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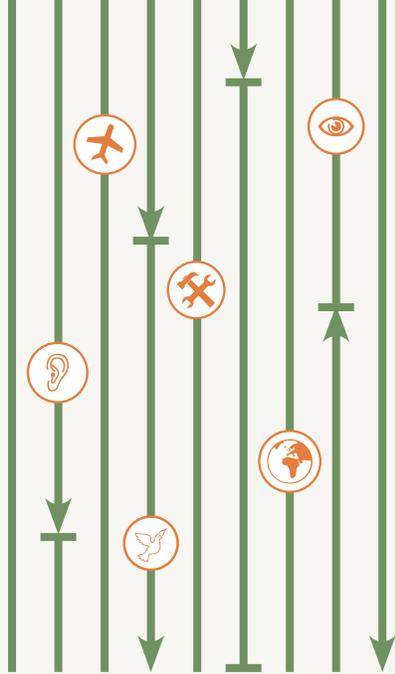
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AN APP FOR THEM

Two sisters have created a user-friendly tool that allows veterans to record and submit stories of their service – all on a smartphone.

BY GAYLE OSTERBERG

From a park picnic table in Wheaton, Illinois, at the National Gathering of American Indian Veterans, George Martin talks about his 20 years of service in the U.S. Army. More than 1,000 miles away in Bridgewater, Massachusetts, George Pelati, a flight engineer during World War II, tells stories surrounded by family in his home.

They are among the first veterans to contribute oral histories to the Veterans History Project using an app that enables participants to enter biographical detail, select questions, record, tag highlights and upload a finished interview—all on a smartphone.

The user-friendly tool that created these records of service is the result of a four-year passion project by two sisters from Massachusetts.

Congress created the Veterans History Project to collect, preserve and make accessible the firsthand remembrances of America's war veterans. And collect it has, more than 100,000 veterans' stories since 2000. But the collection is poised to take a big leap forward thanks to the remarkable efforts of Jean Rhodes and Nancy McNamara.

Rhodes is a professor of clinical psychology at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, and has studied trauma for the past decade. She first encountered the Veterans History Project when considering it as a tool for MENTOR, the national organization for mentoring. She jumped in eagerly and spent the following summer immersing herself in the Veterans History Project experience by conducting interviews with veterans alongside her son, Thomas Witttrup.

"We found it was really cumbersome," she says. "You have to print out all these forms, get a video camera, burn your video on DVD, manually tag interesting portions of the interview—it was an enormous amount of work."

So, she did what she often does in situations when her intellectual goals overwhelm her technical capabilities: She called her sister.

Nancy McNamara has a computer-engineering degree and for 15 years has owned a web-design company that works primarily with academics and research labs. The two have collaborated previously on professional projects, like developing a website that connects mentors with journal articles and other evidence-based information.



Above: The new app is the result of a four-year passion project by its creators, sisters Jean Rhodes (left) and Nancy McNamara.

For Rhodes, it was an opportunity to explore intergenerational relationships and the power of storytelling as a healing device for individuals suffering from trauma. For McNamara, it was a technical challenge and the opportunity to learn something new.

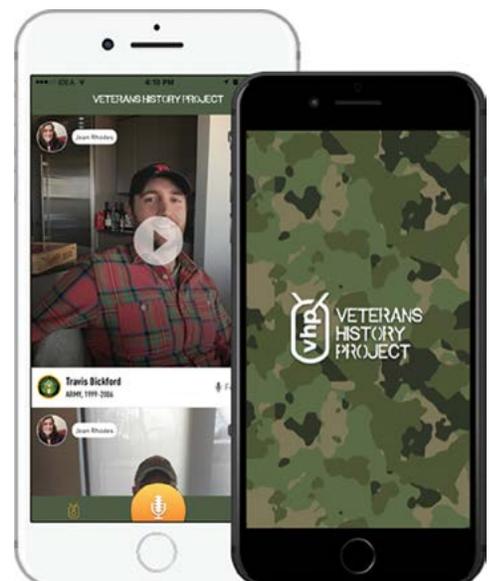
Beyond the professional and intellectual motivation, a more personal interest was also at play. The pair are the daughters of a decorated World War II Army veteran who used to sing war songs with them but rarely talked in detail about his service.

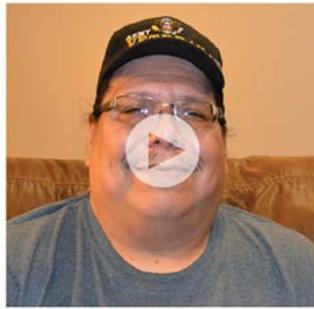
"We had a vague sense of it but never all the details," Rhodes says. "What battle? What year? Where in France? What hospital did he recover in? How did he learn to play bridge?"

They worked together to build a pilot app—McNamara refers to it as a "homegrown" version—and after working with it and gaining confidence in its potential to transform the process and experience, decided to bring in a firm specializing in app development to take their concepts to the next level.

The resulting product—which they are donating to the Library—has been tested this summer by folklorists and oral historians from universities and the Smithsonian National Museum of the

Below: Veterans can record their oral histories and submit them to the Library of Congress using just a smartphone.





ART H
ARMY, 1985 - 1989



Juliana N
SEP 26, 2017



ERNEST S
ARMY, 1943 - 1945



Caroline M
SEP 24, 2017



ANN B
NAVY, 1945 - 1945



Benjamin S
SEP 22, 2017



ROGER P
ARMY, 1967 - 2000



Ryan W
SEP 19, 2017



VERONICA D
ARMY, 1996 - 2017



Martin E
SEP 15, 2017



JAKE A
MARINE CORPS, 2010 - 2014



Christopher G
SEP 9, 2017

Participant interviews as they appear on a website used to upload completed videos in the project's pilot phase.

American Indian, and Rep. Joseph Kennedy III (D-Mass.) and Sen. John Boozman (R-Ark.), who have both used the app to interview veterans in their home states.

The app was beta tested in iOS format, with the hope that funds can be raised to design an Android version and maintain the existing pilot framework while development on interoperability continues. If the app becomes fully integrated with Library systems, the existing analog and mail method will also continue to be offered for all participants, and participants can choose to use other recording methods.

“Dad had stories but we never had the vocabulary to ask him,” Rhodes says. “Now he’s passed away and I wished we had his stories in the kind of detail you get from the Veterans History Project.”

Her work is helping ensure others won’t have those regrets. One of the interviews Rhodes and Wittrup conducted (with the pilot version) was with the father of her longtime friend Gloria. He was also a World War II veteran and had served in Hawaii.

“He actually broke down crying telling stories my friend had never heard, and that was a moment I realized it was a tool for connecting generations,” Rhodes said.

She also observed that potential for interconnectivity while viewing the process through her son’s eyes.

“We went to nursing homes and I could sort of see him thinking, ‘Oh, here comes an old person,’ but then they would start telling stories of service and they were transformed into heroes.”

Among the most impactful features of the new app is that it enables immediate upload to a website, where it can be accessed instantly. Viewers can select interviews and even jump to specific questions within the recording.

McNamara recalls one of the most special moments for her of the last four years was the first time she watched an interview that had been conducted with the app by someone at the Library.

“It was one of the first women who did an interview using the app and I clicked on the question, ‘What would you like the world to know about veterans?’ And it made me cry. It was a great moment.”

MORE INFORMATION

Veterans History Project Pilot App
vhpapp.org