VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS.

Students Learn 'What Legacies Really Are'

High school students interviewed nearly 30 veterans for a documentary, hearing first-hand accounts about what it's like to serve in a war zone

Mar 25, 2020

Army Chief Warrant Officer Billy Barber stood atop the Chugach Mountain in 1967 at the Summit Site in Anchorage Borough, Alaska. He looked down at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson and the school where his daughter was enrolled and thought his life was about to change.

Russian aircraft had flown into U.S. airspace — a maneuver Soviet pilots often did in an almost taunting fashion to steal Army radio frequencies. But this time they entered farther than before, sending Barber and other soldiers into a scramble. They armed the Nike-Hercules missiles and waited for launch orders.

Barber, a member of the U.S. Army's 43rd Air Defense Artillery Regiment, gazed below at his town and then went to work.

"I wanted to take a last look at where we lived," he said. "Then I did what I was supposed to do. We really thought this was the start of World War III."

Barber, now 76, and living in Hoxie, Ark., shared that story last year with a class of 11th-grade English students at Hillcrest High School in the town of Strawberry in rural northern Arkansas.

The students interviewed 27 area veterans of the wars in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan on camera. Overseen by teacher Randy Story, the students then put the interviews together in a 55-minute documentary that preserves the veterans' recollections of war and their service.

"We went through some hair-raising times," said Barber, a life member and former

commander of VFW Post 11300 in Walnut Ridge, Ark. “Kids nowadays think that being in the military only means being shot at. It takes a lot of effort to make a few things go. Contrary to belief, we are all one country. There are a lot of sacrifices made for the common bond.”

Preserved in the Library of Congress

The interviews will be catalogued by the Library of Congress’ Veterans History Project, a program that began in 2000.

“A constant in history is narrative,” Story said in explaining the purpose of his project. “I wanted to impart on my students the power of personal narrative, along with what our veterans have
done to make our lives better.”

Students began taping the interviews with veterans on Veterans Day, Nov. 11, and coincidentally concluded them on Dec. 7, the day the U.S. observes the 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor.

Many of the narratives are poignant accounts of war. Others were simply heartbreaking.

Earnest Ivy, an Army veteran of Vietnam and the 1991 Persian Gulf War, admitted in the documentary to suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

He broke down into tears when talking about a leave he took to see his wife while serving in Vietnam between 1968 and 1970.

“I met my wife in Hawaii,” said the member of VFW Post 4556 in Pocahontas, Ark. “But I had to go back.”

Don Stone, a Marine who served in Vietnam from 1966 to 1970, said people asked him how he adjusted when returning to the states.

“People said we changed,” Stone explains in the documentary. “We went in as kids. We were still the same when we came back.”

Instead, Stone, a member of VFW’s Department of Arkansas, said the country had changed. The assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy in 1968, police clashes with demonstrators the same year at the Democratic convention in Chicago and war protests around the country made America unrecognizable to some veterans.

“I think you had a hard time adjusting to us,” he said. “What you had when we left wasn’t the same as what we came back to. A lot of us left home and haven’t been back since.”

Inspired to Join the Military

One interview led to Joseph DeClerk, 70, of Pocahontas, Ark., regaining his lost medals that he had earned while serving in the Army in Vietnam from 1968 to 1970.

During his interview with DeClerk, student Marcus Jackson, 16, learned about how the veteran lost his Purple Heart and Bronze Star during moves over the years.

"I thought, 'I want to get his medals back,'" Jackson said. "The interview gave me a different perspective about veterans."

Jackson told Story about DeClerk's missing medals, and Story called Arkansas state representatives and military advisors for help. Within a few months, the teacher was able to get new medals for DeClerk, a member of VFW Post 4556.

Jackson presented them in April to DeClerk during a debut showing of the students' documentary at the Wings of Honor Museum in Walnut Ridge, Ark.

"I wasn't expecting that at all," DeClerk said. "I am impressed."

Jackson said the interview experience so moved him that he's decided to join the military after graduating Hillcrest High School in 2020.

Student Ally Martin said she learned stories that she had never heard before when she interviewed her grandfather.

Randall Gawf, an Army Specialist 4th class with the 589th Engineer Battalion in Vietnam, told her a harrowing tale of his last day in the war zone.

Gawf told his granddaughter he had already turned his weapon in that day and was at the Tan Son Nhut airport in Saigon waiting transport home when enemy troops began firing heavily on them.

"He said he jumped down and covered up and prayed he would come home," Martin said. "I thought about that and realized if he hadn't come home, I would not be here today."

'Keep Their Memories Alive'

In addition to preserving memories, the project also brought families closer together and bridged gaps between the teenagers and their subjects. Students realized that they are only a few years younger than the veterans were during their time in service, said Anita Deason, a retired Arkansas National Guard colonel who serves as the military and veterans affairs liaison for Sen. John Boozman (R-Ark.).

Deason said families tend to shy away from talking to relatives about their service, fearing it might trigger bad memories. Veterans, in turn, often think families are not interested in their stories. It creates a cycle of silence, she said.

Deason, who last served as a human resources officer in the military, said Story's project was "amazing."

"I've not seen anything more powerful," she said. "We have 16- and 17-yearold kids sitting at the feet of 70- and 80-year-old veterans and sharing stories. We are losing our veterans through
time. This is a way to keep their memories alive."

Mickayla Smith, 17, interviewed Bobby Bratcher, 55, of Walnut Ridge, Ark., an Air Force master sergeant. Bratcher, whom Smith knew from her church, served in both Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom.

"I got to know him better through this," she said. "I gained a lot of respect for him, learning what he went through and what he was willing to do for us."

Story said his project "exceeded his expectations." He will give copies of the documentary to the Wings of Honor Museum to sell.

"A lot of our kids suddenly became very aware of what generations before them have done," Story said. "It showed them what legacies really are."

This article is featured in the March 2020 VFW magazine, and was written by Ken Heard. Ken Heard is a former newspaper and television reports based in Jonesboro, Ark. He currently is the medi information director for the Craighead County (Ark..) Prosecuting Attorney's office.