# GIVING VOICE TO THE PAST:

## Canada's Heroes Remember

**ABSTRACT**

This article highlights the efforts of Veterans Affairs Canada to commemorate the past and to make accessible to all Canadians the stories of our many service men and women. With a special emphasis on oral history, the Heroes Remember web site offers a collection of interviews with Veterans on-line. These audio and video clips help young people in particular to connect with past events of which they have no first-hand knowledge. VAC continues to search for untapped holdings of previous Veteran interviews and asks anyone with information to contact the Department.

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His voice is faint; his eyes glisten with tears as his memory drifts back. "The trench was a dirty place; it was filthy and full of rats. You could grab a piece of somebody that got killed" he says, fingers worrying at the soggy tissue in his hand. "A man dying was nothing you know, it's not like we look at it here. If you were shot or killed, you might be pulling somebody's leg over to get out of the mud. This was rough, rough warfare."

That was the real Vimy. It is the story of Donald Sutherland – one that cannot be told the same way in any textbook. To see his face, hear his voice, experience his memories is to bring history alive… and this is exactly what the Heroes Remember web site has done. Heroes Remember provides Canadians of all ages with a unique opportunity to experience history through the eyes of those who lived it. Through the site, Veterans Affairs Canada will provide unprecedented access to the more than 1,600 hours of video and audio conversations it has recorded with hundreds of Canadian veterans. These interviews offer the rare and personal memories of veterans from all regions of Canada as well as each of the 20th century's wars and missions of the Canadian Forces.

In addition to streaming video, which allows visitors to see edited portions of the actual interviews, the site also includes a variety of biographical information and educational tools. Life-long learners and academics will appreciate the photos, biographical information and links to related historical information provided. Transcripts of each interview segment have also been provided to facilitate research.

Why is oral history important? It has been said that these stories are the 'ringside seats' of history, providing an intimacy that cannot be found in any history book. They provide insight into the thoughts and feelings of ordinary Canadians in extraordinary circumstances – times we can only imagine. Our native ancestors recognized the value of the spoken word. Their culture cherished the stories and legends, told not only for entertainment, but also as a means of connecting the past to the future.



**"I wouldn't have missed the army for anything else I've done in my life. Just to be with those boys, and some of them were just boys. You know, kids and I was just a kid myself." – World War II Nursing Sister Georgina Seeley.**

Not surprisingly, one of the site's primary target audiences is Canadian youth. Today's youth have indicated that they prefer to see and hear Veterans' stories as opposed to more static learning. But, as the soldiers of past conflicts quietly fade into the past, this becomes increasingly difficult.

The needs of youth at a variety of ages were carefully considered in designing the site. Interviews have been segmented to allow for easy access regardless of grade-level and each interview has been carefully selected and edited to provide a balance of personal and historical information. Teachers will also find a variety of lesson plans and activity ideas designed to highlight the human element of war. As the site continues to evolve, more interactive learning elements will be incorporated, specifically targeting youth in grades 7-12. With content relevant to all regions of Canada and available in both official languages, Heroes Remember is a useful and engaging tool for all educators.




**"They had no radio communication, they had bugles… There was this one time one of our guys, I guess he learned to play a bugle in his younger days. He learned how to blow retreat in Chinese. The Chinese are blowing attack and he's blowing retreat. I thought that was great." – Korean War veteran William Chrysler.**

VAC first began videotaping veteran stories in the early 1990s. The department then received a Head of the Public Service Award for what was known as the "Oral Histories Project." Now, after nearly 15 years, the project represents the cooperative effort of several organizations. Funding was provided in 2003 by the Canadian Culture Online Program's *Canadian Memory Fund* which provides funding to federal institutions for the digitization of Canada's key cultural heritage collections. The program was designed as part of Canadian Heritage's ongoing effort to connect all Canadians, but particularly youth, with authentic sources of Canadian experience by making Canada's cultural collections available online in both official languages.

Heroes Remember is also an integral part of the Canadian Military History Gateway, a government web portal providing access to Web sites and digitized resources about Canada's military history. In cooperation with other federal partners (including the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Parks Canada, the National Film Board of Canada, etc.), the Canadian Military History Gateway was spearheaded by the Department of National Defence and provides several ways to discover, access and exploit online military history resources including everything from an interactive timeline to a concise military history of Canada.

Veterans Affairs Canada is also pursuing access to other Veteran oral history collections. The University of New Brunswick's Dr. Marc Milner, for example, donated 16 interviews completed in the 1970s by students in the Military and Strategic Studies graduate program. Through a partnership agreement, the Provincial Archives of New Brunswick will digitize this contribution before they are added to the Heroes Remember web site. The Testaments of Honour Foundation, a non-profit charity dedicated to preserving the personal histories of Canada's veterans, will also make a significant contribution in the form of approximately 400 interviews. Contributions like these allow Veterans Affairs to broaden the depth and texture of its oral history collection and begin consolidating scattered collections.



**"My mother took it pretty hard… she couldn't say goodbye so she gave it to me in a letter which I have in that bible yet. It was her farewell words to me and one of them was, 'Try and find someone that doesn't drink as a pal.' Well, that was quite a hard job to do!" – Canadian seaman Lorne Stevens.**

The challenge of telling the stories of war has always been to move beyond the facts and figures that dominate our historical landscape. More than 116,000 Canadian graves scattered across six continents are a testament to Canada's sacrifice in 20th century conflicts, however they do little to explain the terrible loss of these young men and women to their families, friends and communities. Neither is it enough to say that more than one million young Canadians fought during the Second World War when we know that each of these men and women was somebody's sister, daughter, father, husband or son.

This is why the search for compelling stories to tell continues. The 32 English and 31 French interviews currently found on the site are only the beginning for this new and exciting project. As Heroes Remember unfolds over the next year, as many as 600 additional interviews and more than 5000 historical photographs will be digitized and added to the collection. The site will include oral histories from veterans of the South African War, the First and Second World Wars, the Korean War as well as peacekeeping and modern military operations. Additional interviews will be collected to reflect the diverse demographics of Canadian culture. The team continues to seek out untapped holdings of previous Veteran interviews and asks anyone with knowledge of such sources to contact the Department.

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In the end, our veterans are ordinary men and women who became heroes under extraordinary conditions. Their actions profoundly affected the course of history and the shaping of all of our futures. The Heroes Remember web site allows all Canadians to celebrate their achievements and learn from our past.