

Your Voice, Your Story

Library of Congress' Veterans History Project
Collects, Preserves Firsthand Accounts of Service



COURTESY OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

A veteran participates in an oral history interview during a VHP event at Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island, S.C., July 31, 2018. Over the past 20 years, the project, part of the Library of Congress' American Folklife Center, has added more than 100,000 veterans' stories to its collections in an effort to paint an "authentic picture" of military service.

By Sara W. Bock

The largest library in the world and home to the most extensive rare-book collection in North America, the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., has amassed more than 170 million items to date, including the presidential papers of 23 U.S. presidents, a 15th century Gutenberg Bible and a comprehensive array of newspapers, manuscripts, photographs, sheet music, audio recordings and more. Over the past 20 years, its collections have expanded to include another category of priceless articles: veterans' stories, told firsthand, which create a permanent record to help future generations understand the past.

Thanks to the Veterans History Project (VHP), part of the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress, the library is now home to a growing collection of more than 110,000 personal submissions from U.S. military veterans—audio-and video-recorded oral history interviews, photographs, manuscripts, letters and artwork. Together, they form what the

project's director, retired Army Colonel Karen Lloyd, often refers to as "the people's collection."

The legislation that led to the creation of VHP was the brainchild of U.S. Congressman Ron Kind of Wisconsin, who, according to Lloyd, was at a family gathering when his father and uncle began reminiscing about their service during World War II. Kind asked them to pause for a moment so he could get his video camera to begin recording, saying of his two young children: "I want them to hear your stories from you."

In October 2000, Congress unanimously passed Public Law 106-380, sponsored by Kind and fellow Representatives Amo Houghton and Steny Hoyer, and U.S. Senators Max Cleland and Chuck Hagel. The legislation established the VHP as part of the Library of Congress and was signed into law by President William J. Clinton on Oct. 27. Sixteen years later, the Gold Star Families Voices Act expanded the scope of the project to include oral history interviews from the families of fallen servicemembers who died "as a result of their service during a period of war."

This photo, taken in 2007, provides an aerial view of two Library of Congress buildings on Capitol Hill—the Thomas Jefferson Building, center, the John Adams Building behind it, and the James Madison Building to the right. (Photo by Carol M. Highsmith)



What's perhaps most remarkable about VHP is that all veterans who have served in the U.S. Armed Forces, from World War I to present conflicts, are invited to contribute their personal stories, regardless of their military occupational specialty, how long they served, and whether or not they saw combat. And as Lloyd and her staff at the Library of Congress celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Veterans History Project this year, they hope that the collection will continue to grow as more veterans choose to participate.

Often, she said, all it takes is for them to know that someone wants to take the time to genuinely listen to what they have to say.

"I think so often our veterans are hidden in plain sight, and we really don't realize that we're surrounded by veterans who have done amazing things," said Lloyd. "We're interested in the full spectrum. We're not just interested in the ones who were at the tip of the spear or saw combat. We think that understanding the full picture really gives you a better sense of the selfless service. It can be selfless service in the mess hall [...] where they served isn't as important as their story and their telling us their story."

While recorded oral histories and interviews at least 30 minutes in length—in either audio or video form—are certainly the focal point of the collection and allow researchers or family members the added benefit of hearing the emotions in an individual's voice, Lloyd emphasizes that such recordings are not required. In lieu of a recording, a personal collection can be created with 20 pages or more of original memoirs, diaries or journals; collections of 10 or more letters; or collections of 10 or more original photographs or two-dimensional pieces of artwork. These types of materials also can be accepted on behalf of veterans who are already deceased. And those who do submit oral histories are also encouraged to submit items from those supplemental categories to "round out" their collection and provide a more comprehensive picture of their service. Once a collection has been started with at least one of the qualifying criteria met, the veteran can continue to add to it over time. For example, an individual who completes an interview may decide to hold off on the addition of original photographs until they are ready to part with them as the library does not accept scans or copies.

Relying on a volunteer-based network of individuals across the country, VHP is proud to provide interviewers to guide the veteran through the process of recording their story by responding to a series of questions. While



A researcher visits the Library of Congress to access the Veterans History Project collections, which are available to professionals, family members and any other interested individuals.

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—Col Karen Lloyd, USA (Ret)

veterans who wish to contribute are certainly welcome to visit the Library of Congress in person, traveling to Washington, D.C., is not necessary in order to participate. Individual volunteers and members of local organizations or Scout troops work within their communities to locate veterans and facilitate interviews to add to the VHP collection.

