NOTES
FROM THE DOCUMENTARY PRODUCER AND TEAM

Intro

If you're like me, you don't appreciate people telling you how to do your job. But if you're planning to combine this archival footage of the Vietnam War with the stories of the veterans who fought it, and you haven't had many opportunities to talk to veterans about their experiences, it might be helpful for you to know what I've learned in the course of interviewing 80 WWII veterans, 50 Korean War veterans, and 110 Vietnam War veterans for our War Stories projects over the past decade.

Understanding Veterans

Be prepared when you first approach Vietnam veterans about sharing their stories -- they will most likely tell you they don't want to talk about it. They will insist that they have put the war behind them and want to keep it there. That's not true, of course. They think about the war every day, still trying to figure it out. But the memories are indeed painful, of friends lost, of lives changed, of endless fear and tension, the guilt of surviving, the reception received when they came home, accusations that they lost their war, anger over the way the war was fought and things they were asked to do. And for many, previous attempts to tell their story have gone badly -- war is not something you want to share with your wife or children, and reporters seem more interested in hearing something sensational than listening. That is why so many veterans have found it easier to pretend they never served. And that is why people are so often shocked to find out after many years that neighbors, friends and workmates are Vietnam veterans.

Finding Veterans

Warning: The public image of the typical Vietnam veteran as the troubled homeless guy who wears tattered fatigues is false. There are, unfortunately, some of those, but there are far more school principals and mailmen, CEO's and social workers, storekeepers and factory workers, doctors and ministers, and anyone else you see when you look around.

It is extremely important to be selective when looking for veterans to interview, keeping in mind the wide variance of Vietnam experiences. Veterans have said that Vietnam was not a ten-year war, but ten one-year wars, because each year was so different. Even the phrase "ten year war" is disputed because U.S. military personnel were there from 1955 to 1975 – that's a generation of change and differences. Similarly, the type of war waged

up by the border with North Vietnam was totally different from that in the Central Highlands, which was in turn totally different from the guerilla war in the Delta. Add to that the difference of experience in the Army, Marines, Air Force, Navy and Coast Guard.

I highly recommend that you not advertise publicly for veterans, because the ones who respond are probably not the ones you will want to interview. A far better source is the Veterans Service Officers who help veterans obtain their VA benefits. These officers are usually veterans themselves and hear on a routine basis the stories you are looking for. If you gain their trust, they can help you identify people representing a wide range of wartime experiences. Other sources are service organizations like the Vietnam Veterans of America, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Military Order of the Purple Heart, and the American Legion. But keep in mind that a majority of veterans do not belong to organizations. Still other possibilities are a multitude of websites built around military units and memorable events in the war. And, finally, allow time for word of mouth to travel from veteran to veteran until it leads you to just the person you need. (View the interview map.)

Contacting Veterans

Your first contact with the veteran is critical. At any mention of television or interview or telling their story, they will envision the worst. You have to let them know up front that you understand what they have been through, both in Vietnam and on their return home. They may be quick to anger, so remember that the anger is not directed at you, but at the unfairness of their experience. Tell them about your project and what you hope to accomplish, such as clearing up some of the confusion people have about Vietnam veterans. Tell them that you believe the best way to do that is to let veterans tell their own story rather than having it interpreted by a producer or reporter. Then, get their information. They don't like to talk about their bad experiences, but they will happily share with you the dates of their service, their unit, where they were in Vietnam, and their job in the military. Providing this information may very well start them talking about their experiences, and if they sound comfortable, you can ask them if they would be willing to share their story with you in an interview. But if you sense that there is still hesitation on their part, don't force the issue, because once they say no it's hard to change their mind. Just tell them you're still in the process of locating people and finding out what stories are out there.

Another difficulty that can arise when you first contact veterans is that after hearing the details of their service, you realize you don't want to interview them, perhaps because you've already talked to two door gunners and neither your budget nor the scope of your project has room for a third. Put yourself in their position and imagine how you would

feel if someone decided your story wasn't worth sharing. Let them know that all veterans' stories are important, but that you're limited in how many you can use.

