

Fall 2013

What They Left Behind: Reclaiming the Unknown History of World War II

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Recommended Citation

Patricio, Melissa, "What They Left Behind: Reclaiming the Unknown History of World War II" (2013). *World War II – Related Research Projects*. Paper 1.

http://docs.rwu.edu/ww2_research/1

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:: By Melissa A. Patricio // Photography by James P. Jones, Photography RI ::

WHAT THEY LEFT BEHIND:

Reclaiming the Untold History of World War II

AS THE U.S. LOSES 800 WW-II VETERANS each day to age and illness, the race is on to preserve their stories – Thanasi Metropoulos '13 has taken up the charge

:: IWO JIMA, JAPAN.

FEB. 21, 1945

One hundred feet from land, the waves lapped and roared at the sides of the landing craft infantry boat pushing the 21st Marine Corps Regiment toward what could only be described as hell on Earth. Upended AmTrac amphibious vehicles and landing vessels littered the beach, where 30,000 troops landed just a sunrise prior.

THE SMOKE HUNG HEAVY IN THE AIR as Bill Conley and his platoon of 77 Marines skidded into the shoreline, dodging dead bodies as they made their way onto the beach. Looking down, Conley saw Manila John Basilone – the legendary gunny sergeant who two years prior annihilated Japanese forces at Guadalcanal, manning a machine gun for three days and three nights before fending off enemy soldiers with a .45 pistol – face down in the sand. For more than four hours, U.S. troops flooded the beach until darkness descended along with enemy fire.

Iwo Jima at night was a symphony of whistling mortars and exploding artillery. The stones on the ground were pock-marked with bullets. Conley couldn't count to three without hearing a series of explosions and shellfire. There were no casualties during that first night, but that wouldn't last long. Not with an order to attack at all costs.

At 0900 on Feb. 23, Conley led a squad 100 yards at a time into enemy fire. The first mortar shell landed 15 feet behind him, shaking the Earth and knocking Conley off his feet. Most in his squad were killed. As the survivors sought cover, one more received a direct hit. Another disappeared. By day's end, however, the U.S. forces penetrated the Japanese Imperial defenses, and the momentum began to slowly shift in America's favor.

The fighting would continue at this pace for 33 days before the U.S. Armed Forces captured the island from the Japanese Empire. But for Conley, that day would be one of the worst.



// Thanasi Metropoulos '13, a trader at Fidelity Investments, spent more than a dozen hours at Bill Conley's home recording Conley's oral history of his service during WW-II and the Korean Conflict. //

SUNKEN INTO A WELL-WORN BROWN LEATHER ARMCHAIR in a darkened room, Bill Conley stares across the room at a bookshelf lined with spines heralding the American war experience in the Pacific theater. Inside, the pages are peppered with notes marking the historical inaccuracies he has found. Two small jars sit on the top shelf, each filled with sand from Guam and Iwo Jima. The sand there was so coarse, he says, it was like walking on wheat.

With a slow blink of his eyes and a quick touch to his wristwatch, Conley comes back to the present. “That day I lost damn near everybody I had,” he says. “Iwo Jima was the worst out of any other place we fought. My platoon was 78 strong when we landed – a reinforced platoon. When it ended, there was myself and four of the original guys.”

Still, nearly seven decades later, Conley remains resolute: “Iwo Jima was worth it, no doubt.”

At 91 years old, Conley now finds himself among a group even more exclusive than the U.S. Marines with whom he served through the end of the Korean conflict: the last million American veterans of the Second World War. Today, fewer than nine percent of those who served during WW-II are living. And when they are gone, so too are their memories, their stories of service and the on-the-ground accounts of what war was truly like – the off-the-cuff version from those who lived it.

“A lot of history has been forgotten,” Conley says grimly. “A lot has never been told, and a lot won’t ever be told.”

Sitting across from Conley, Thanasi Metropoulos ’13 shakes his head. The grandson of Greek immigrants who survived Nazi occupation and the ensuing Greek Civil War, Metropoulos grew up fascinated by his elders’ war stories. He reads every book about WW-II that he can find. He has pored over his grandparents’ scrapbooks and talked to them at length about their experiences in combat and as citizens under siege. He feels an urgent responsibility to ensure that future generations know as much as possible about the extraordinary circumstances ordinary people endured in a global fight for freedom.

In 2011, in his second year at Roger Williams, Metropoulos – a finance major and history minor – took his interest a step further and reached out to veterans in the towns surrounding the University. He thought he might meet one or two. Instead, he was met with responses from 15 veterans – 14 men and one woman – who agreed to meet with him for oral history interviews that would be memorialized at the Rogers Free Library in Bristol. He would eventually turn the project into an independent study course, earning credit for his thesis – a compilation of the interviews, which he also presented at the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association national conference in Washington, D.C., in April. But the perspective Metropoulos gained was far more valuable, he says, and much more real.