Becoming a volunteer is relatively easy. A "field kit" and required forms are available on the Library of Congress Veterans History Project website, along with an instructional video, as well as sample interview questions and information on how to submit interviews and other items. The Library of Congress also offers workshops in local communities for groups of 25 or more interested volunteers. This year, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, VHP has relied primarily on virtual workshops to equip volunteers to reach out to the veterans around them and resume collecting their stories once social distancing measures have relaxed.

For those conducting the interviews, the experience is particularly rewarding.

"Having that opportunity to sit down and connect with somebody on a different level is, to me, just such a tremendous gift," said Kerry Ward, a liaison specialist



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Boy Scout Michael McPhie of Irvine, Calif., listens to the story of a veteran from his local community. McPhie was named the American Legion's Eagle Scout of the Year for 2020 for coordinating and conducting VHP interviews and collecting donations of food and personal care items to give to the veterans in his community who were interviewed for the project.

who works on the VHP staff and has conducted numerous oral history interviews.

The recordings and other items that veterans contribute to the project are stored in climate-controlled facilities and archived among some of America's most precious national treasures, where they're afforded the same level of professionalism and respect. Lloyd and her staff understand that people who contribute are in effect giving the library a "piece of their heart," and it's important to her that they rest assured that their personal collections will be well cared for.

"The preservation lab that is taking care of our collections are the same preservationists that are taking care of the draft of the Declaration of Independence," said Lloyd. "It's very well taken

care of, always to archival standards, and they're in good company."

According to Lloyd, roughly 20 percent of the VHP collection is digitized and accessible online through the Library of Congress. Thanks to generous funding by Congress, she anticipates that percentage to increase in the coming years. The VHP website also features compilations called "Experiencing War," which are groupings of individual collections based on subject matter, ranging from Tuskegee Airmen and chaplains to female aviators.

The importance of archiving these firsthand stories and preserving them for future generations cannot be overstated. It's also worth noting that when submitting to VHP, the veteran retains the copyright to their story, meaning it cannot be used in a profit-making venue without their permission, Lloyd said.

"We need those veteran voices. And participation is simple and it's meaningful and it creates a lasting legacy for your family. So if you're not going to do it for yourself, think about your family," said

Lloyd, who was the U.S. Army's first female medevac pilot and has a remarkable story of her own that comes from the course of 28 years of service. "It's a way of passing those family memories down, and these authentic stories, and authentic picture of what military service is all about."

Lloyd's personal experiences have shown her the importance of chronicling one's stories of service. Her husband, a Silver Star recipient who served as a helicopter pilot in Vietnam, died unexpectedly just three days after a visit to Normandy, France, during which he told her he was finally ready to tell his story.

"I have books that tell what he did in Vietnam, but I don't have his version of what happened," said Lloyd. "It is why I am driven to reach out and make sure that we don't lose stories in

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With the help of a volunteer interviewer, a veteran records his story on video for submission to the VHP. The project relies heavily on the work of volunteers across the country to gather oral histories, photographs, journals and other items from the veterans around them.

COURTESY OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



the way that I feel like we've lost my husband's."

Of the approximately 110,000 stories that VHP has collected, only 10,000 are from Marines. "There's lots of room for improvement," said Lloyd, who encourages Marine veterans to participate so that the collection can present a full and clear picture of what it means to be a Marine and what each Marine's individual story contributes to the overall history of the Corps.

For those Marines still serving on active duty, Lloyd encourages them to keep their photographs in a safe place and to journal or find other ways to capture their story while events are still "fresh in their mind." While servicemembers are asked to wait to do an oral history interview until after separating from active duty or retiring, they can start their collections now with photographs, letters and other eligible items.

"Think of us as your attic," said Lloyd. "You're moving

around all the time. Think of us as that place that will keep your collections and your memories safe until you're ready to come and really talk about them and reflect upon them."

It's important, Lloyd believes, that veterans speak out about their experiences to create a true understanding of what military service is like. There's not a requirement to tell everything—rather, individuals are encouraged to tell only as much of their story as they are willing.

"This is about telling your story your way," said Lloyd. "We need to hear your voice. Everyone has a story, we're looking for the arc of your story, from where you were born, to why the heck did you sign up? And as importantly, we are after the reflections of how your service impacted your life."

The following are four of the thousands of Marine veterans who have shared their stories with VHP:



COURTESY OF DERL HORN

Derl Horn, Vietnam War Collection #112513

After being drafted into the Marine Corps in 1966, Derl Horn arrived in Da Nang, Vietnam, on a C-130 Hercules. As he and the other Marines disembarked the aircraft, they noticed a number of body bags staged for loading, which brought the Marines to a startling realization: they were replacements.