For us, one of our most productive ways of meeting veterans was through listening sessions. Organized by Veterans Services Officers or service organizations, we met with groups of 10-15 Vietnam veterans at a time. We told them about our project, indicated that we were aware of how often Vietnam veterans had been misrepresented in the past, and asked them to share a little bit about their service. These were truly "listening" sessions, comfortably informal. We did not bring a camera or do any videotaping. However, we did ask participants to fill out information sheets (pdf), including whether or not they had personal photos or film from Vietnam. Having their service information handy helped determine who would best help us tell the larger story of the Vietnam War. Of all the veterans I met in this manner, not a single one declined when I later asked them to interview. And I learned a lot about the veterans and the war in those sessions.

Beware of Wannabes

There is a sad phenomenon that appears to be connected more with Vietnam than any other war -- people who never served pretending that they did, and people who served in the US or in rear echelon positions claiming combat experience and even medals for valor. This is treacherous ground for anyone trying to interview veterans because you don't want to include stories in your program that can later be proved bogus, and neither do you want to give real veterans the impression that you don't trust what they are saying.

Some have suggested that the only way to avoid this problem is to require veterans to bring with them their Form DD214, which lists the dates and locations of their service. I was never comfortable with that approach, feeling that if I was asking someone to go through the pain of sharing difficult memories with me, I should at least give them the benefit of the doubt. I did, however, pay close attention to the information they provided, plus I had the luxury of a videographer who is a Vietnam veteran. Veterans recognize right away when somebody's story is fishy.

What I learned from him are a number of things to watch for, such as a story that's just too good to be true, full of heroic actions and fuzzy on specific details. These stories tend to focus only on the storyteller, whereas veterans who were in the thick of it speak mostly of the people they were with, and especially the people they lost. And a practiced, dramatic delivery is indicative of a story that's been told many times before. Still, it's not an easy call, because these memories are 40 years old, and things like names and dates and the order of events can get a little confused.

Scheduling Interviews

One of the difficulties veterans have when it comes to telling their stories is that it takes time. It takes time for them to let the memories flow, and it takes time to tell a story of such complexity and emotion, and it takes time to come back out of the telling. Television production, on the other hand, is more of a "get in, get the story and get out" process. In this case, I think we have an obligation to change that process because we can actually cause damage by asking the veteran to delve into those memories and then abruptly pulling away because we have to move on to another interview. For this reason, we chose to do our interviews as oral histories, allowing time to get the whole 1-2 hour story, even though we would only be using a few minutes of it in the program. The added benefit of this approach was the creation of an extensive archive that will benefit historians and families for generations.

When scheduling an interview, make sure you explain clearly what will happen. Most people hear the word "interview" and think of what they've seen on television, with a reporter asking the questions and the interviewee on the spot to come up with cogent answers. That's a lot of pressure. I always tell veterans that it will be more of a conversation than an interview, with just the two of us talking about their experience. I tell them I will ask questions, but only to clarify my understanding of their story. We will start at the beginning of their service and talk until there's nothing more to say, with them having full control over what they choose to talk about.

I came to understand, after hearing from wives, that even the prospect of talking about Vietnam has a profound effect on veterans, often causing night sweats and bad dreams. And it only gets worse as the day of the interview approaches. That is why I always contact them again shortly before the interview to reassure them that it will not be as bad as they're expecting. They don't necessarily believe me when I tell them it is actually going to be comfortable, and that they will probably get emotional but there's nothing wrong with that, and that all the veterans I'd interviewed so far felt good about it afterwards, but it gives them a chance to ask any questions that have come up as they've obsessed over what it's going to be like. And still, every single veteran shows up for the interview expecting the worst.

Conducting Interviews

When your veterans show up to the interview, understand that they will be a bundle of nerves. Talking in front of a camera is daunting for anybody, and that unease increases exponentially when the subject is going to be something as painful as memories of the Vietnam War, with the real likelihood that raw emotions will be exposed, resulting in embarrassment. So your first job is to put the veteran at ease. We used a process that allowed this to happen naturally, in that we projected an image of the veteran in uniform,

preferably in Vietnam, as a background for the interview. (View an interview photo.) In order to do this we had to look through their photos with them, select a photo that would work, scan it and get the background set up properly before we could begin the interview. This gave them time to get to know my crew and me a little bit and to get comfortable with the technical set-up and how the interview was going to be conducted.

