

AUSTRALIAN  
WAR  
MEMORIAL

# GUIDE TO RECORDING ORAL HISTORIES BY AWM



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

SHA/65/0327/VN

# Introduction

This guide provides general advice for members of the public, about the conduct and technique for recording oral history interviews with past or current serving members of the Australian Defence Forces.

Oral histories can be a valuable resource for personal use, interest or reference. You may be undertaking a community heritage project, or perhaps you wish to interview a parent, friend or relative. You might be a retired veteran wishing to make a record of your recollections. Many people feel the need to record the experiences of others for posterity, either because the recollections tell an important story, or are rich in and of themselves.

The Memorial receives many nominations for oral history interview, and it is not possible to meet every request. The Memorial has created this guide as a way to help people to conduct interviews with veterans. It is intended to cover principles of ethical oral history practice, a subject for which further references can be found at the end of this guide, together with specific recommendations for interviewing war veterans.

This guide is based on the experience of Memorial staff, on advice from experienced historians and on expertise available from other sources such as the Oral History Association of Australia (OHAA) and in particular, Beth Robertson's guide to oral history, which is available through the OHAA. Robertson's book is cited at the end of this guide.

Please note that the Memorial cannot guarantee the acquisition of any recordings resulting from private interview projects. For more information on oral history interviewing, nominating someone for interview, or on donating a sound recording, please contact the Sound curator : [photofilmsound@awm.gov.au](mailto:photofilmsound@awm.gov.au).



# Contents

		Page
<b>What is an oral history interview</b>		3
<b>Advice for interviewers</b>		4
	Intentions of the interview	4
	Copyright in the interview	4
	Confidentiality	5
	Interviewer's Conduct	5
	Managing emotional responses	5
<b>Preparing for an interview</b>		6
	Framing the questions	7
	Sample questions	7
<b>Conducting an interview</b>		9
<b>Before the interview</b>		9
	Prepare the space	9
	Positioning of participants	10
	Documentation	10
	Before pressing record	10
<b>Beginning the interview</b>		10
<b>During the interview</b>		11
<b>Concluding the interview</b>		11
<b>After the interview</b>		12
<b>Identify your recording</b>	Templates for documenting the interview	13
<b>Technical Matters</b>		18
<b>Selecting a recording device</b>	Features to look for	18
<b>Format of the recording</b>		19
<b>Before recording</b>		20
<b>Microphones</b>		20
<b>Recording Process</b>		20
<b>Alternatives to interviewing</b>		21
<b>Further References</b>		22
	Oral history practice	22
	Oral history projects	22
	Support and advisory services	23
	Copyright & Technical information	24

# What is an oral history interview?

*The past never alters, but memory and history change all the time.*

-Alistair Thomson, **Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend**

An oral history occurs when an individual plans and records the spoken recollections of another individual. By recording an interview with that individual, you create a new historical record which can supplement existing records, such as official documents, written diaries, photographs, and the oral histories of other veterans. Through an oral history record, a version of the past is captured for the benefit of future generations, in a way which preserves the voices, accents and vocabularies of individuals interviewed.

Oral history is a method for obtaining information from different and personal perspectives, many of which cannot be found in written sources. In the context of military history, an oral history interview aims to elicit information about personal experiences and views relating to the conflict in which the interviewee was involved. It does not aim to obtain information which repeats the official history; rather, an interview will record a personal history, the perspective of conflict or war that is particular to that veteran, including attitudes, emotions and experiences. You should also find that through the discussion, aspects of the larger history will emerge. The interviewer has a greater chance of success if discussion points or direct questions are prepared in advance to elicit particular aspects of the interviewee's experience in active service. It is important to be clear from the outset about the purpose of the interview, and to research and prepare interview questions accordingly.

The content and nature of the interview will depend on whether the interviewer is well known or closely related to the interviewee, and what the purpose of the recording is. For example is it conducted as a family history record, or for research purposes? Is it anticipated that people outside the veteran's own acquaintance will hear it? The interview technique should be adapted to suit personal preferences and the purpose of the interview.

Oral histories with war veterans have been recorded for a variety of reasons and have an equally diverse range of applications to other contexts. These include historical and academic research, documentary film and radio, family history, museum exhibitions, websites, school projects and community history projects.

