



Marilyn Mayer Culpepper. *Never Will We Forget: Oral Histories of World War II.*
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Memories of Ordinary People in an Extraordinary Time

America, it seems, has an undying passion for the men and women who make up what news commentator Tom Brokaw calls "The Greatest Generation." The war they fought and through which they suffered, their war, World War II, has even been called "The Good War" by well-known historians and pundits. Those who won that war are heroes. On almost any given night, the History Channel, Discovery Channel, or Military Channel features some passion play about virtually every aspect of the war from Allied armor to Zundapp motorcycles. The deadly tactics of infantry and armor combat, the sweep of grand strategies, and the complexities of diplomatic negotiations have been, and continue to be, the stuff of history books. A good portion of the world, but Americans in particular, strive to keep the memory of this war alive. Perhaps because it was the war of our fathers and grandfathers, perhaps because it was our first motion picture war, and perhaps because the patriotic tone of those films allow us to easily see ourselves standing up for "the right thing" in a war where the line between good and evil seems so clear, we wash World War II in a glow so bright that we forget it was a global war with terrible demands on both soldier and civilian.

When I marched off for my first tour in Iraq, my orders said I would return home in a year or so. When my father marched off for the Pacific in 1942, his orders were for "the duration." Still, his stories of war and mine, though vastly different, have a hauntingly familiar echo. This is the power of oral history. So it is that World

War II has cemented itself as the place to which we go to find the human story of war, the story not of great generals and admirals but of common soldiers and factory workers. Indeed, the oral history of World War II has found itself at the intersection of how people find and learn bits and pieces of history, and a rapidly growing era of expanding information and media formats that distributes that information at an unprecedented speed. Recently, Ken Burns used oral history to give life to the still growing history of World War II in his documentary *The War* (2007). Regardless of the source—documentary film, popular history, academic study, or blockbuster movie—World War II has given us a touchstone to understand better the human price, and social history, of war.

Marilyn Mayer Culpepper, professor emerita at Michigan State University, adds to the long list of such studies by linking several oral histories from men and women who fought (and built) their way through the war in *Never Will We Forget*. Culpepper's book presents uniquely personal views of the war that start with the memories of soldiers and sailors present at the attack on Pearl Harbor, and the reactions of civilians in places far removed from the Pacific, such as Tecumseh, Michigan, and Bucyrus, Ohio, upon hearing the news. From there, the book explores the memories of men and women who saw combat in Europe and the Pacific, who experienced life as a Prisoner of War (POW) in Germany and Japan, and who engaged in war at sea. Recognizing that war reaches well beyond battlefield and bivouac, the book re-

calls the memories of those working on the home front, families waiting for their loved ones, and even stories of luck and redemption on the battlefield. Most authors would be happy to stop with memories of the atomic bombs, ultimate victory, and joyous home comings. But Culpepper extends her reach and writes about the aftermath of war, and how veterans feel about the "Greatest Generation." Culpepper does not limit her oral histories to participants, but accepts anecdotes and secondhand experiences passed down to children and grandchildren as a tool to broaden our understanding of just how deep the memory of World War II is embedded in the American psyche.

Never Will We Forget is not encumbered with heavy analysis, nor does Culpepper try to forge a new direction in the historiography of World War II. This is both a blessing and a curse. On the positive side, Culpepper allows the voices of those who were there to bear the weight of their own history. As she notes in the introduction, "these are glimpses of a world at war and the changes that radically transformed people and the world they lived in" (p. i). Although it was, indeed, a "world" war, in the case of this work it would be more accurate to say that this book offers a glimpse of America at war. Each chapter and subchapter begins with a brief explanation to set the historical context and to provide some background information, such as the number of women who served in uniform or with the Red Cross, or the inhumane nature of captivity in a German POW camp. Still, certain chapters of the book, especially "The Later Years," which present the oral histories of veterans long after the war, cry out for a historian's touch. How people remember, and what they remember, is crucial to our understanding of the oral tradition and its value to history.

At first glance, the book's final chapter is nothing more than a collection of memories, or more accurately, as the chapter title puts it, "A Collage of Memories." Combat is often at the center, but there are also stories

of comic moments, tragic regrets, and families reunited. Nevertheless, this final chapter reminds us that war is a human act, and, as such, it forever marks those who participate even in distant roles. Those private memories, made public through oral testimony, combine with more traditional historical works to present a complex human story that cannot be separated by such simplistic categories as "primary archival resource" or "oral history."

Perhaps the most powerful idea that Culpepper's book has to offer is the simple fact that World War II was not the culminating moment of a single "Greatest Generation." Rather, it was a formative event in the lives of those who survived it and those who followed. For instance, Culpepper tells the story of a man who, when only six months old, lost his father to the war. This soldier's son still attends unit reunions for a war in which he did not participate, with men with whom he never served, to understand better a father he never knew. This simple act of remembering does not make him part of the "Greatest Generation," but it allows him to come closer to understanding a father he never knew by talking to former soldiers who shared his father's experiences. Later, in telling his own story, this soldier's son is able to contribute his own piece of history to the expanding story of World War II.

Oral history is a remarkably powerful tool to understand better the complexities of an event like World War II. This book, underpinned by the words of those who participated, tells the story not of a nation at war but of a people at war. Culpepper's work aims to expand our understanding of the role of common men and women during times of conflict and afterward, and is informed not by comparing and contrasting the work of other historians, but by using fragile yet valuable human memories. Culpepper states at the outset that her goal in *Never Will We Forget* is to bring the experiences of those who were in the war, as soldier, rivet driver, or lonely spouse, into the mainstream of historical inquiry. She has succeeded.

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