One firm rule that we followed during this pre-interview period was to never let them talk about Vietnam. While nervous, they are also primed to talk about their service, but if you let that conversation begin before they are in front of the camera, there are two outcomes, both of which are bad. The first is that you might hear something important that is not repeated when the camera is rolling, and the second is that if they do repeat something that they've already told you, they will invariably preface it with "as I said before." So we always kept the chat mundane and concentrated on clearly explaining everything we were doing and what was going to happen next.

Just as we eased into the interview, we continued to ease into their story when the interview finally began. Because the interview was basically an oral history, we began at the beginning, having them pronounce and spell their name (important information to have right at the front of the tape) and then asking them where they were living, and when and how they decided to join the military. This is non-threatening stuff, and we followed it right on through their Basic Training and on to Vietnam. Quickly enough, and there is no hurry because tape is pretty cheap compared to the priceless value of these memories, the story took over and followed its own thread. I was always ready with questions when the veteran stopped talking, but the questions grew from the context of the conversation, clarifying what I was hearing, or asking for details to help me picture the scene clearly, or simply asking what happened after that. I never went into an interview with a list of questions (though I had them in my head), because I've found that if you ask a formal question you get a formal answer, and what I was looking for was the flow of memory – the story.

I told the veterans repeatedly that they were in full control of what we talked about in the interview, that I would never try to lead them into memories that made them uncomfortable. And whenever I asked a question that might have that result, I reminded them that I wasn't trying to push them into anything and just to say no if they didn't want to go there. But even without my actively looking for it, the raw stories came pouring out as if they could no longer be contained -- as if they were just waiting for someone to listen, without judgment, without horror, without fear. Of course tears and sobs and valiant struggles to stay in control would accompany the stories. How could they not? But we learned not to be embarrassed by these shows of emotion, and because we weren't, the veterans weren't embarrassed either. They would let it out, then regain their composure and continue on. On occasion the breakdown was so extreme that we would stop the camera and give them a chance to have a drink of water and blow their nose and

wipe their eyes, but then they always wanted to continue. In all our interviews, not a single veteran asked to stop the session. (View the *All Hell Broke Loose* segment.)

While I always had questions, I also found out that silence can be productive. Many of the veterans we interviewed, perhaps the majority of them, had never before talked so much about Vietnam. They were processing memories that they had not allowed to surface for decades, so they did not come out in an organized narrative, but jumped around from incident to incident, place to place, person to person, as triggered by something else that had been said. Silence provided the room for more memories to surface, and they always did. Unfortunately, an even stronger trigger seemed to be provided by the end of the interview. Without the pressure of articulating their memories on camera, the stories come pouring out even more freely once the interview was over. It was always frustrating when we were scanning the rest of their photos or getting their release signed or tearing down the equipment or seeing them out the door, and they kept saying all kinds of powerful things that we wished we had on tape. But short of pretending to end the interview while you secretly continue shooting (which would be alarmingly unethical, to say the least!), there seems to be no way to avoid this phenomenon.

What you absolutely don't want to do, however, is finish the interview without getting all the logistical information you're going to need when you put your show together. So even if it's a recap at the end of the interview, make sure you have the specific dates of their service; their unit information, including squad, platoon, company, brigade and division (or comparable information for the Air Force, Navy and Coast Guard); and the places (spelled if possible, which is not easy for Vietnam) where they served.