# Advice for interviewers

The best interviews are achieved when a sense of trust exists between the participants. This will help interviewees feel comfortable in relating a personal (rather than institutional) story. As an interviewer you have certain responsibilities towards your interviewees, including making your interviewees aware of their rights and how to protect them. Clear communication between yourself and the interviewee is crucial. It is therefore important to consider the following points and be prepared to address them:

## *Intentions*

Explain to the interviewee:

- the purpose of the interview
- who might be expected to use it
- where and how will it be stored
- advise how it might be used, especially if it may form part of a publication or production (such as a book or documentary film)
- advise how it will be recorded and documented, and whether it will be transcribed
- whether the interviewee can have a copy of the interview and transcript

## *Legalities*

The interviewees own copyright in the recording. This is a right that they hold in perpetuity. It means that in order for the recording to be reproduced or used in any way, you must first obtain the interviewee's permission to do so.

If you intend to use the whole or any part of the interview in a way that other people will hear it, you should create an agreement between yourself and the interviewee, to enable that to happen. The document should clearly state the following:

- The names and contact details of the interviewee and interviewer
- Location and date of interview
- The purpose of the interview, with regard to the way in which it will be used and reproduced by the interviewer
- The signature of the interviewee, giving permission for the interview to be recorded and released in the manner described. The interviewees should print and sign their names and date the agreement. This should be counter signed by the interviewer and a copy of the document provided to the interviewee. Both parties should understand that for any change in intended use of the interview, permission to use for that purpose must be renegotiated.

Remember that if the recording is published, i.e., broadcast, printed, or made public in some way, copyright in the recording will last for 70 years from the date of that publication or the death of the creator. For more information about copyright and releases refer to the resources in this guide.

If the interviewees don't mind how, where or when their interview is used, they can make a complete assignment of their copyright to you, but again this must be documented.

Ensure that the interviewees understand what they are signing and why. They are either licencing you to use the recording for the purpose specified, or, they are transferring their copyright to you. If it is within your budget or that of the project on which you are working, it would be a good idea to have legal assistance in devising a template for documenting copyright control.

### *Confidentiality*

Treat every interview as a confidential conversation until an interviewee gives the right to share information through the above specified agreement.

Explain that the interviewee has the right to ask for anonymity and/or to place restrictions on the use of the interview during his or her lifetime.

### *Conduct*

Undertake interviews with objectivity, honesty and integrity.

- Be aware of defamation laws and consider implications for all parties concerned, of recording potentially defamatory material.
- Ensure that interviewees are given the opportunity to review, correct and/or withdraw material.
- Ensure the interviewees understand that he or she should not feel obliged to answer any question which causes distress or compromises security classifications.
- Ensure the interviewees know they can call for a break or cessation of the interview at any time.

### *Emotional responses*

Oral history interviews can renew memories and generate strong emotions. As a result of recalling past events, the interviewees may experience degrees of stress, distress, grief, anxiety, or fatigue. You and your interviewee should be assured that this is completely normal.

- Ensure the interviewees understand they may take breaks from or cease the interview if necessary.
- As interviewer, you may feel yourself becoming emotionally involved in the story. It is wise to monitor your own reactions to the interviewee's story, and to allow for breaks if necessary.
- If you intend to conduct many interviews, it may be worth familiarising yourself with the literature which describes symptoms and measures for prevention of "compassion fatigue" and "vicarious trauma". For more information refer to the further references at the end of this guide.

### *Other considerations*

You may be planning to have the interview transcribed. This can be time consuming and expensive. However a transcript, particularly for long interviews, is an excellent reference tool for accessing the interview. Also consider offering the interviewees a chance to review the interview, either as a sound recording or in transcript form, and providing them with courtesy copies of the interview.

# Preparing an interview

It is a good idea to meet with the interviewee ahead of the scheduled interview, or at least become acquainted by phone, particularly if you have not met the interviewee before. This serves several purposes: it helps establish an acquaintance from which a sense of trust can be built; it allows you the opportunity to brief the veteran regarding the purpose and nature of the interview; and it allows you to research the topic and prepare your questions in conjunction with the interviewee.