This story is just one of the many Horn, who served with "Bravo" Company, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines of the 3rd Marine Division, told during an hour-long oral history interview at the Library of Congress in 2018, conducted by liaison specialist Kerry Ward. The combat veteran, who resides in Springdale, Ark., was visiting Washington, D.C., for a reunion of 1/9 Marines—often referred to as the "Walking Dead"—and had been encouraged by members of his local veterans community to contribute his story to the Veterans History Project.

On July 2, 1967, Horn and his fellow Marines of Bravo Co were ambushed north of the DMZ, where they fought for their lives though the odds were significantly against them. Horn was one of only 26 Marines who survived.

After he returned home to Arkansas, many decades passed before Horn was ready to talk about the things he had done and seen in Vietnam. He regularly turned down requests to speak at schools and events, but eventually decided to tell his story through a book, "Blood, Sweat & Honor: Memoirs of a 'Walking Dead' Marine," which was published in 2015 and is now part of his personal collection at the Library of Congress. Since writing the book, Horn has accepted many local speaking engagements and hopes that his story will help those who haven't served to understand what he went through. And for his fellow veterans, he also hopes his story will be meaningful.

"I wanted to show my fellow veterans and other war veterans that we can survive after war without turning to drugs and alcohol," said Horn. "I try to encourage other veterans to tell their stories, and maybe even write something, because I realized how much it helps to do that."

Right: Horn, who was drafted in 1966, is pictured here at Camp Carroll, Vietnam, in 1967 when he was assigned to Bravo Co, 1/9.



COURTESY OF DERL HORN

Above: Marine veteran Derl Horn stands outside his home in Arkansas. Horn, who submitted his story to the VHP in 2018, encourages others to participate and tell their own stories of service—for their own benefit as well as the benefit of others.



COURTESY OF DERL HORN

LtCol Art Nalls, USMC (Ret)
Cold War
Collection #110568

Retired Marine Lieutenant Colonel Art Nalls is no stranger to adventure, and he tells the stories of his exploits both in and out of the Marine Corps during a two-and-a-half-hour recorded video interview with the Veterans History Project’s Kerry Ward, which was recorded at the Library of Congress in March 2018. As a midshipman at the U.S. Naval Academy, he landed a Guinness World Record for building and riding the world’s smallest rideable bicycle, which stood less than 5 inches tall.

The former AV-8 Harrier pilot and naval test pilot served in the Marine Corps from 1976 to 1998, and after retiring, started Nalls Aviation, which operates numerous aircraft on the air show circuit, including two Harriers, the first and only privately owned of their kind in the world.

Ward, who previously had worked in the air show business prior to joining VHP, encouraged Nalls to contribute his story—and for him, it was a no-brainer.

“It’ll be catalogued, archived and preserved in perpetuity so that 100 years from now if someone wants to research you and they search on the Library of Congress, this interview will come up,” said Nalls. “So if they’re researching either me personally or, say, a great-great grandson wants to know about his great-great grandfather, it would be just like talking to me. He could see what I looked like, see what I sounded like and hear me talk about various experiences.”



COURTESY OF LTCOL ART NALLS, USMC (RET)

LtCol Art Nalls’ passion for the AV-8 Harrier didn’t go away when he retired in 1998, so he became the first and only civilian in the world to privately purchase two for his air show business, Nalls Aviation (below). Nalls, pictured in 1986 in front of a Harrier (left), shared his story with VHP in 2018.



COURTESY OF LTCOL ART NALLS, USMC (RET)

Nalls is proud of his Marine Corps career and said he would do it all over again in a heartbeat. Participating in the VHP was meaningful to him, and his oral history interview brought up many different memories he hadn’t talked about in years. He often encourages the veterans around him to start their own collections through the Library of Congress.

“You know, you’re a part of history and you’re not going to be here forever,” he tells them. “Why don’t you sit down and do it, and that will be here forever.”



COURTESY OF MGYSGT JANE CROSS, USMC (RET)

MGySgt Jane Cross, USMC (Ret)
War on Terrorism
Collection #117485

If anyone understands the value of collecting and preserving memories, it’s retired Master Gunnery Sergeant Jane Cross, who served for 22 years as a music librarian and archivist with “The President’s Own” United States Marine Band, and, since her retirement last year, has worked as an archivist in the Library of Congress Music Division.

