



The Need to *Remember*
Our Aging Veterans



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Our Veterans are Our Heroes

So many of our parents and grandparents have—and unfortunately some still do—sacrifice their innocence as human beings in struggles to defend our very morals and ideals. I believe that it is safe to say that most of us, at some point in our lives, have heard a tale of a soldier fighting for his or her life in a foreign country against an unfamiliar enemy. But the question is: How many of us have actually sat down and truly, completely listened to these soldiers and their personal accounts of the struggle?

How many of us have truly comprehended the impact that these experiences have had on the consciousness of our defenders, and how much their lives have been changed in the process? These men and women are pieces of living history; their stories make up what eventually end up in our school's history books and on the programs we watch on television. As a society, we need to focus on these living memorials, before they die off, and all we are left with *is history*.

Whether you liked history or despised every boring minute of it as children in school, you had to sit around, listening to your teacher talk and give long, drawn out notes on our past. We were taught what war was, and what soldiers did during these conflicts. As we got older, we were all taught about the histories behind these conflicts (i.e. World War I, II, Korea, and Vietnam). We were all taught what a veteran is, and we all know that holidays like Memorial Day are celebrated every year in order for us to remember what our veterans did for our country.

Most of us just sat there and listened to the proctor drudge on through dates, faces, and battles, watching the clock to see how much time was left until that bell would ring. If we were lucky, we watched a film strip or video, but you soon realized that these were only slightly more entertaining.

Then, there are the depictions of our veterans in entertainment, on the silver screen and on television. There is no denying the fact that Hollywood has run through the gambit of war movies time and time again. These are big budget, star studded extravaganzas of special effects and heroic acts, usually intertwining some love story, all in the back drop of one 21st century war or another.

All Quiet on the Western Front, Flyboys, Saving Private Ryan, Pearl Harbor; all really good movies that pull at the emotional heart strings and depict the events of some of our greatest conflicts. Heck, some of us probably even watched a few of these in class.

Are they entertaining? Yes, there's certainly no denying that. But, though these movies are based on true events, that is usually where they part ways with history and the true, personal stories of soldiers during these desperate times.

This was, and still is, how history was taught to us. With ancient conflicts, this is the only way it can be taught. But, when it comes to our more recent history, the conflicts and battles within the 21st century, we have other resources at our disposal—wells of information that are underused and are slowly dying as we watch. These tools are the very people that bravely fought and sacrificed their personal lives in the service of our country, the people that actually manned a plane or shot a machine gun during wartime.

Listening to a teacher explain the strategic formations involved in the Battle of the Bulge can be informative, but extremely boring, while watching a pumped up, hyped, big screen war movie can be extremely entertaining and may even teach you a little of the history involved.

However, these things truly pale in comparison to the personal accounts of being on the front lines of battle that the veteran living around the corner could tell, and the oral histories of these veterans are continually lost—every minute of every day.

A question to mull over as we continue: Would you rather have watched a video depicting soldiers storming the beaches of Normandy, or would have rather had a soldier *who was actually there*, standing in front of you, telling you what it was like as he ran head-long up the beach as bullets and shrapnel rained down?

As a society, we need to focus on these living memorials, before they die off, and all we are left with *is history*.

FACT: As of December 2009, there is currently only 1 (yes, 1) remaining World War I veteran still alive in America. Frank Buckles is currently 108 years old.

FACT: As of December 2009, there are approximately 2 million American World War II veterans still alive today. On average, it has been documented that we are losing nearly 1,000 (yes, 1,000) of these remaining veterans every day.

Startling statistics, but it is expected as these generations continue to age and time marches on. What should be the most startling piece of information to come from these statistics is the number of veterans that we still have walking among us today that can still regale us with their personal stories of service. These individuals encompass the battles and the conflicts that we seem to only hear and learn about in documentaries and history text books.

Who knows how many intriguing, exciting, first person tales from these wars are being lost as age continues to march on our veterans; as diseases like Alzheimer's continue to strip them of their memories. Many of these veterans, like my grandfather, Frank Carollo, had kept diaries during the war, or had written down their accounts after arriving home. Many of these diaries have been lost to time, or are lying in attics or storage chests covered in dust.

Why aren't we making more use of them in our educational system?

The argument can be made that we do remember our veterans more than other countries, by erecting grand monuments to them and by opening museums dedicated to remembering those that sacrificed during these conflicts. But, I believe we can and should be doing so much more, not only for the sake of memorializing them, but for the sake of future generations being able to understand what it was like for the individual soldier during the wars that this country has fought.

They are our lifelines to the past... *They are living history.*

Is the soldier that endured cold, wet daily life in a trench in France, with the constant threat of death from disease or a bullet not a direct link to trench warfare during World War I?

Is the soldier that was shot down over Austria, and forced to march through snow for days, before becoming imprisoned in a POW camp not a direct link to the history behind Stalag 17 and other POW camps during World War II?

The bottom-line: The veteran living down the road or the veteran somewhere within your very own family is much more informative, much more involved in the conflicts that they sacrificed their lives in, and even more entertaining than anything we can learn in history classes, on television, or in the movies.