The best interviews happen as a result of a collaborative approach. Research also helps ensure the relevance of the questions you ask, and importantly, it is encouraging for the interviewees if they perceive your understanding of the topics discussed. Keep a list of topics and prepared questions available during the interview. It may be useful to list the key points of the interviewees' career on a separate document to assist in the research, or ask them to fill a form like the one provided in this guide.

Providing the questions to the interviewee at least one week prior to the interview helps give more thoughtful responses in the interview, and allows for time to remember names of people and places to be mentioned. It will also help the interviewee have clear understanding of the purpose and nature of the interview.

Encourage the interviewee to search out and bring along photographs, diaries or other records of their service. These will assist in prompting recollections and may form part of the interview. You may wish to photograph or film these items for further reference during or after the interview.

When briefing the veteran, emphasise the interview's purpose, which is **not** to obtain a comprehensive or formal report of events, but to record a personal story which includes the recall of experiences and emotions. Not only will this help ensure a meaningful and valuable interview, but it can provide assurance to the veterans about the nature of the interview – that is, there should be no reason to feel anxious about being unable to recall precise dates, names or other details. Within the context of the interview, the only things that are “important” are the things that have stuck in their mind.

In the course of recalling these past events, the interviewee may experience strong feelings, especially if he or she has not previously shared these stories with anyone else. Do not show surprise or dismay if powerful emotions are expressed.

**Important:** As mentioned above, oral history interviews have the capacity to renew strong memories and emotions. Before beginning the interview:

- Plan a 'circuit breaking' activity to take place after the interview, such as a cup of coffee or a walk, with yourself or a close associate of the interviewee.
- Before commencing the interview, advise your interviewees that they can ask to stop the interview for any reason. Whether you are asked to or not, be prepared to pause the recording should signs of physical or emotional distress become apparent during interview.

## **Framing the questions**

Having a list of topics to cover, ready to hand, enables you to keep control of the interview. Plan to deal with what you identify to be the major topics of the interview. There will be about five major topics :

- pre-military upbringing and education;
- military training;
- operational experience;
- any extraordinary experiences;
- reflections/recollections.

Any of the topics may be disregarded if irrelevant to or inappropriate for the interviewee. They may also be adapted to suit non-military interviewees.

As the interview proceeds, other topics might be introduced by either the interviewee or interviewer. Interesting and/or controversial aspects of topics should be illustrated with examples where appropriate.

Put questions in clear concise terms, but avoid asking “closed” questions, that require a simple ‘yes/no’ answer. Ask the more general questions first, then follow specific leads.

When commencing the interview, follow a chronological line. Begin at the beginning - for example, by asking about their early life, or from the point where they first learned they were deploying. These are good points to start from because they establish that the story is a personal one (not a formal or official report), and it encourages the interviewee to recall feelings and personal memories.

## **Sample questions**

### *Pre-military life and experiences*

- Where and when you were born? Where did you grow up?
- Where and why you enlisted. What was your background prior to active service? (ask about education, work experience, training and personal experience or development for active service).

### *Early military life and experiences*

- What were your feelings upon learning of your imminent deployment?
- Tell me about your unit's training in preparation for deployment for operational service.
- What was your age on first entering the operational theatre?

### *Life and experiences on deployment*

- What were your initial reactions to service in the operational environment, (whether based in theatre, HQ or at the front/over the wire), including climatic adjustment, cultural differences, etc.
- What were the general living conditions experienced, including provision of meals and rations, hygiene/medical facilities, amenities, rest and recuperation, leave allowances. If you had any free time during deployment, how was it spent?
- Who did you serve with? For example, what services and/or nations they were from, and what previous/subsequent dealings you had with them.
- What characteristics of, and relations with, allied forces did you observe, and what was the nature of work undertaken with or alongside them.
- Did you communicate with friends and loved ones at home whilst deployed?
- If so how and how often? What was your perception of home life whilst away?
- Were your relationships affected by your absence and if so, how.
- What were command and control arrangements, for example how and by whom were orders conveyed and reports made?
- Operational organisation in which employed, including the unit role, dress, equipment, techniques etc.
- What was the political/strategic background? For example, what were the characteristics of the enemy forces – as individuals, or organisationally; describe their tactics, equipment and own observations.
- How did you feel about the performance of own organisation or team? For example with regard to capability, leadership, morale, discipline, personnel selection, training etc.
- Did you feel the training and preparation you had was appropriate and/or sufficient to the role and location?
- Did you or your friends sustain service - related injuries?
- If applicable, what was your prisoner of war experience – personal reactions, enemy treatment, living conditions, indoctrination, and release.
- If applicable and appropriate, how were the wounded handled, including evacuation procedure.
- Examine each of the significant operations experienced, with brief description, critical incidents and outline of results.
- Are any specific events/places memorable, and if so, why? Encourage anecdotes if their subject is within scope of the interview.

