

# THE WAR

## Ken Burns' Seven Tips to a Successful Interview

You don't have to be a professional interviewer to do an interview for the Veterans History Project. The project values all contributors and they want you to know this is not a complicated process. With merely some time to listen, a good microphone and a cassette recorder, you can make a veteran a part of history.

As you are interviewing a veteran of any war, here are a few tips to keep in mind:

- 1. Pick an appropriate location for the interview.** Be sure you choose a place for the interview that has good natural light. Near a window is preferable to outside and one that is free of extraneous noise. The human ear can filter out unwanted sounds but not so the microphone. Be aware of street noise, barking dogs and turn off cell and home phones.
- 2. Establish a comfort zone.** Help the veteran feel relaxed and as comfortable as possible. If you can, conduct the interview in surroundings familiar to him or her.
- 3. Do your research.** Thoughtful research before the interview will help your work immensely. Get to know the person you will interview and the events he or she will speak about. If possible, have the veteran fill out the biographical data form and give it to you before you move to record the interview.
- 4. Practice good listening skills.** Careful listening is critical to this process. Let the interview be guided by the veteran. The best way to know what question to ask next is to follow up on what the veteran just said. Follow-up questions are necessary to enrich the story.
- 5. Be patient.** Don't put the veteran on the spot about dates and places. Many times particular battles were not given names until long after the events occurred. It is more important to record their personal recollections than specifics.
- 6. Be respectful.** If the veteran becomes emotional, have tissues on hand and let them compose themselves. Pause the recording if you need to. But remember to press record again when the veteran is ready. Never record someone secretly or without their consent.
- 7. Be a quiet listener.** A good interview happens when the interviewer says the least and the interview subject says the most. Hold in your natural inclination to add comments and respond by nodding your head or making affirmative eye contact.

I can tell you that having someone share their story with you is one of the most rewarding experiences you will ever have. Thank you for making your contribution to the story of our country.

*-Ken Burns*

*Director & Producer, THE WAR*