What should we as a society be doing in order to give these vets the remembrances they so richly deserve; to give future generations the first-hand experiences and lessons that we may have, or at least could have gotten from hearing the war stories of our fathers and grandfathers?

The answer: **Use them as unparalleled tools for education! Let them tell their personal stories to our younger generations!**

If you want a class filled with kids to listen and comprehend a history lesson, give them a person that was actually there, fighting in the Battle of Bulge. Give them a World War II veteran!

From personal experience in promoting my own book on a World War II veteran, I can safely say that students will pay attention and listen more intently when you offer them an experience like this. My grandfather is no longer alive, and I could see, while I was giving these talks that the students were losing interest as I talked about his experiences in WWII.

But when I took out the original diary that he had kept while a POW; when they were able to touch the toilet paper he had written it on with a piece of lead, I peeked their interests like nothing else could have. After that, I knew I had their attention.

That was just his diary. Just imagine if I had been able to bring my grandfather into these classrooms, as a piece of living history!

They are our lifelines to the past... *living history.*

Here are three simple steps that I propose to utilize our remaining veterans of these early 21st century conflicts, and all veterans for that matter, to ensure a better historical education for all of us, and to better ensure that their individual, personal stories are remembered.

Step 1: Let Them Speak!

Admittedly, there are many veterans that don't wish to share their stories, because the memories are still so powerful and vivid in their minds. They don't want to relive them. My grandfather was one of them. It took a lot for him to express what he had experienced as a POW, and he did so sparingly. But at the same time, there are probably so many more that would love to share their personal accounts of wartime with students across the country.

Our schools should be actively seeking veterans to speak in their classrooms and auditoriums. Open dialogue with local VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars) chapters would ensure a steady stream of individuals willing to enlighten students about their time in war. This, I know, is already in affect within some school districts, but it is something that needs to be greatly expanded, to ensure that all those vets that wish to speak have their chance.

Step 2: Let Them Speak... On Video!

Sitting down those veterans willing to speak about their experiences in a classroom will enlighten a class, but setting up a video and creating a video archive of these stories will enlighten countless future generations. This method could also be used for those veterans who find it too hard to express their experiences in front of others. They could sit in the privacy of their homes and record their experiences when and if they feel comfortable.

Or they could write down their thoughts and experiences in a diary. These journals would be another great source of priceless, firsthand information that could be archived and saved for future generations, before it is too late. Archives of oral and written histories from veterans have begun to be built by some, like Steven Spielberg, but again, this is something that needs to be greatly expanded.

Step 3: Allow Kids to Find the Veterans in their Own Families!

A simple task, one that could be made into a fun assignment by teachers all over the country; make students explore the veterans within their own families. Let them go home and find out if their parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents are, or were, veterans. Doing so would not only inform them of history in a fun way, but they may be surprised to find personal mementos or writings to go along with those stories!

At this time, there is only one living American World War I veteran left alive. Thankfully, he is still around and able to tell his stories. Unfortunately, the time is coming when this last survivor will be gone from this Earth and World War I, for Americans at least, will be completely history.

As the years continue to progress, how much longer will it be before we are staring at our very last World War II veteran?

The point is not to focus on how many of these veterans are left alive, but to focus on how many personal stories of bravery and sacrifice we can still hear; that our children can still hear from these veterans in their own words.

And when the time comes that the last of them have passed, then at least, if we can continue to implement these steps in further remembering our veterans, we will have their stories, in their own words, either orally or written, to pass on to the generations to come.

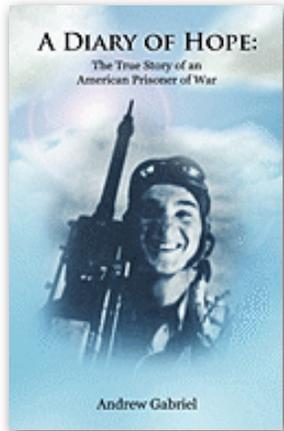
I'm reminded of my grandfather's own words from the original "To The Reader" within his diary:

"The completed book in itself is not an elaborate article. On the contrary, it is quite a simple bit of work, but its contents will clearly show what a Prisoner of War's life was truly like. How, what, where, and under what conditions; all is related to the best of my abilities."

We must give our veterans our time and our ears, allow them to recite their experiences to us, let them have the chance to tell the stories of the great wars in their own words. We must allow them to tell us what they did, and listen intently to their personal sagas, told in their own words, to the “best of their abilities.” 🗣️

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To learn more about America’s last surviving WWI veteran, visit his website at frankbuckles.org.



BUY THE BOOK

Get more details or buy a copy of Andrew Gabriel's [A Diary of Hope](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew Gabriel is the author of *A Diary of Hope: The True Story of an American Prisoner of War*. A first time author, he has always possessed a love of history and our past, having graduated from Montclair State University with a bachelor's degree in Anthropology and Archaeology. *A Diary of Hope* was created as a remembrance to his grandfather, Frank Carollo, and the sacrifices that he, and so many others, were forced to make during World War II. The author has also joined with the National Alzheimer's Association, in memory of his grandfather who suffered with the disease. 20% of each book sold will be donated to this organization. If you have any questions or comments, please don't hesitate to him at hopediary1@gmail.com.

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