Notes From the Videographer

I came up with the idea of using a projected black and white image for the background of the veteran interviews for a number of reasons: background is very important, especially in our now 16 X 9 world. I wanted some continuity as we cut between interviews, and I wanted the focus to stay on the veterans face and story. I also wanted some continuity as we cut from the veteran to archival footage that supported what the veteran was talking about. The soft black and white background gave me that continuity as I cut to the black and white archival footage. The image we choose for the projected background was almost always a photograph that the veterans brought with them to the interview. We would choose a photo of them while in the military, or something that related to their time in the service, like a tank, helicopter, jeep, truck, etc. We scanned that image, made it B&W and front projected it onto a white canvas that we hung in the background. I threw the image a little out of focus to give it a soft but recognizable feel in the background. The veteran (in color) always stood out from the B&W background, thereby

keeping the focus on them. The veterans thought it was pretty cool to see themselves 40 years younger in the military as a background image to their interview.

I needed to be careful how I composed the background because the majority of the interview was shot very tight and I still wanted to make some sense of what the background was.

The interview location was always a challenge. We needed a dark and fairly large space. I needed to keep the veteran about 10ft or more from the background canvas so that my subject lights did not spill light onto the projected image. We also needed to block out any window or other ambient light. I typically lit the interview using a large soft light as my key, filling with a reflector, and I used a Lowel VIP for a back light. But once we were set up at a location, we could move easily from interview to interview by changing only the background photo.

I started my composition of the interview with a medium shot above the waist but very soon moved into a head and shoulders shot. As the veteran would tell us stories I would creep into a tight shot of their face. I definitely stayed tight the bulk of the time because their faces were so engaging and told so much of their story. The one piece of advice I would give videographers is stay tight and you will never be sorry.

The big advantage I had as the archival footage editor it that I am a veteran myself. I know the difference between an M14, M16, 50 cal, M60, grenade launcher, LAW rocket, etc. You do not want to choose archival footage that is not appropriate for that veteran's story. Find a veteran who you can consult with as you choose archival footage. I cut away to archival footage only when I had to. Again, I can not emphasize enough how important the veterans' faces are as they tell their story. Stay on a tight face shot and leave it only when you have to! (View the Mick Lyons *"Coming Home"* preview.)

Notes From the Audio Designer

For the interviews I used both a boom mic and a lavaliere. If you find that a person in telling their story moves around a lot and causes fabric noises or static pops on the lavaliere, you have the boom audio available to use as a back-up. Then you can stop the interview at the end of a story and make proper adjustments. You don't want to stop the interview right at a critical emotional point. This also brings up the point of paying attention to where you are on the tape. The last thing you want to have happen is to run out of tape in the middle of a compelling story, because after changing the tape you will never get back to where you were interrupted.

One of the greatest challenges of the project was providing nat sound for the mostly silent archival footage. Providing good sound effects for every shot takes a commitment of

time and resources, but the end result is more than worth the effort. Even though the levels must be kept low so as not to interfere with the stories, seeing a Huey without that familiar thump-thump-thump or a weapon firing with no report detracts from the reality captured by the footage. Good sound effects are readily available on line, as either CD's, in sets, or single payment of a particular effect. But make sure the effect is appropriate to the picture because a Huey doesn't sound like a CH-34, and every Vietnam veteran knows the difference. (View the *Airmobile* segment.)

Back to the Producer
Sharing Interviews

It is a valid and long-standing practice of news organizations and production houses to never provide people with copies of their raw interviews. With the veterans' stories, however, there are compelling reasons to share. To begin with, this may well be the only time they have ever had the opportunity to sit down and talk about their experiences in such a comprehensive manner. It is their story, earned too often with blood and anguish, and we felt they should have the opportunity to share it with others if they chose to do so.

Veterans have given us a number of reasons why they never talked about Vietnam, particularly to their families. Foremost among those reasons is that they didn't want to expose parents, wives or children to the horrors they witnessed. Actions that were acceptably appropriate in the insane world of war take on a different character, nearly impossible to justify, in the shelter of the home. And almost always, the veterans fear that they will lose control of the anger and emotion they are still struggling to keep bottled up.

Sharing their interviews on DVD is apparently much less threatening for the veterans, perhaps because the uncertainty of the telling is past. They have repeatedly told us how precious the DVDs are to them, because the interview provides a means to let their families know what they have been carrying all these years. One veteran told us that he sat his grown sons in front of the TV, put in the DVD, and then waited in the kitchen until they had finished watching. When they came in to join him, he could finally say, "That's what your dad did."