“There is plenty written about World War II,”

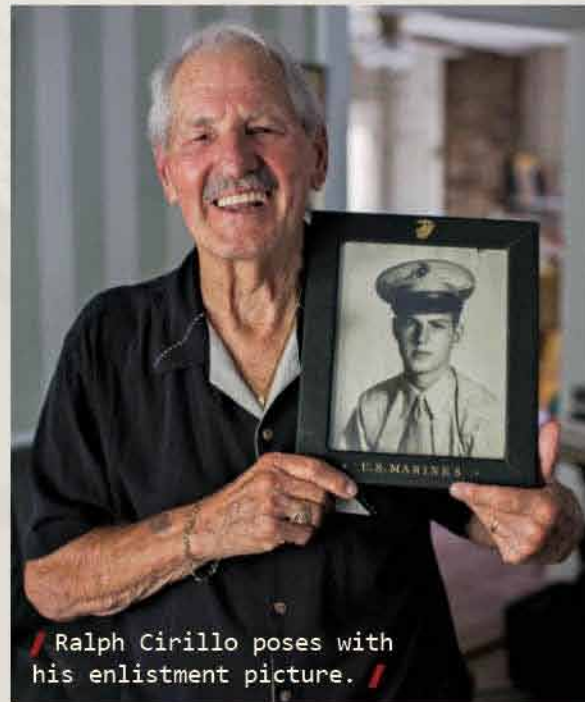
Metropoulos says. “But little of it is in these veterans’ exact words. This is a real person – you’re not reading someone else’s spin on it. Actually seeing a person and recognizing the person behind the words puts it into greater context and has a deeper effect.”



IT’S NOT THAT VETERANS DON’T WANT TO TALK ABOUT THEIR SERVICE, Metropoulos says. Some are reticent, but most are simply never asked – in part because many people forget that the surviving veterans of WW-II are still among them, living in their communities, having a coffee on the corner with their pals. They’re not draped in American flags or wearing their war medals to the market. They are aging, but the memories are ever-present.

“These people are living right next door to you,” Metropoulos says. “They are your neighbors. People don’t recognize that they exist anymore. It’s sad, really, because a lot of these people are still around and are willing to share. You just have to listen.”

It was Metropoulos’s ability to listen that encouraged Ralph Cirillo, an 87-year-old veteran of the 6th Marine



! Ralph Cirillo poses with his enlistment picture. !

“THE HISTORY BOOKS ARE CLOSE TO BEING ACCURATE, BUT NO ONE KNEW HOW SCARED I WAS.”
- RALPH CIRILLO

Division, to grant an uncensored interview about his combat experiences at the Battle of Okinawa for the first time in his life. Cirillo’s children and grandchildren knew he was a Marine, but that was all they needed to know, he says. Even his late wife, Helen – Cirillo’s high school sweetheart, to whom he proposed in a letter from active duty – never knew what he endured. He didn’t want her to know, because it wasn’t easy. She didn’t need that horror in her head, he says, sitting at his kitchen table, shuffling through piles of photos and postcards he brought home from the Pacific.

Even now, nearly 70 years later, he is diffident to discuss the gruesome details of men shredded with shrapnel, bodies flying through the air a split-second after a mortar shell exploded at their feet. Cirillo's voice still catches in the back of his throat when he talks about Okinawa.

"We suffered 120 percent casualties," he recalls. "We were boys trying to be men. The training was too fast. Some of the guys fighting had no rifle training. A lot of times it felt like we were being used for fodder."

The mud and rain on Okinawa was so bad, Cirillo says, that the soldiers' feet were never dry. They would fight for days without a real meal to sustain them.

"The history books are close to being accurate, but no one knew how scared I was," he says. "It was a rude awakening to how fragile life is."

And, he now says, it was like a different life. That was war world. In the real world – the world he returned to – Cirillo says the expectation was to get married, have a family and live happily ever after. So he did.



THERE IS A KIND OF PRAGMATISM in the way Bill Conley and Ralph Cirillo talk about the War.

"It's all done. It's history!" Cirillo says. "I know some guys downtown who never left the States who ramble on about what they did this day or that – I could never understand how they could brag about all that crap."

Conley likes to keep a low profile, too. He politely

refuses requests to ride with the Iwo Jima group in the parades, and he belongs to only one veteran's organization, the American Legion. He doesn't attend meetings.

It's not uncommon for their generation, according to RWU Associate Professor of History Debra Mulligan, a military history expert who advised Metropoulos throughout his interviews.

"That generation was different," she explains. "People didn't talk about things – you were expected to suck it up and put a good face on. And then they had to go home and learn to be human after being taught how not to be human."

