

The stories they've carried

With time swiftly thinning the ranks of World War II veterans, the race is on to capture their memories

By David Filipov, Globe Staff | March 27, 2010

BOXFORD — Franklin P. Pomroy never told war stories. Not the one about the desperate firefight on Guadalcanal when the cannon he was manning flew into the air after it fired a single shot. Not the one about a buddy who was killed with his finger on the trigger of his machine gun, and in death kept shooting at Japanese soldiers. Not even the story that produced an iconic image of World War II: a 1944 photograph of Pomroy sitting with his head in his hands on a Pacific atoll, exhausted from combat, left leg spattered with blood.

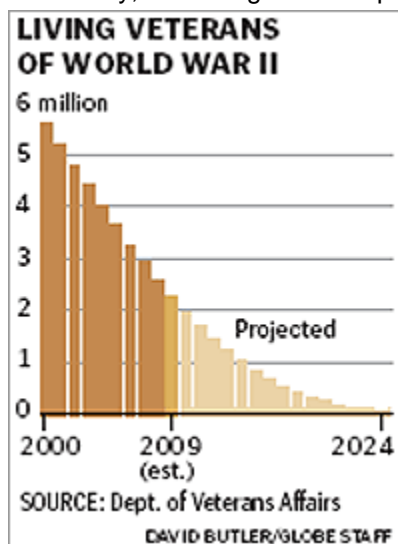
Like so many veterans of the war, Pomroy for decades spoke of these memories only with the Marines in his unit. But American World War II veterans are now dying at a rate of about one every two minutes. And a race is on to preserve their stories before they are lost forever.

Pomroy, now 85, has begun to share his.

On Tuesday, he sat in front of a digital video camera in his Boxford home and recounted the episodes of camaraderie and bloodshed, wonder and exhaustion, humor and loss that he faced.

"Only recently I realized that this is history and we need to preserve it," Pomroy said during a break in the recording. "And I'm a walking history book."

About 2.2 million of the 16 million men and women who served in the US military during World War II are alive today, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs. The department estimates that 291,000 will have died between Sept. 30, 2009, and Sept. 30 this year — a rate of about 800 per day.



As the World War II generation wanes, interest in publicizing their stories from foxholes, cockpits, and battle stations grows, a trend reflected in the popularity of dramatic reenactments such as the new HBO series "The Pacific." In recent years, the country has also seen an intensified effort to collect that history, one veteran at a time.

Compiling these stories can be a challenge. Many combat veterans are uncomfortable sharing their experiences with outsiders, to say nothing of the entire world of Internet users, said Thomas G. Kelley, Massachusetts secretary of veterans services, who was awarded the Medal of Honor and a Purple Heart as a Navy officer in Vietnam. He finds this especially true with World War II veterans.

"They are a very modest and unassuming crowd," Kelley said in an interview. "They all have stories, even if they don't think they do."

Tom Beaty, who interviewed Pomroy on Tuesday, is part of that effort. Owner of an Atlanta-based

consulting firm and a military history enthusiast, Beaty, 41, also heads Witness to War, a nonprofit organization that makes digital video interviews of combat veterans. He has set the goal of posting 1,000 interviews with World War II veterans by the end of 2011 on its website, www.witnesstowar.org.

"What's amazing is a large number of them have never had their histories recorded," Beaty said. "It's getting very sad."

Witness to War is one of a number of projects that aim to collect the stories of the war. The National World War II Museum in New Orleans has a team of four interviewers who travel the country interviewing veterans. They have collected 3,500 video interviews, although they are not yet online, said Kacey Hill, public relations manager for the museum. Pomroy was attending high school in Danvers in 1941 when the football coach cut him, saying the 16-year-old was too small to make the team.

"He told me, 'You'll get killed out there,' " Pomroy said.

A year later, Pomroy was killing Japanese soldiers on Guadalcanal. He recalled firing, reloading, firing, reloading, unaware of what was going on 50 feet from his foxhole. He recalled counting the bodies of enemy dead. He recalled the blood, and the silence that follows combat.

"It's not like a football game, a baseball game, with everybody cheering," Pomroy said. "Real war is bloody, basically. Sometimes, you gotta stand your ground."

During the furious hand-to-hand fighting on Peleliu atoll in 1944, Pomroy found himself alone in a marsh, loaded down with weapons he had collected from dead comrades, defending himself from Japanese soldiers. He took three bullets in his right leg and a bayonet in his left. Pomroy killed the man who stabbed him, and later looked in his foe's wallet and found photographs, probably of the man's family members. An American amphibious tank finally rescued Pomroy. He was dehydrated and hungry. Blood spattered his left leg, and seeped from the gunshot wounds in his right. Someone snapped the famous photograph.

Now it hangs in the living room of the four-bedroom house Pomroy designed and built that brims with mementos of his life after the war. He has grandchildren. He roots for the Patriots and Red Sox. The last time his unit, H Company, Second Battalion, First Marine Division, had its annual reunion, "six or eight guys showed up."

Some veterans Beaty approaches never considered recording their stories for posterity. Llewellyn Jenkins, 90, who fought from France to Czechoslovakia, was one of them.

"The war effort was part of my life; I leave it alone," said Jenkins, who splits time between Chatham and Arizona. "I moved on."

He got a job in a bank, married, and had four children. He rose to vice chairman of the board and was president of the American Bankers Association. But he agreed to talk to Witness to War. As a second lieutenant in the 26th Infantry Division, Jenkins's job was to spot enemy targets, and radio their positions to artillery units in the rear so they knew where to shoot. His position was on the front line, and enemy snipers would recognize him by his radio, and target him because of the firepower he commanded.

One time on a ridge somewhere east of Nancy, France, Jenkins was on the front, observing a German position, and moved too far out of his foxhole.

"The sniper bullet pinged in the dirt and I was, like, 'Where did that come from?,' " he recalled. "The next one he put within a quarter inch of my right ear."

An American sniper team shot and killed its German counterpart. Later on, a flock of geese flew over the battle lines.

“Everybody on both sides let loose at the geese,” Jenkins recalled. “It was like we were having a grand old holiday for a few minutes.”

“As far as I could see,” he chuckled, “not one goose got hit.” ■