And from the families, there has been nothing but thanks. Producers like to think their projects can change lives. Sharing these interviews is the closest I've ever come to it.

So I told the veterans before the interview, and reaffirmed afterwards, that when we digitized their tapes we would make DVDs for them. I warned them that it might take awhile because shooting more than 100 interviews was putting something of a strain on our station's resources and our cadre of volunteer transcribers. Even so, they all received their DVD's before the documentary was completed, and not a single veteran asked me

not to use something they had said. If any of them had made such a request, I would have willingly honored it.

In addition to sharing the DVDs with the veterans, we also gave copies to our partner organization, the Wisconsin Veterans Museum, who will eventually archive the field tapes as well. The interviews, expertly shot in HD, were a valuable addition to their already extensive oral history collection. Not only did this confirm to the veterans that their stories were important, it was nice to know that even though we used such a small percentage of the material in our shows, the interviews in their entirety will be accessible for viewing and research years into the future.

Fact Checking

While I trusted the veterans implicitly, I was also aware that they were remembering things from 40 or so years ago. I was continually amazed by their recall of exotic place names. But for many of them, timelines were fluid. There are specific dates that are burned into their memory, but beyond those they often got dates wrong, months in particular and sometimes years as well. Similarly, they were often fuzzy on details such as the other units that participated with them in an operation, or the order in which things happened, be it a battle or an operation or their entire deployment. So I was always careful to check specific details before using them in the show. I didn't want to provide false or misleading information just because the veteran had misspoken.

Another thing I watched out for was acquired memories. This has nothing to do with the people I warned about earlier who knowingly talk about things they never experienced. I came to understand that the real veterans have been thinking about their experiences since the time they happened, mentally replaying those experiences again and again and again, as if the outcome could be changed. Many of them have also read everything they could get their hands on that has anything to do with their time in the Service. After awhile, some of the things they've read since or heard about while still in Vietnam have become indistinguishable from memories of what they actually experienced.

I never challenged the veterans' stories during the interviews, but I did give them a chance to reconsider if dates or the flow of events didn't sound right. And more than once the veterans were confused about whether something had happened to them or somebody else. So if I later found details in an interview that didn't quite jive with the rest of the story, I was careful not to use that material. Besides, in a two hour interview there was plenty to choose from, all of it powerful.

Building the Show

I'll be really careful here, because again, you don't need me to tell you how to put your show together. But in the course of working with the veterans, who had put their lives on the line for our country, there are some things I came to feel pretty strongly about when using their stories.

My first concern was to never embarrass the veterans. They had shared their stories because I had gained their trust, and I wasn't about to violate that trust by misrepresenting them. If a part of a story out of context felt gruesome, or inhuman, or macabre, I either found a way to include the context or else I didn't use it. If a date was misremembered or an incident was obviously exaggerated, I didn't use it. I was particularly careful about smiles and laughter. I had learned to my surprise when directing Shakespeare that an audience's response to the most horrific of scenes is to laugh. You may have encountered that same response in horror movies. Laughter is an emotional antidote to nausea. So I was not surprised when veterans smiled or laughed while recounting the most gruesome details of war. But if that came across on tape as enjoying an awful action or finding it funny, I didn't use it.

I was also concerned about the people watching the program. While we all have different levels of tolerance, there are things that are just too painful to hear or imagine. The combat experience is so inconceivable to those who have not experienced it, that even a glimpse of its reality can be overwhelming. But for the veterans who had to survive it, both physically and emotionally, the inconceivable came to feel almost commonplace. So some of the things they describe without emotion, like sitting on a dead body to eat their c-rations, may be too graphic for a general audience. And I had to be aware that after hearing so many of their stories, my initial sense of what was or was not acceptable for public viewing might be compromised, so I listened carefully to the feedback from people not involved in the production. You can't communicate the horror of war by forcing people to turn away and stop watching.