### *Life and experiences post deployment*

- Homecoming; Where did you return to, and to what reception?
- Family/friends; impact on family/friends of your service, both at the time and subsequently.
- Any aims or goals you had - how or whether they were achieved ?
- If applicable, discuss any official recognition of bravery and/or outstanding service.
- Did your personal perspective or belief system change during or following deployment?
- Discuss any other general recollections of interest, including “lessons learned”, contact with well-known identities, life decisions made as a result of active service.

- In closing, invite reflections on the past, and hopes or aspirations for the future. Questions may take the form of “what advice would you give others, or a younger self”, or “how would you have done things differently”.

## Conducting an interview

- In addition to research, some preparation is required. You should consider factors such as the physical space in which you will be interviewing, potential interruptions and ambient sounds, the physical and emotional comfort of your interviewee and yourself. Check that your equipment works and that you know when to break or interrupt the interview.

### **Before the interview**

#### *Preparing the space*

- Choose a quiet room, clear of other activities going on in the residence or building. Negotiate to have as few interruptions as possible. Third parties, including partners and children may be present to support the interviewee but need to remain quiet during the recording.
- Domestic ambient sounds, such as those of dishwashers, air conditioners, washing machines, refrigerators, ticking clocks, television and telephone, are distracting to both interviewee and interviewer, and affects the overall quality of the recording.
- Close windows and doors to reduce noises such as traffic, lawn mowers and children playing.
- Take the phone off the hook and ensure mobile devices are switched off.
- Avoid chewing, drinking, and moving items such as jewellery and papers close by the recorder. Sensitive microphones record the sounds, and so detract from the quality of the recording.
- Aim to use a carpeted room with soft furnishings. Rooms with shiny surfaces will create an echo or hollow sounding audio in the interview.
- Avoid outdoor interview locations if possible as traffic, aircraft, and birdlife are common sounds which intrude on the interview and can become very annoying to the listener. Microphones are also very sensitive to wind. Lapel microphones are recommended if interviewing in an external environment.

### *Positioning & Comfort*

- Use stable, high-backed chairs with sufficient comfort and support. Check that they do not squeak.
- Sit up well and within range of the microphone. In a couch there is tendency for people to lean back and fall out of range of the microphone. Moreover voice quality may also be affected as the diaphragm is more compressed.
- Position yourself, as interviewer, opposite the interviewee. Avoid leaning over a coffee table, which will become uncomfortable over time; a dining table is a better height.
- It is a good idea to have water glasses handy, especially for long interviews. Ensure any crockery or glassware is cushioned beneath (e.g. by a tablecloth or folded napkin) to muffle sounds of drinks being put down.
- It is also a good idea to have tissues handy should the interview lead to emotional memory recall for the interviewee.
- Have a sense of how long you estimate the interview to take. Plan with the interviewee to take breaks as necessary.

### *Supporting documentation*

Have your notes and a notepad in front of you. Interviews conducted with reference to maps, photo albums, letters or diaries are best videoed rather than recorded, but you can introduce items verbally and photograph them if necessary.

### *Before you record*

- Check the basic functions of your recording equipment, by making a test recording in the room you will interview in. This allows you to be sure the recorder is working, and that the sound levels are correct for the environment.
- Use mains power in preference to batteries. However, should it be necessary to use battery power, ensure you have a sufficient number of fully-charged batteries for your recording equipment. This may include both the recorder and the microphone(s). A fully-charged battery will normally give only four hours' recording time. Begin each interview with new batteries.
- Make time to have an informal "warm up" chat before commencing the interview.

