

HERITAGE

70/40: WORLD WAR II (1945-2015) • VIETNAM WAR (1975-2015)



Dave Hosmer (left) and Doug Haar of Yankton are engaged in a project to record the experiences of World War II veterans. This year marks the 70th anniversary of the end of the

war, and the surviving veterans of the conflict are at least in their upper 80s, and many are older. (Randy Dockendorf/P&D)

Listening To History

*Two Yankton Men Work To Record And Preserve
The Experiences Of World War II Veterans*

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Doug Haar and Dave Hosmer enjoy talking about history. But in recent months, history has been talking to them. The two Yankton men have interviewed World War II veterans, capturing the living history on video. It's become far more than they imagined when they started.

"We have so much material that we could put out a book," Hosmer said.

The two men share a passion for history. Haar teaches history at Yankton High School, while Hosmer formerly practiced law and now works in financial services.

"We started talking about (doing these interviews) during summer 2013," Hosmer said. "Doug and I get together to talk history, and we were together one day. We realized that my (former) teacher was a World War II veteran."

The two men were fascinated to learn of the discovery, particularly with the rapidly dwindling number of World War II veterans.

"We decided to do an interview of (the former teacher)," Hosmer said. "Then, I started getting more requests."

As word got out, the number of interviews grew ... and grew. Haar and Hosmer have interviewed 99 veterans so far and hope to continue.

The veterans came from different walks of life, and they served in different theaters of war. Some served in Europe, others in the Pacific.

However, most of the veterans shared the common bond of coming from the Yankton area, growing up during the Depression and serving in World War II.

The veterans were, as Yankton/Pickstown native and former NBC Nightly News anchor Tom Brokaw called them, "the Greatest Generation."

Their combat experiences ranged from surviving Pearl Harbor to flying as a reconnaissance photo pilot over Europe to fighting in the Philippines.

Haar found himself talking to the very type of individuals he would often discuss in the classroom. However, the stories came

alive and became intense.

"We had some surreal moments," Haar said.

GETTING A START

The two men decided to tackle the veterans' interviews while Haar had a break in his schedule and Hosmer was making the transition between careers.

They started the project Jan. 1, 2014. They soon realized the task loomed much more time consuming – and emotionally draining – than they ever expected.

"We had planned to do three interviews every day – but we did our first interview and it lasted 3 ½ hours," Haar said. "We were late to the other ones and had to reschedule."

The trend continued and required a change in approach, Haar said. "There was so much information. There was so much rich history that the time just flew by," he said.

The veterans showed a mixture of eagerness and reluctance in sharing their wartime experiences, Haar said. With time claiming more World War II veterans, the survivors felt a compelling need to share their stories.

"They were uncomfortable coming forward (at first), but then they did," Haar said.

Haar and Hosmer didn't want to talk solely about combat experiences. They also sought to learn more about the veterans as individuals who were shaped by their times.

"When we interviewed World War II veterans, we would ask people about their early life, education and being farm kids," Hosmer said. "We asked about their education and what they did for fun as kids. They would swim the Jim River. They grew up in the Depression and during FDR's (Franklin Delano Roosevelt's) presidency. They lived through bank failures and crop failures."

As a result, the Greatest Generation came across as modest, humble people despite winning a war and building a nation once they arrived home, Haar said.

"It was like an 'American Heroes' script," he said. "But it was raw history, so it was all the better. There was no painted-over, rehearsed interview. It was straight from the heart."

The veterans maintained their military discipline throughout their lifetimes, Hosmer said. "When we set up an interview for 11 a.m., they would be there at 10 a.m.," he said.

The veterans told incredible stories about the war, Hosmer said. "But there were certain topics where you just pulled away (during the interviews)," he said.

Haar experienced that moment on a

personal level. "I took my dad from Freeman over to Wagner (to talk with another veteran). When we drove back, there was just silence in the car," he said.

Other times, family members didn't want to talk about their war experiences and the atrocities they witnessed, Haar said.

"It's amazing, some of the battles," Hosmer said.

AMAZING STORIES

Hosmer and Haar identified WWII veterans for possible interviews, but not all would be part of the project. Of the pool, 15 were unable to participate because of old age and another 12-15 didn't want to be interviewed.

The project came across some unexpected finds, Hosmer said.

"Jim Black was a submariner during World War II," he said. "They (submariners) suffered the highest casualty rate, but they sank 54 percent of all Japanese ships. The Japanese tried to destroy them."

Some of the wartime moments were uncanny, Hosmer said.

One soldier was reading a story about the homecoming king in the Yankton High School newspaper, the *Woksape*, Hosmer said.

"Then he heard somebody yell, 'You want to grab a line?' And it was the homecoming king he was just reading about," Hosmer said. "Another time, a local soldier jumped into a foxhole, and there he was with the quarterback of the Vermillion High School football team."

Those who enlisted before Pearl Harbor got to choose their military branch, often selecting the Navy or Coast Guard, Haar said.

The veterans were affected by their war experience even after they returned home, Hosmer said.

"The 'Greatest Generation' hated war more than anyone else. They weren't warmongers. They were happy the war was over," he said. "Great Britain had no more men (available for battle). Americans were war-weary and drafting men in their 40s. The United States had 454,000 killed over four years and 16 million who were in military service."

Meanwhile, the Japanese were determined to defend their homeland to the death, Hosmer said.

"We didn't realize how radicalized the Japanese culture was at the time," he said, with even children trained for war.

President Harry Truman made the decision to drop the atomic bomb when considering the costs of a prolonged, bloody war, Hosmer said.

RETURNING HOME

The soldiers and sailors came from and returned to a much different era than modern America, Haar said.

"Today, the lifestyle is fast-paced," he said. "Back then, neighbors were close knit and cared for each other. They helped each other out. They would play cards and enjoy time together. The kids walked home for lunch. It was a different time and a different life."

World War II shaped the entire nation, Hosmer said.

"The defining event for that generation was Pearl Harbor," he said. "For others who came later, it was the assassination attempt on President Reagan, the Challenger explosion or 9/11."

Hosmer said he was grateful for the interviews and capturing the living history. The two men plan to donate the video to a museum or university as a historical resource.

"There were unique stories that people told us. Thank God we've been able to preserve the stories for perpetuity," Hosmer said. "I wish we had done this (project) 20 years sooner. But I'm not sure (the veterans) would have talked 20 years earlier."

Haar considered the interviews a life-changing experience for Hosmer and him.

"Both of us became way more aware of what sacrifice means," he said. "Neither of us were drafted or had to go to war. Due to (the veterans') service, they accomplished a lot for mankind. They wanted to do their utmost so their stories weren't forgotten."

Hosmer expressed gratitude to the veterans. "We owe everything to them. They sacrificed because they assumed it was the right thing to do," he said.

Brokaw's "Greatest Generation" provided a great service in educating the public about World War II and the heroes on the front line, Hosmer said.

In a smaller way, Haar and Hosmer hope their project educates the public about the war. The public holds some knowledge about the European theater but relatively little about the Pacific theater, they said.

World War II continues to impact everyday life 70 years after the war's conclusion, Hosmer said. He pointed to the domino effect of ending colonialism, the Korean and Vietnam wars and the current Middle East conflict.

"If you don't know your history, you're doomed to repeat it," he said.

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