

Since You Asked

Remembering America's Veterans

Barbara Hatch

A 9th grade student who had just lost his mother over Christmas read his personal essay to a Vietnam War dog handler. At the end, the veteran, Tom, said, "That was awesome, man." Another veteran, one who had fought at Bougainville, Tulagi, and Guadalcanal, took the hands of an 11th grader who lost his brother in Iraq and told him, "Son, your brother was a hero. Don't you ever forget that."

These are only two of the many interactions that occur when students work with America's military veterans. The powerful results of these encounters is mutual healing. The students help the veterans come to terms with their combat memories by providing them a format for telling their stories; the veterans offer the students compassion when they suffer their own losses.

The Arizona Heritage Project began in 2003 when the Salt River Project (SRP) celebrated its centennial. This Arizona utility sponsored five student groups engaged in documenting Arizona history. Cactus Shadows High School in Cave Creek, Arizona—an old cowboy town about 20 miles north of Phoenix—was one of the recipients of a \$3,000 grant to archive the town's Christmas Pageant, which began as a 4-H project in 1952 but ended in 2001 when the community changed. After the students videotaped 35 participants in the pageant, including the first Mary who is now in her 70s, Cave Creek resurrected the pageant in 2004. I attended a short time ago and handed out brochures of the pageant's history that my students had created in 2004.

In 2004, SRP renewed its support of students documenting local history. I

applied and was accepted to preserve the stories of Arizona's military veterans, with whom I had become involved through Ralph George's Veterans in the Classroom program. While we had been content with merely publishing a brochure in 2004, in 2005, we made the leap to publishing a book. Sixty-five interviews later, the first edition of *Since You Asked: Arizona Veterans Share Their Memories* went to press. Celeste Hobratschk, the mother of the student who did the artwork in the book, and I pulled an "all-nighter" to make deadline; we could not pay the printer until we sold some books, but we managed to pull it off. The learning curve—in terms of writing, editing, publishing, and technology—was high, but the veterans who attended our first reception at the school's Fine Arts Center signed books for the guests with pride, particularly the Vietnam veterans who, at last, felt welcomed home. The drama students in the Project wrote a stage play from the veterans' memories, interspersed with clips from the interviews. These students are now college graduates and, I was not surprised to learn, highly successful.

In 2006, a student laid out the book with Celeste's help. Previous veterans recommended other veterans. We needed

a larger venue for our reception as we added 50 more veterans to the previous 65. All veterans received a complimentary book and a copy of their interview on DVD.

Our third year added another 50 veterans, with more left for the "future." Would we have a future? A student laid out the book without *any* parental assistance; we had to find an even larger location for our annual book signing. We were invited to speak at conferences, including the National Council for the Social Studies in Washington, D.C. While there, we deposited 200 veteran videos with the Library of Congress's Veterans History Project for future students to use. Students were VIP guests of the Association of the U.S. Army. They found relatives on the Vietnam Wall and paid homage at the recently open World War II memorial. One of the students, who wrote an essay, despite having English as her second language, rode on an airplane for the first time. Volume 3, the "white book," was paid for with veterans' tax credits before it went to press. We were off and running.

The "green book," Volume 4, brought new students, as the founding generation left for college. Skills were handed down before "veteran" students left or were communicated via cell phone. We hosted a teacher workshop for the PBS local affiliate, KAET 8, in conjunction with the release of Ken Burns's series *The War*. We presented to NCSS attendees in San Diego and toured the *Midway*.



Jeff Tully interviews World War II Navy veteran Bil Canfield.

What color for Volume 5? We had run through blue, red, white, and Army green. My 88-year-old mother recommended khaki. Khaki it was, with Arizona coper highlighting our front logo. Students opted for an overseas trip to learn firsthand where “their” veterans had fought instead of presenting at a national conference. Murray Pulver’s stories of the Battle of the Bulge led us to the village of Tessy-sur-Vire in Normandy, where townspeople related what they suffered in 1944 at the hands of the German army. Our D.C. contacts allowed us to arrange a tour of the cemetery at Colleville-sur-Mer, where a personal guide focused on the stories of Arizona veterans along with a veteran who died to save Tessy. We somberly walked Omaha Beach and Pointe du Hoc and World War I trenches in Belgium. While in Tessy, Alex Doss finally got an answer to her question, “What’s a hedge-row?” when the villagers patiently walked us through these barricades that still line their fields, telling the students how after the war they dug out old shells, packs of chewing gum, and countless “souvenirs.”

West Point gray will clothe our 6th edition. Students are planning a trip to Germany, Austria, and the Czech Republic.

We have already interviewed 50 veterans, our goal, but have recently discovered an enormous cache of World War II veterans we feel compelled to interview (before they become part of the statistic about the number of World War II veterans we are losing every day); so, I may have to ask my experienced seniors to write a few more interviews.

Teaching full-time while sponsoring this project as an after-school activity prompted me to establish the Veterans Heritage Project, a non-profit working to institute veteran projects in more schools throughout Arizona, and eventually across the United States. My Cactus Shadows kids will be mentors to their Arizona peers. Because of student presentations at NCSS, a school in the Chicago area and another in North Carolina have contacted us to seek guidance on setting up similar programs. Each school can adapt its program to local needs. Our list of veterans grows each day. We can no longer travel to communities far from our school, but see the need for those students to honor the veterans who are their neighbors or family.

I have taught for 37 years: in Senegal, as a Peace Corps volunteer; Iran; the U.S. Virgin Islands; and Arizona. I have taught

English, history, journalism, French, and yearbook. The Arizona Heritage Project brings together all my skills. Not only do students learn the power of oral history, they acquire the skills of interviewing, transcribing, organizing, writing, and editing. They have addressed veteran and teacher groups. They write letters to the veterans. They have performed stage plays. They are “ambassadors” abroad. Their high school education comes full circle. They become better citizens of this great country. The veterans share more than their military service. They teach the students the cost of living in a free society.

As D-Day veteran Jack Nemerov wrote for last year’s book, “One generation following in the footsteps of another—that is what America is all about.” 📖

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