## **Beginning the interview**

- After pressing record, clearly identify your recording by introducing yourself and the veteran by name, stating the date and location of the recording, and briefly mentioning the topics of the interview. If the interview is part of a project, include this information. You may like to use the template included in this guide.
- Allow time for both of you to warm up, particularly if you are not closely acquainted with your interviewee. Questions about his or her background, such as place of birth, place of enlistment and number of family, can assist in this as well as providing excellent contextual information for the interview.
- Ask background questions in chronological order. When you feel sufficient rapport has been established, you can begin to broach the more important or personally sensitive topics.

## During the interview

- Remember the interviewee is talking to you, so maintain eye contact. As the interview continues you can react more with your eyes and face.
- *Interjections such as “yes”, “hmmm” etc., are to be avoided if possible.* They are impossible to remove from the recording, and will impair listener’s appreciation and use of the interview.
- Use body language and facial expression to indicate supportive and engaged listening. *Give a second’s pause between completion of the interviewee’s comment and your response or following question.*
- Try not to cut off an answer as it can be perceived as discourteous, as well as detrimental to the flow of the interview. It would only be necessary if a subject is unusually garrulous and the content is irrelevant to your purpose. Moreover, much important material can arise during what seems to be digressive discussion.
- If the interviewee uses military terms and acronyms whose meaning is not obvious, you may wish to ask for definitions of those terms. Use your judgement as to whether or not to ask during the course of interview or afterwards, so as not to interrupt the flow of the interview. These terms can be explained in the transcript or within documentation that accompanies the interview.

## Concluding the interview

- Plan where and how you will draw the interview to a close; know ahead of time what you will say as a conclusion to mark the impending close the interview. For example, “I’ve reached the end of my questions. But is there anything I haven’t asked you, that you would like to add?” or, “What advice would you give to your family/to others who have had similar experiences?” “What would you do differently, or what gave you the greatest sense of satisfaction?”
- Always “rewind” the last few seconds and play it back. If there is something on the recorder at that point then the chances are that the rest of the interview is also there. If you are unhappy about any parts of the interview ask the interviewee to tell it again. It is far better to do it there and then than to have to come back another day.
- Ensure any paperwork required for signature is checked.
- Remember to thank the interviewee for their participation.
- Note that many people, even when emotionally affected by their interview, are quite often stimulated by the experience. It is courteous to chat informally for a time, before parting company. It is important to demonstrate that the veteran’s interview has been worthwhile and meaningful, as this provides the veteran with a sense of recognition and affirmation.

## After the Interview

- If appropriate to your purpose, take a photograph of the interviewee in situ. This contextualises the interview and rounds out the recording experience, as well as offering potential use within a digital story telling project if desired.
- Back up your recording keep copies in at least two different places.
- If you are able to, provide copies of the interview to the interviewee. He or she may like additional copies for their family / friends. Be sure to name the file accurately, i.e., with the interviewee's name and the date of the interview, or if using cassettes, to label the tapes accurately and clearly with ink pen.
- Provide copies of signed release or copyright forms to the interviewee. Refer to the example form in this guide.
- If the interview is being transcribed, you may like to offer the interviewee an opportunity to review the transcript. The interviewee should not be encouraged to use the opportunity to edit and change large parts of the transcript, however it is a means by which the transcript can be proofed for error or omissions, as where a spoken word were too faint for the transcriber to hear. It may also help form the basis for a trusting working relationship between interviewer and interviewee.

If you are conducting a series of interviews, you should consider keeping an interview log. This will form an index of the work and be of invaluable assistance during current or future research. The log should list the following details for each interview: full name of interviewee, date of interview, length of interview, key topics discussed.