It's a fine line to walk because the veterans urgently want people to know that war is not the rational, heroic, sugarcoated experience depicted in too many Hollywood movies. It's a last resort, not a contest, and it is life-alteringly brutal.

In nine hours of war stories programs covering WWII, Korea and Vietnam, I have not once been accused of portraying a war inaccurately. With people so quick to disagree about the justness of a war, or how the war was fought, or the details of a famous battle, there is nothing with which to disagree in a veteran's firsthand account of his or her experience. And veterans are entitled to their own opinions about the war they fought and the meaning of their experiences. But the moment you try to distill those personal accounts and opinions into narration, you're fair game for criticism because suddenly it's the producer talking, not the veteran. So rather than fitting sound bites into narration to tell the story, I built the narrative entirely out of the interviews. We taped the veterans in extreme close up, because the eyes and expressions say as much as the words in these

stories, and we used them on camera as much as possible in the show. (View the *The Price* segment.)

When the veteran is not on camera, using their interview material as narrative requires, of course, considerable editing. With digital editing it is far too easy to make people appear to say things they never meant to say. It rests upon the producer's ethics to insure that however appealing it might be for the sake of a good story, you never cross that line. What I tried to do was take what the veterans said and help them say it more clearly and succinctly. Pauses and stumbles that are acceptable on camera are disruptive and difficult to follow in voice over, as are redundant phrases, digressions, and insertions like "you know?" I felt comfortable removing them. I also felt comfortable connecting parts of a story that may have been seconds or minutes or even tapes removed in the telling.

Of course, the content and flow of each veteran's narrative is determined by the overall structure of the program. How do you put the individual interviews together to build a larger and equally compelling narrative? That's the question each producer must answer, and all I can do is report how I chose to do it. Following the timeline of the war provided me with a beginning and an end, as well as stops along the way at notable events and transition points. Within that structure there was space to insert important stories, not contingent on timeline, which dealt with different aspects of the veterans' experience, such as the use of helicopters or the treatment of the wounded. I also found that interweaving two or three veterans telling similar stories provided a more complete context as one story built upon the other.

And finally, try to maintain a balance in the nature of the stories. While there are physical and emotional scars that the veterans carry, there are also memories of camaraderie and great humor. You will find that many veterans still feel as close to the people who served with them as to anyone else in their lives, families included. Indeed, when veterans talk to one another about Vietnam, it is almost always with howls of laughter. Because there is so much tragedy in these stories, it's always nice to find a little relief in moments of levity and juvenile madness.

The Cutting Room Floor

The cruelest part of the production process, with which you are all too familiar, is running out of room in your program to include some very powerful moments and stories. Our companion website was a great help in making use of this surfeit of good material. Each of our War Stories projects has been accompanied by a veterans' portrait exhibit. Combining those portraits with selected audio clips from the interviews was a natural for the website. (Visit WisconsinStories.org/Vietnam) Another fine use of the material was editing audio clips together with the personal photos shared with us by several of the veterans to form storytelling slideshows.

Also abundant in the interviews were magical excerpts, a minute or two in length, that when combined with music and some simple graphics created moving promotional previews for the project. We placed them on YouTube and used them in presentations to instantly portray the emotional power of the stories we had gathered. (View the *George & Ed* preview.)

The Vietnam War Footage

The archival footage in this tool kit represents a broad selection of films depicting action in each of the military services and covering the many years of the Vietnam War. All of the films are from the National Archives and are in the public domain. They were acquired by Meredith Vezina for her company, Traditions Military Videos, in Julian, California.

Meredith was extremely helpful in helping us identify the appropriate footage to illustrate the specific interviews we were using in our program. It is a comprehensive list, but by no means complete. There are places, bases, battles and operations that were not touched upon in our documentary, but might be in yours. The general public will never notice, but the veterans definitely will if you illustrate a story with the wrong footage. So if you have stories that need some special video, Meredith will most likely have just what you need. http://www.militaryvideo.com/ There will be a fee (she's running a business, after all), but it will be less costly and time-consuming than researching the holdings of the National Archives and having films mastered, dubbed and shipped to you.