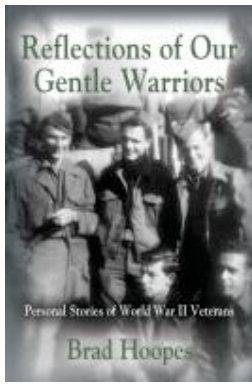




Reflections of Our Gentle Warriors

Personal Stories of World War II Veterans

Brad Hoopes



They endured the Great Depression and then were faced with World War II. Most were just kids when they went off to war, put into roles of tremendous responsibility and/or thrown into hellish situations. Returning home, they built this country's economy into the greatest the world has ever seen. Now in their eighties and nineties, they tell their stories, many for the first time, providing a fresh, human perspective on the war.

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Introduction

I first started interviewing veterans and preserving their stories a number of years ago. The project represented a convergence of several interests: I love history, I love listening to people tell their stories, and I have deep respect and awe for what veterans have done and continue to do. I had just finished reading Tom Brokaw's book, *The Greatest Generation*, and had also learned about the Library of Congress's Veterans History Project. I thought to myself, "Why not try to do something on a local level?" I went out, bought a video camera, and began interviewing. It has proven to be a fascinating and fulfilling experience.

The main objective of my project is to make sure that the veterans' families have a permanent record of their stories, never to be lost or forgotten. A secondary objective is to make sure a copy of these stories is preserved by public institutions so present and future generations can learn about these people. Depending on when you are reading this book, there may not be any World War II veterans still living. As I write, more than five hundred veterans are passing away each day and taking their stories with them.

These veterans were from a humble generation. They went off to war, came home, and moved on with their lives without missing a beat. Most had never told their story—or only bits of it, if they had talked about it at all—before sitting down with me, and they were all in their eighties or older when I interviewed them. A prime example was a man who was badly injured in the fighting on Iwo Jima and was the sole survivor of his unit. Years later his son approached him and asked his father to take him to a costume shop. When the man asked his son why, his son said he needed an army outfit for a play he was in at school. The father asked, "Why don't you use mine?" The son didn't even know he had been in the army, let alone his incredible story!

The downside to coming back and moving right along with life was that many of these men suffered from what we now know as PTSD; they held in emotions and experiences that in many cases they carried with them for sixty-five years or more. Very seldom did I leave an interview where the veteran or I—or both of us—had not cried. When I started this project, I thought that it would primarily benefit the veterans’ families, which of course it has proven to do. But I found out that it often benefited the veteran himself. I once got a call from the wife of a veteran the morning after I had interviewed him. She thanked me and told me that the previous night had been the first time in sixty years that her husband had slept through the night. Once, after asking a standard question about whether the veteran had ever been able to travel back to where he had served, I received an answer that is still seared in my brain: “Why should I? I’m there almost every night.” I still think with sadness of the veteran so wracked with arthritis that it takes him five minutes to cross a room, yet his wife says he flies out of bed like Superman every night because of nightmares. So many times I heard, “I can’t remember what I had for breakfast this morning, but I remember where I was on August 8, 1943.” So often I wish it was the other way around for these people, and they could say, “I had bacon and eggs for breakfast this morning, but I just don’t remember being in that foxhole with my feet frozen solid . . . or the time my ship was attacked . . . or that horrible mission over Berlin . . . or the day my best buddy was killed.” On the flip side, another woman told me that her husband walked around for days after the interview, his chest puffed out with pride. Most of these men will tell you that they didn’t do anything. I hope this veteran listened to his own words and realized that, yes, indeed, he did do something.

Do I think that some of these stories may have been embellished? Yes, I am sure they have been. I am sure that some of the facts are incorrect as well. I choose to overlook any embellishments simply because, given what these men have done, I believe they are entitled to exaggerate a little bit. If some of the facts are incorrect, I think this is largely due to the fog of war and the fact that the veterans were recounting stories sixty-five years after they happened. I was never

after the facts, anyway, since these are all collected in the history books. I wanted to capture the human perspective and experience, which I believe will powerfully enhance the facts and figures.

There were two aspects of these veterans' experiences that I want to emphasize as a background to these stories. The first is the world they came from. Most of these people had never traveled more than fifty miles from home while growing up. They really only knew their immediate family, friends, and surroundings. There was no Internet cable TV with 300+ channels and 24/7 news coverage. Their sources for information about the outside world were maybe a *National Geographic* magazine in the library and the radio that they listened to at night. They were going off to an unknown experience in what was to them a largely unknown world.

The second aspect of their experiences, and one I still haven't been able to get my head around, is that they were just kids—eighteen, nineteen, twenty years old. I look at what my biggest worries or responsibilities were at that age: that math test on Wednesday . . . would that cute girl in English class ever go out with me . . . oh, and most important, what's going on Friday night? What was your personal world like at that age? These "kids" were thrown into situations—often sheer hell—where they were forced to assume enormous responsibility.

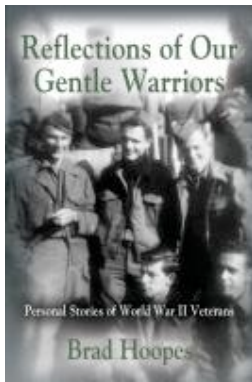
Due to the limitations of my location and demographics, there are a number of stories I was unable to collect that would have rounded out an overview of this important period in history. The stories of African-Americans, for example. They made contributions to the war for this country while still being treated as second-class citizens both in the armed forces and often back home. Another bleak page in our history was our treatment of Japanese-Americans. Some of the most decorated units overseas were Japanese-American, and they served while their families and friends were behind barbed wire in America. Finally, I wish I could have covered more thoroughly the incredible role women played in winning the war, both in the service and on the

home front. I hope this book will prompt readers to go out and learn more about this truly pivotal era in American history.

I also hope that if you never got the chance to hear the story of someone who was special to you, maybe you'll come across a story in this book of someone who served in the same unit or on the same ship or who had the same type of duty and that it will give you some sense of what they experienced. My most fervent wish, however, is that you will seek out your father, grandfather, favorite uncle, or next-door neighbor to have them tell their story or that you will tell your story, if you have one!

I hope this book will give you insight into where this generation came from, who they were, and what they experienced.

Note: The war was fought on two massive fronts. There was the Pacific Theater of Operation (PTO) against Japan and the European Theater of Operation (ETO) against Germany and her Axis allies. I have broken the stories down according to the theater in which the veteran served.



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