# Interviewee biographical details : template

SURNAME (block letters) \_\_\_\_\_

MAIDEN NAME (if applicable) \_\_\_\_\_

GIVEN NAMES (in full) \_\_\_\_\_

TITLE \_\_\_\_\_

DEGREES, DECORATIONS, OTHER AWARDS \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

TELEPHONE # \_\_\_\_\_ MOBILE PHONE # \_\_\_\_\_

EMAIL ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

DATE OF BIRTH \_\_\_\_\_ PLACE OF BIRTH \_\_\_\_\_

SERVICE/PM KEYS NUMBER

\_\_\_\_\_

HIGHEST RANK OR RELEVANT POSITION HELD \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

OVERALL DATES OF SERVICE OR RELEVANT EXPERIENCE

FROM: \_\_\_\_\_

TO: \_\_\_\_\_

DETAILS OF SERVICE OR RELEVANT EXPERIENCE

## Note

The section overleaf provides for a summary of your relevant experience.

The space below may be used for any additional information which you think would be of assistance to the interviewer.

## Career Record : Template

Please provide these details as completely as possible.  
Please don't use abbreviations.

<b>Dates</b>	<b>Unit, ship or squadron(if appropriate)</b>	<b>Station, theatre or Place</b>	<b>Rank, Position or Occupation</b>	<b>Duties (include routine or special relevant activities)</b>

## Identify your Recording: template

This is a template for the introduction to an oral history interview. Fill in the gaps and read aloud at the commencement of the recording.

This is an interview with.....

(interviewee)

It is conducted by.....

(interviewer)

on ..... at .....

(date) (recording location, e.g. Bankstown, Sydney )

The topics covered are the experiences of .....

(rank/name)

as ..... of .....

(appointment)

(unit)

in ..... in .....

(location)

(date range)

*Continue .....*

*Interviewer to format a brief biographical note, as presented below, and read it following the above.*

..... was born in .....

(name)

(place)

on ..... He/she was educated at .....

(date)

(last educational institution prior to military service)

His/her significant postings were .....

.....

.....

.....

Service medals/awards include .....

Employment status (retired, employed) .....

## Example

*'This is an interview with Vice Admiral Sir Richard Innes Peek KBE CB DSC RN (Rtd). It is conducted by Lieutenant Commander Tony Hughes RANR on Wednesday 2 April 2003 at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra. The topics covered are mainly the views and experience of Vice Admiral Peek as Commanding Officer of HMAS Tobruk in the Malayan Emergency during 1956.*

*'Vice Admiral Sir Richard Peek had a distinguished career which included service during the Second World War in HMS Revenge, HMAS Hobart, and HMAS Australia. He was awarded the OBE and the DSC for operations in Philippine waters. In the Korea War he was Commanding Officer of HMAS Tobruk and was awarded the US Legion of Merit, and in the Malayan Emergency he again commanded HMAS Tobruk. His later appointments included Commanding Officer of HMAS Sydney and of the aircraft carrier HMAS Melbourne, and as a Flag Officer, the 4th Naval Member of the Australian Naval Board, the Deputy Chief of Naval Staff (DCNS) Flag Officer Commanding the Australian Fleet (FOCAF) Second Naval Member of the Australian Naval Board, and finally, Chief of Naval Staff (CNS). Vice Admiral Peek retired in 1973.'*

# Release Forms

A release form is an instrument that acts to regulate any legal liability between the “releasor” - in this case, the interviewee - and the “releasee” – the interviewer. A release form provides some protection to the interviewer in the event of a legal action, should the interviewee or their successors later object to the interview being used in a way stated on the form. Such forms are routinely used by photographers, film makers, broadcast radio producers and the like.

The release form documents the mutual understanding of the interviewee’s consent for the interview to be used by the interviewer in the manner stated. The interviewee should therefore be encouraged to seek clarification of any details on the release form which cause concern or confusion, and a copy of the signed form provided to them.

The form should:

- include the name and contact details of interviewee and interviewer
- the purpose for which the interview was recorded
- the conditions under which the interview may be used, accessed or referred to
- the long term storage location of the recording (for example, if there is any possibility of the interview being offered to a public institution such as a library or museum)

The likelihood of an institution’s acceptance of the recording is increased, if it is accompanied by a clearly worded and signed document which states the interviewee’s wishes.

