Practicing Oral History with Military and War Veterans

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Oral history is at once among the oldest and newest methods of practicing history. The oral tradition dates to prehistoric times, long before systems of writing were developed. Sharon D. Raynor explains that Thucydides spoke with veterans of the Peloponnesian War before writing his history of that conflict. More recently, in the 1930s, tape recorders were used to chronicle the lives of those affected by the Great Depression as part of the Federal Writers Project. Since then, oral history has developed into a full-fledged and fully accepted historical approach.

Yet oral history is not uniform. Interviewers, subjects, topics of discussion, time, and memory all affect the craft. This is especially true when interviewing veterans. Raynor’s *Practicing Oral History with Military and War Veterans* seeks to illustrate the peculiarities of interviewing veterans. Raynor’s work not only discusses the nuts and bolts of veteran oral history but also explains why this particular area of oral history requires more careful consideration and preparation and a softer approach.

Veterans, especially those who have seen combat, carry with them the wounds of trauma, which Raynor explains can develop a sort of “code of silence” that helps them prevent reliving these events or sharing their stories with family members to protect them from hearing not only the horrors of war, but also what that veteran may have done in such life-and-death situations. Further, the role of memory immediately after an event and decades later often leads to vastly different interview outcomes. Research has shown that a veteran’s memory of an event changes over time from the highly specific to the more general.
Practicing Oral History with Military and War Veterans is divided into four sections that take readers from Raynor’s origins in veteran oral history through the process of preparing for and interviewing veterans. As a young historian, Raynor interviewed a Vietnam veteran whose recollections were so disjointed and incomplete that it led her to realize that veterans will hide traumatic memories away to prevent reliving. Raynor has dedicated herself to the craft of veteran oral history, and has provided an invaluable guide for junior and senior historians alike.

In section 1, Raynor tells her origin story. Here she chronicles how she realized that veteran’s oral history was vastly different enterprise than other interview subjects. Because of the intrinsic value of recording veterans’ experience, Raynor decided to devote her career not only to conducting such interviews, but also explaining the intricacies of the craft to those who would take on veteran interviews.

Section 2 discusses the human side of interviewing veterans. Interviewers cannot jump head first into the trauma of warfare. There must be a period when trust is built, when the interviewer must learn patience and allow silence, and where trauma must be understood before any interview process begins. Empathy is necessary when interviewing veterans, argues Raynor. The interviewer must learn to bear the burden of the trauma themselves to understand not only what the veteran may be feeling and why, but also what direction to take the interview.

Sections 3 and 4 are a handy guide to the nuts and bolts of preparing for a veteran interview. But Raynor goes beyond a mere how-to guide. She explains that an important part of veteran interview preparation is to build a “structural methodology” that takes the interview beyond a simple collection of stories and facts and creates a therapeutic opportunity for veteran and interviewer. The interview must allow for a more organic interview process that ebbs and flows and does not follow the more traditional oral history chronological approach. An interview may
look like it is disjointed and out of order, but that, wrote Raynor, is part of the process or remembering and coping with past trauma. This is where empathy and understanding play a major role in the interview. The interviewer must do their best to understand and even “feel” what the veteran feels as they recollect past events.

Those who do not regularly practice oral history often see it as a simple process of questions and answers. This reductive approach fails to appreciate the intricacies of the craft. Raynor explains that veterans oral history takes this complexity a step further. The goal of any oral history is not to obtain answers to a prescribed list of questions, but to take the subject to places they have not been to in a while; to give them opportunities for reflection and retrospection. With veterans, this is the key to a successful interview.

It would be a mistake to dismiss this book as useful only for veteran oral histories. Any scholar can benefit from this work. Oral history requires a certain level of empathy and understanding for any interview subject. To be sure, this is the essence of history itself—the effort to understand the motivations behind actions and events and how it may illustrate for us the complexity of the human condition.