

Project seeks vets' histories

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Mark Zangara

History Project of the Library of Congress American Folklife Center — primarily an oral history program that collects and preserves first-hand interviews of veterans.

HARPERS FERRY — Mark Zangara believes every veteran is a hero whose story deserves to be told — and remembered.

Because he felt so strongly about not losing this important national

treasure, Zangara, 56, spent much of his own time during the past 20 years interviewing World War II veterans in an effort to preserve their

oral histories.

However during those early years, Zangara, a civilian engineer with the U.S. Army, couldn't find any govern-

mental agency tasked with preserving what he'd collected.

Fortunately that changed in 2000 when Congress created the Veterans

It relies on volunteers like Zangara — individuals as well as

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organizations — to contribute veterans' stories, whether audio- or video-recorded interviews.

This project is especially important now since many WWII veterans are older, according to Zangara, who would like to see many more people share in this rewarding experience.

"Time really is a consideration with these older veterans, especially since many of them are passing on every day and their numbers continue to drop more quickly as time passes," he said.

"I would like to see every-one possible interview their dad, father-in-law, grandfather, family friend or neighbor and

send it to the Vets History Project. ... Don't worry about how good it looks, please just do it. I can't tell you how many families are grateful for what I did since their loved ones are no longer with us," Zangara said.

There are some tips for getting started and doing interviews — information that can be found in the U.S. Army Oral History Manual, he said.

For example, while it's a good idea to be somewhat familiar with the material to be covered during an interview, it's also important to remain flexible and conversational, Zangara said.

"Remember that an oral history interview is just an extended discussion with a subject-

matter expert. ... Do not blindly follow your topic-question list, but instead remain alert to the conversation. Really listen to the answers. Historians who will not deviate from a prepared list miss opportunities to collect information. The interviewee may have important information that the prepared list doesn't address," he said.

It's also best to not ask questions that can be answered with either a simple "yes" or "no," but instead ones that will lead to a follow-up discussion, Zan-

gara said.

"Do not be afraid of silence. A pause may signify that the interviewee is thinking and perhaps formulating a further response. That information could be lost if the interviewer is too quick with the next question," he said.

He also recommends taking notes during the interview while also avoiding "marathon interview sessions" that can become difficult due to stress and fatigue.

Looking back, Zangara

knows his life has been enriched by the lives of veterans' who have shared their experiences with him.

"While all of the veterans are heroes, there are a few that you always remember. Joe Lockard, the first to see the Japanese planes coming to Pearl Harbor, 200 miles out on radar. ... He was briefly portrayed in the movie 'Pearl Harbor.' Joe is 89 and lives a quiet life," he said.

Fred Mayer is another notable veteran, in large part

because despite being Jewish he volunteered to be parachuted into Nazi-occupied Austria after becoming an Army Ranger in 1942, Zangara said.

"He survived the last months of the war, radioing back information that helped the Allies end the German advantage in Italy. He also discovered where Hitler's bunker was in Berlin," he said.

Additional information on the Veterans History Project is available online at www.loc.gov/vets.