An unconditional release would contain wording similar to this :

*By signing this release form, I [interviewee name] authorise [interviewer’s name/organisation name], to use the following personal information, consisting of sound and/or video recording. I hereby grant to [insert interviewer name] and successors or licensees the right to use, publish and reproduce for [specify purpose] my name and voice/image recording in any or all media without limitation [or specify conditions] and/or offer as a donation to [insert organisation name].*

# Technical Matters

Analogue (reel to reel, cassette and micro cassette) is now a redundant recording format. Electronic companies have almost entirely ceased to manufacture analogue equipment and some have already withdrawn maintenance support.

## Selecting a recording device

Use of a good quality digital recorder is recommended to ensure the best quality of audio interview. This is an essential requirement for recordings which are need to survive indefinitely, or simply to be able to listen to them again years from now.

If you do not wish to buy a recorder, and cannot borrow one (try your local library or historical society), you can hire one from a transcription service company. You may have to hire a microphone separately.

Features of a good recorder include :

### *Ease of use*

A device which causes you frustration or anxiety will not make for a good interview experience. Have a look at the user manual online if possible – if it doesn't make sense to you, perhaps you shouldn't use it. Inspect a model in person if you can, and ascertain the following features: Can you easily depress buttons or manipulate controls? Does the device clearly have *Record*, *Stop* and *Play* buttons on its face? Is there a wheel, or buttons, to adjust the record volume? Are the read-outs legible, and do the menus progress logically?

### *Price point*

A good recorder need not be excessively dear, and it is worth remembering that sale prices of such devices can be negotiated. At the basic end of the market there are some good recorders that are great value for the quality they provide, for example:

*Zoom H1 Palmtop Recorder* - retails for around \$150 and is probably the lowest priced model with capacity for capturing an acceptable quality of audio.

*Zoom H4N Handy Recorder* - retails at around \$280. This model is recommended for its demonstrated robustness and quality.

When it comes to audio budget is important but always try to buy the best you can afford! Cheapest is never the best and very generally, the more money you spend the more quality you will be buying into, simple as that!

Other recommended models are Tascam DR-40, Tascam DR-05, as well as other models by Marantz, Roland, Yamaha, Sony of varying prices right up to the highly recommended "Sound Devices" brand 702 field recorder (but at a cost of \$2500 is perhaps only for organisations which can justify the money for this kind of quality).

### *Records in archival format*

The device must be able to record in a format suitable for long term storage. The Memorial uses the “**Wav**” file format for high quality, long term digital storage. *Wav* files are uncompressed, will provide good sound quality, and have the greatest flexibility for multi-purposing – they can be played back on the widest variety of equipment. A *Wav* file at 16bit 44.1 kHz is equivalent in quality to a compact disc. Playback of audio recorded at this quality will clearly demonstrate its clarity and audibility. Please note that the Mp3 format is **not** considered suitable for capturing original sound, as it is highly compressed, unstable, and not suitable for archival preservation.

### *Interconnectivity*

Ease of retrieval and back up of the recordings, is an important consideration.

Most devices on the market should be able to connect directly to your computer via USB, so you can upload (and save copies of) your recordings. This is also important if you plan to be able to edit the recordings and/or upload to online platforms, websites etc.

### *Good memory*

A *Wav* file at 16bit 44.1 kHz, which is the lowest recommended recording quality, will take up about 1GB for about an hour and a half of recording. However it is HIGHLY recommended to record at 24 bit 96 khz or 24 bit 48 khz. These higher rates will record audio more realistically and provide improved dynamic range. A *wav* file at 24bt 96 khz will use 2 GB per hour of recording. Therefore a device with large memory capacity is recommended; you don't want to have to worry about running out of storage space in the middle of an interview. Models that use flash card, SD or even micro SD are a good option, as you can then buy bigger or multiple cards to make ensure you are not caught short.

Most recorders average about 2GB of memory, i.e., three hours recording at 16bit 44.1 kHz. Note that 16bit is the lowest acceptable standard for archival storage at the Memorial.

### *Microphone*

Use a good quality microphone to ensure the best possible result.

Some recorders (ones under \$150) will have very poor inbuilt microphones. Look for a **pair** of visible microphones attached to the front of the device as opposed to microphones hidden within a small hole in the device. Good recorders record good sound with high fidelity and resolution, and bona fide microphones are a main contributor to this.

