You might be interested in how US soldiers endured the hardships of the battle of Normandy, France on or after D-Day. You might want to know what emotions and attitudes US soldiers had toward Germans as they entered Germany in early 1945. Or you might want to write about the soldiers who fought on the remote Pacific islands like Guadalcanal or Tarawa or Iwo Jima or dozens of other such places.

You might want to hear from African-American veterans. Or you might want to learn about women in various branches of the armed services. Or about prisoners of war. Or medical corpsmen and nurses. The possible topics are endless.

For this assignment, please **follow these steps**:

1. Go to the Library of Congress Veterans History Project site. <http://www.loc.gov/vets>

Read about the project. Then select "Search the Veterans Collections."

2. Use the search engine to identify oral history records on the general subject you want to know more about. The search engine allows you to select for "digitized collection" and "transcript." Make sure you also choose "All Fields Together" on the left-hand bar. You can also select the Browse tab at the top to get a feel for the range of the collection. Search for fairly large topics at first and then get more specific. (For example I found 59

transcripts when I searched for “nurse” and WW2; 96 for Guadalcanal; 111 for Iwo Jima; 62 for African American; and so on.)

3. You must find about **15 oral history transcripts** that relate to the topic you have selected. Make a careful list of all the transcripts you will use, and indicate the full biographical information for each veteran. This list must appear at the end of your paper.
4. Now begins the hard part. You have to develop **an argument**. That is, develop an interpretation of what the transcripts as a whole mean and how they shed light on the topic you are studying. Draw out the meaning of these transcripts. **DO NOT SIMPLY DESCRIBE THEM.**

Guidelines:

Your essay must highlight patterns, similarities, and themes that link the stories together. Pay careful attention to the interviews. What words do these veterans use? How do they describe their lives before the war? What impact did the war seem to have on them? Why did they think they were fighting? What kinds of topics do the veterans talk about? Do they tell battle stories, or do they talk about friends, or family, or specific episodes they remember? What sorts of things do they *not* seem to mention? How much can you learn from the experience of a soldier from these oral testimonies? And what are the limitations of these sorts of sources?

Please do not simply summarize the individual transcripts. Find common themes and build those themes into an argument about the human experience in war.

If you wish, you may do additional outside reading about the topic you have chosen, but this is not required. If, for example, you want to know more detail about a particular battle or period of the war, you can do additional reading. Make sure to cite all sources you consult in an endnote and in a full bibliography.

The final essay should be roughly 3500 words in length. In addition, the essay must include a **list of the veterans** whose interviews you read, and a **bibliography** if you used any additional outside reading. The list of sources does not count toward your word limit.

Note: this assignment requires patience. You cannot do it in a single night. Start reading the transcripts now, and think about them for a while before you begin to write.

In 2018, please do not write your essay comparing how the Germans and Japanese treated American POWs. That topic is retired for this year...