

Veteran Interview Guide

Questions for recording a veteran's life story, from childhood to coming home

Use these questions as a menu, not a script. Pick the ones that fit, follow the veteran's lead, and let the best answers lead to your own follow-up questions. Any question can be skipped, for any reason, without explanation.

Before the day: agree on a length (about an hour per session is plenty), choose a quiet room, test your recorder and microphone, and explain how the recording will be used. If you plan to donate it to the Library of Congress Veterans History Project, download its field kit first: interviews must run at least 30 minutes and need a signed Veteran's Release Form.

During: ask open questions ("Tell me about...", "What was it like..."), let silences sit, and follow the story rather than the list. If the veteran becomes upset, pause or stop. The Veterans Crisis Line is available to veterans and families: dial 988, then press 1.

Name of veteran: _____ Interviewer: _____ Date: _____

Before you press record

Settle the basics and say them on the recording, so future listeners know who is speaking.

- ☐ 1. State today's date, where you are, and the names of everyone in the room.
- ☐ 2. Please say your full name, and the name you used while in service if it was different.
- ☐ 3. When and where were you born?
- ☐ 4. Which branch did you serve in, and roughly what years?
- ☐ 5. Is it all right with you that we record this conversation? You can stop or skip anything at any time.

Growing up and joining

Starting with childhood warms up memory and gives the story a shape.

- ☐ 1. Tell me about the place you grew up and the people who raised you.
- ☐ 2. What was going on in the world, and in your family, around the time you went in?
- ☐ 3. Were you drafted, or did you enlist? What led to that?
- ☐ 4. How did your family feel about you going?
- ☐ 5. What do you remember about the day you left home?

Training

Training stories are vivid and usually easy to tell, which builds trust for later questions.

- ☐ 1. Where did you go for basic training, and what was your first impression?
- ☐ 2. Tell me about a drill instructor or trainer you still remember.
- ☐ 3. What was the hardest part of military life to adjust to?
- ☐ 4. Did you receive specialized training after that? What was it for?
- ☐ 5. Who were your friends in training, and did you stay together?

Service

Let the veteran choose how much detail to share. Ask about places, people and daily routine as much as events.

- ☐ 1. Where were you stationed or deployed? How did you get there?
- ☐ 2. What was your job, and what did a typical day look like?
- ☐ 3. Who did you serve with? Tell me about someone you think about often.
- ☐ 4. What did you eat, where did you sleep, and what did you do in your off hours?
- ☐ 5. How did you stay in touch with home? Do you remember a letter or call in particular?
- ☐ 6. Is there a day or an event from your service that you would like people to know about?
- ☐ 7. Was there anything that surprised you about the places or people you encountered?
- ☐ 8. Were you awarded any medals or citations? What were they for?

Coming home

The return is often the least recorded part of a veteran's story, and one of the most important.

- ☐ 1. When and how did you leave the service?
- ☐ 2. What was it like to come home? Who was there to meet you?
- ☐ 3. How did people around you react to your service?
- ☐ 4. What did you do next: work, school, family?
- ☐ 5. Did you stay in touch with anyone you served with? Have you gone to reunions?

Looking back

Reflection questions are a good way to close. Leave room for silence.

- ☐ 1. How do you think your service changed you?
- ☐ 2. What do you wish people understood about your experience, or about veterans in general?
- ☐ 3. Is there anything you have never been asked about that you would like to talk about?
- ☐ 4. What would you want your grandchildren, or a young person joining today, to take from your story?
- ☐ 5. Is there anything we have not covered that you would like to add?

Photos, letters and keepsakes

Objects unlock memory. Ask before the interview whether the veteran has items to show, and photograph them afterward.

- ☐ 1. Can you tell me about this photograph? Who is in it, and where was it taken?
- ☐ 2. Who wrote this letter, and what was happening when it was written?
- ☐ 3. Where did this item come from, and why have you kept it?
- ☐ 4. Is there anything you wish you had kept?

After the interview

- ☐ Thank the veteran, and say the closing date and time on the recording.
- ☐ Have the release form signed if you plan to share or donate the interview.
- ☐ Copy the files to at least two places the same day, and label them with the veteran's name and the date.
- ☐ Write down names and places that were hard to hear, while they are fresh, and check spellings with the veteran.
- ☐ Send a thank-you note and, if they would like one, a copy of the recording.

Notes: names, places and dates to check

More help: How to record a veteran's story, oral history ethics, and finding service records at **taleofwar.com/preserving-voices**. You may copy and share this guide for personal, family, classroom and nonprofit use.