To lose those stories by not sharing them, though, would be just as tragic as the massive loss of life suffered throughout the War, Mulligan says.

"There's a lot to be said for oral history projects. To find out from the people who lived it. People make history. And your history is just as important as the President's, because it contributes to a greater picture and that picture becomes more thorough."

Among those attempting to piece together that richer picture is Owen Rogers, a historian who dedicates his days to sourcing and cataloging these histories via the Veterans History Project at the Library of Congress. Together with teams of staff and volunteers, Rogers collects materials and recordings spanning veterans' service from WW-I through current conflicts. Since 2000, the Veterans History Project has amassed more than 87,000 individual narratives, from oral histories to manuscripts and personal images. More than 60 percent



Marie Tucker, 1944 and 2013, gives us her mighty salute and trademark smile. /

"THEY CAN LEARN TO BE GREAT AMERICANS – PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT THEIR COUNTRY AND WHAT'S GOOD FOR THEIR COUNTRY."

of those records are related to WW-II. These narratives create a richer history, he says, well beyond the traditional military record that captures just two percent of the military experience – that of the exiting flag-level officers. How much more could we know if we could connect on a personal level and watch tears escape the eyes of our veterans as they remember, he asks?

“This is the everyman’s experience,” Rogers says. “It depicts their way of life from the mess hall to the motor pool. It’s the ones that aren’t celebrated, that aren’t popular memory or Hollywood history. And we really do glean insight behind the eyes of someone who participated in history and is forever affected by it.”

Without swift action, though, hundreds of thousands of histories could be lost. According to Rogers, 800 WW-II veterans die every day. And they’re not slow to admit that they’re aging – Conley quickly points out that just two of his friends from the Marines are still alive. In 20 years, Metropoulos says, they all will be gone. They are sobering statistics.

“These men are all passing, and their story isn’t told,” Mulligan points out. “No one is going to write letters anymore. How are we going to know what people thought and did and said? If you don’t have a history, then you don’t have a civilization.”



MARIE TUCKER IS A SPRY 87 YEARS OLD. Her home is hung with dozens of family photos, and a large Maine coon cat lolls on the living room chair. A bookshelf in the corner houses nearly every Danielle Steel novel ever published. She likes the happy endings.

A member of the U.S. Naval Reserve, Tucker served as a registered nurse at naval hospitals from Brooklyn to San Diego. At basic training, the men called her “Tea and Toast,” a nod to her preferred daily breakfast. Like Bill Conley and Ralph Cirillo, she still remembers the names of the patients she sat with and read to as they lay dying. Farm boys, like a young amputee called Corning, who grew up on a farm and asked Tucker to deliver a note to his parents. He called her “Blue Eyes.”

Tucker is specific about these details, she says, because in so many cases the minutiae are all that remain of her comrades.

“When these guys are gone, their stories are gone,” she says. “All we have are our memories – but it’s not just the memories you have, it’s what you do with them that counts.”

So in the twilight of her life, Tucker dedicates her days to digging up as many WW-II stories as she can find veterans. Every six weeks, she travels from Rhode Island to Washington, D.C., to deliver any narratives she’s collected to the Veterans History Project. It’s one of the greatest responsibilities of her life, to speak for other veterans and to tell their stories, she says. Even the smallest memory is an integral part of a larger history –

::: INROADS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

A new generation of military veterans to join the ranks of RWU students via customized academic and career development programs

Since its early days as a junior college operating out of the YMCA in Providence, Roger Williams has long been a go-to partner for military learners seeking certificates and degrees via distance learning, and since 2008 has annually earned distinction as a military friendly school from publications including *Military Advanced Education*, *G.I. Jobs* and *Military Times*. Now, thanks to a new partnership with the Rhode Island Division of Veterans Affairs, the School of Continuing Studies will extend career-oriented education opportunities for the state’s veterans via academic plans that tailor their military experience with today’s workforce demands. Support services will include academic advising, tutoring and transitional services. Read more at <http://pdq.rwu.edu/news/magazine-9-extras>.

and current generations can learn so much from the untold stories.

“I think younger generations can learn patience and to care for people,” Tucker says. “They can learn to be great Americans – people who care about their country and what’s good for their country.”

Particularly in troubling times, when there’s little good news to be heard, and when persistence can be the key to prosperity.

“I think the fact that people did endure is the best lesson of all,” Mulligan says. “There’s a certain set of values that these men and women carry that young people seem to honor and respect.”

Young people who, like Thanasi Metropoulos, can contribute to history simply by asking a veteran about theirs.

They will never run out of stories to share, he says. In this case, history is on the side of the living. It’s just a race against time to ensure that the greatest diversity of the Greatest Generation’s memories endures as long as they have. **RWU**

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