



Rick Badie's Gwinnett: A history project worthy of veterans

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I'd always wanted to preserve my father's life on tape. He grew up in the Jim Crow South, so his is a rich, raw emotional tale. Our clan knows bits and pieces about his life, but not enough details to equate to a true history.

Now, it's too late. Pops died six years ago.

Here in Gwinnett, Tom Beaty is preserving memories for a dying generation.

Beaty grew up in Charlotte, with a mad love for military history.

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill pretty much designed a course load so he could earn a bachelor's degree in the subject. For his master's degree, he attended the Goizueta Business School at Emory University.

In 2000, with help from members of the Atlanta World War II Roundtable, Beaty launched a project that eventually became a nonprofit. The Witness to War Foundation involves interviewing veterans of wars and conflicts about their experiences.

A high-definition video camera is used to capture the soldiers' ordinary roles as well as their intense ordeals. The hourlong sessions are edited down to two- or three-minute stories that are posted at witnessstowar.org.

The combat stories featured on the Web site are organized by experience under titles such as "artillery fire" and "kamikaze attack."

"A lot of people love history," Beaty told me, "but some people like to read about the Eisenhowers and the generals. I am more interested in the 'foxhole view,' what it was like to be there. I am interested in the personal experience."

The project is quite an undertaking, and when it comes to World War II vets, one with a sense of urgency. You've probably heard how World War II veterans are dying at a steady clip.

Because of that, Beaty wants to capture on film as many of those who, for whatever reasons, sacrificed so much. Eventually, the interviews will be available to the public through the Atlanta History Center.

Beaty owns Insight Sourcing Group, a Norcross-based management consulting firm. To date, he says he's pumped well over \$100,000 of his own money into the project. He employs a few editors, but mostly relies on volunteers.

He envisions a business that would allow him to videotape 1,000 or so veterans from all wars, not just World War II, over the next two years. That, however, would require a philanthropist or a corporate sponsor, which he hasn't secured.

"Basically, I am going to foot the overhead," he said. "I don't want anything from it."

So far, around 600 stories have been posted on the site. A majority of the 250 or so veterans who've partaken in the project hail from the Atlanta area, notably Gwinnett.

For most sessions, Beaty has been the lead interviewer. Some participants, he said, get highly emotional as they recall history and their role as 18- and 19-year-olds. Others say they have recounted events that they've never shared with a soul. Not even kin.

All participants get free DVDs of their sessions.

Some consider them family heirlooms, Beaty said.

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