

Tips on Writing a Military Service History

Whether you survived the most harrowing battles of a war or were a peacetime soldier, sailor, or airman (or service woman), your story is important. Even in the depths of peacetime, military service imposes burdens, requires sacrifices, and fosters an ethic of service to others. For many, it's a pivotal point in their adult lives. Insights into that critical time and how it shaped your life are invaluable to your children, grandchildren, and society at large.

If you've been hesitant to share your story because the memories, although decades old, are too painful, or you don't know how to start, I offer the following suggestions.

Step 1. Start Simply. Obtain Your Military Services Records, if You Don't Already Have Them. Once you have them in hand, annotate them. If it's not obvious, explain where you traveled during your service career. Several of my late father's crewmates on LST 705 kept detailed logs which were a valuable supplement to their official records (and in some cases, the official ship's records as well).

Explain the military jargon, so that civilian family members may understand completely what ATB, AGS, GM3, and other acronyms common in military records mean. This is particularly important as terminology changes over time and the same acronym may have different meanings for different branches of the military.

Step 2. Locate and Organize All Other Relevant Materials (e.g., letters, medals, photographs, records, and other mementos). Identify who is in each photograph, when and where it was taken, and the events and individuals pictured therein. Tag other items with a detailed description. Be mindful that a family member might not understand the significance, for example, of a Silver Star, so write your explanations with a civilian reader in mind.

Step 3. Record Your Recollections.¹ Start by recording your branch of service, the date you enlisted, the date you were discharged, your final rank, and where you were stationed during your time in the military. Describe your job(s) and the related training.

If possible, chronicle the activities of a typical day. LST 705 crew, for example, told me delightful stories about meeting the challenges of doing laundry and preparing/serving meals aboard ship, the antics of the dogs and monkey they brought on board ship, being treated by the ship's baker to late night grilled cheese sandwiches, and fantail parties. Talk about military traditions too, such as the crossing over ceremony and other special events. Other topics that you might wish to address could include the following:

1. What is your fondest memory of your service?
2. Did you make friends in the service that you are still in touch with? If so, who? Why did you stay buddies all these years?
3. Which foreign countries, if any, did you visit while you were in the service? What recollections do you have of those places? Have you visited them again as a civilian?
4. What was your last day like at home before you went off to the service? What did you do? How did your family react? Did you pack any special souvenirs with you?
5. Do you have any special souvenirs from your service? If so, what are they and why are they special to you?
6. Did anyone in the family save any of the letters you wrote home while away? If so, would you share those letters?

Step 4. Write About Your Buddies. Perhaps this may be your most important task. Many of your colleagues may no longer be able to speak for themselves, thus, you will be their voice.

In speaking with the officers/crew of LST 705, I was stunned at the tight bonds of friendship formed among the men, bonds that had not weakened over 60 years. I realize now that the nature of military life enables you to know

¹I suggest a written account as paper (especially the acid-free type) is the best long-term storage medium. If you're more comfortable creating an audio or video record of your story, consider preparing a companion written transcript.

your colleagues as well, if not better, than one might know a family member. Your memories of your buddies, therefore, will be particularly cherished by their children and grandchildren like me. Please share them.

Step 5. Consider Your Experiences and Their Historical Significance. Consider as well the Historical Significance to the People Around You. In the course of a family history project, I learned that a female family member enlisted as a WAVE during WWII. A math teacher before the war, she taught math to pilots. I can only imagine what some of those pilots might have thought about having a female instructor. Unfortunately, we have no record of Evelyn's thoughts about her work or that of the pilots she instructed.

Another family member was a guard at a German Prisoner of War camp in Texas, certainly an unusual experience. As you reflect on your service experience, therefore, give thought to the historical implications for all parties involved.

Step 6. Finally, Write About the Lessons to be Learned from Your Military Service. Explain the impact that military service had on your life. If you're uncomfortable with some of your thoughts, seal those recollections in an envelope to be opened after your death.

Step 7. Contribute Your Story to the Library of Congress's Veterans' History Project and Other Similar Initiatives.²

The significance of your story telling cannot be underestimated both to your family and to society at large. Poet Maya Angelou said it well. "People live in direct relation to the heroes they have, keep and admire. If a people have no one to respect or to hold in high regard, they will find little inside themselves to glory and to honor."³

²See <http://www.loc.gov/vets>.

³Angelou, Maya, "Let's Thank Those Who Came Before Us," Parade (December 25, 2005; p. 4.)