In December 2019, Cross attended a social event with other archivists, where she met two VHP staff members who encouraged her to contribute her story. She sat down in early 2020 with VHP director Karen Lloyd for an oral history interview, which she describes as an “unexpectedly emotional” experience. The opportunity also caused her to reflect on what she calls her family’s greatest regret: not preserving her grandfather’s oral history from his service in World War II.

She often wishes she had recorded the stories he did share with her—and that she had asked him to tell more. By recording her own story of service, she’s determined to not let the past repeat itself.

“Talking about it was difficult but also helpful,” said Cross.

MGySgt Jane Cross, center, served as the orchestra librarian for a luncheon hosted by the First Lady in Washington, D.C., May 2019. Pictured here with SSgt Charles Paul, left, and SSgt Tilden Olsen, right, Cross shared the story of her 22 years with “The President’s Own” United States Marine Band during a VHP oral history interview earlier this year.



COURTESY OF ASHLEIGH BRYANT BYRNES

Ashleigh Bryant Byrnes Operation Enduring Freedom Collection #81887

As a Marine Corps combat correspondent, Ashleigh Bryant Byrnes was familiar asking the questions. So when she decided to share her story with the Veterans History Project in 2012, it felt a bit strange to her that the roles were reversed.

But the experience was personally rewarding for Byrnes, who enlisted in the Marine Corps in 2004 and served in Afghanistan during 2009 as the News Bureau Chief for Armed Forces Network Kandahar, working as an embedded reporter with various units. On one of her trips to the front lines, she earned a Combat Action Ribbon during Operation Eastern Resolve II.

“I didn’t have an easy deployment—not that any deployment is easy—but there were elements of my deployment that were very difficult and sat with me for a very long time,” said Byrnes, who left active duty as a sergeant in 2011 and now works as the Deputy National Communications Director for Disabled American Veterans (DAV). “It was therapeutic, in a way, to get that off my chest. And really, that was the first time I had talked with anyone really openly about it. There were things I said in that interview that I’m sure I didn’t even tell my own mother, partly because I know that she would not take that easily. But in a way, it was almost easier to open up and express that to someone who wasn’t an immediate family member. It was nice to be able to say those things out loud finally.”

Through her work with DAV, which partners with the Veterans History Project frequently during national conventions and other events, Byrnes has seen firsthand the myriad benefits of creating a permanent record of one’s service. She’s particularly driven to encourage her fellow female veterans to make their



COURTESY OF ASHLEIGH BRYANT BYRNES

Marine veteran Ashleigh Bryant Byrnes shared her stories from Afghanistan with VHP in 2012. Byrnes, who now works for Disabled American Veterans as deputy national communications director, is thankful that her oral history will be preserved for her young sons.

voices heard, emphasizing that the number of women who have participated in VHP is particularly low.

“We have this unique shared experience as women in the military, and so often I think it feels like we’re isolated in our experiences,” said Byrnes. “I think women 30, 40, 50 years ago never would have imagined that women in the military would be doing what they are doing today, but it all stems from them. It’s just important to me to look back and see whose shoulders we were standing on.”

For Byrnes, who is now a mother, it’s equally important to her that her children and future generations of her family have access to her own story, told in her own words.

“You never know what’s going to happen tomorrow,” said Byrnes. “So to know that that’s captured, that’s recorded, if I don’t ever have a chance to share that with my sons, they can go and open that archive and there’s a little time capsule in there that they can learn about their mom and what their mom did in service.”

“It was enjoyable in the sense that someone cared enough to ask, listen to me share my unique experiences, and record them.”

During her years with the Marine Band, Cross collected and curated items related to the band’s former members—photographs, correspondence, music, uniforms and instruments.

“But it was through the fascinating stories about their experiences that those items took on meaning and helped us better understand our unit’s history,” she reflected. “Someday I hope my story about my time in the Marine Band will similarly contribute to a broader understanding of how it served the White House, the Marine Corps and the American people, and what the experience was like.”



COURTESY OF MGYSGT JANE CROSS, USMC (RET)

After retiring from the Marine Corps in 2019, MGySgt Jane Cross took a position at the Library of Congress, where she recently processed the Leonard B. Smith papers, a collection of sheet music, pictured here.

What Now?

Are you a veteran or Gold Star family member who is interested in contributing your own oral history interview or collection to the Veterans History Project? Would you like to become a volunteer and conduct interviews within your own community? Are you interested in exploring the digitized collections from the VHP?

Visit www.loc.gov/vets, where you can find answers to these questions, access information and resources, download the VHP Field Kit and explore the collections of veterans who have contributed to the project.