Playback of audio recorded at this quality will clearly demonstrate its clarity and audibility. This is an essential requirement for recordings which are need to survive indefinitely, or simply to be able to listen to them again years from now.

## **Format of the recording**

By using a good quality digital recorder the interview can be recorded at the optimum format: as a **.Wav** file.

The Memorial archival standard is 24bit 96kHz.

The lowest acceptable standard is 16bit 44.1kHz (CD quality audio)

MP3s are very compressed, unstable files and are not suitable for archival preservation.

## **Before you record**

Check the basic functions of your recording equipment. Use mains power in preference to batteries. However, should it be necessary to use battery power, ensure you have a sufficient number of fully-charged batteries for your recording equipment. This can include both the recorder and the microphone(s). A fully-charged battery will normally give only four hours' recording time (approximately the length of one interview). Begin each interview with new batteries.

If using a tape recorder, and the recorder is standing directly on the same surface as the microphone, place a cloth or magazine beneath it. This will prevent mechanical noises being transmitted to the microphone.

## **The microphone**

Position static microphones on a table or other stable surface, ideally with equal distance between it and each interviewee. Microphones on stands should be angled up to chin level, not at eye level.

If using clip-on or lapel microphones, position within 15cm, and slightly to one side, of the mouth.

## **The recording process**

Do a sound check - test your identification message by playing it back.  
It is a good idea to try this in the interviewing room as recording conditions can vary.

## **Transcription**

There are many commercial transcription companies in Australia, some of whom can provide on line quotes for transcription jobs. Costs will vary according to:

- The quality of the recording, i.e., will the transcriber have trouble hearing the interview.
- Content of the recording, i.e., if a speaker is heavily accented, or uses uncommon words, jargon or pronunciations
- The length of the recording. Generally a professional transcriber requires three to four hours' time to transcribe one hour of recorded interview
- The type of transcription required. For example, a strict verbatim transcription, capturing every pause, every "um" or other incidental remark, will be more expensive than a "standard" transcription which omits pauses, emphasis, laughter or repetition. Therefore, the type of transcription you choose will depend on the purpose of the interview.

You may wish to transcribe the interview yourself, and there are many software and equipment packages on the open market available to assist in this. Simply use an online search engine to look for "transcription software" or "transcription services".

The use of voice recognition software (known also as "transcription software"), is another option for transcription.

This software should negate the need for a human transcriber, however especial attention should be paid to the proof reading of the resulting transcript. An alternative method for creating a written finding aid for the recording is to create a “timed summary” , which provides a time stamp at regular intervals alongside a summary of the interview for that minute.

## Alternatives

If you have a story that is important to record for posterity, you may not have to do it all yourself. Other avenues of assistance include :

- Your local historical, or family history, society. There are many such organisations throughout Australia, usually staffed by volunteers with tips and maybe resources which could be of help to you. They may even be able to conduct the interview, or be interested in archiving it.

- Many libraries have oral history programs and it may be worthwhile approaching your state or local library for advice. Town Councils and municipal archive centres also sometimes record or collect oral histories of their local residents.

- Contact your local community radio station and find out if they are interested in interviewing your nominated interviewee. Or maybe you can book one of their recording studios to conduct the interview.

- Consider letting your local paper and/or radio station know about the story. Media people are always on the look-out for interesting stories; this is particularly true in the lead up to Anzac and Remembrance Days.

- Consider hiring a professional oral historian, storyteller or film maker to conduct the interview; many businesses offer this service. Look for them online using keywords such as oral historian, life history, life story, personal histories, digital storytelling, or look in online locations like these :

Oral History Association’s registry of practicing oral historians  
<http://www.ohaa-wa.com.au/registry-of-practising-oral-historians/>

Digital Storytellers <http://digitalstorytellers.com.au/>  
a collective of professional storytellers who can utilize filmmaking, web design, crowdsourcing and social media to assist their clients to tell stories and portray them to a wider audience.

The Dulwich Centre <http://www.dulwichcentre.com.au/>  
An Adelaide based, independent centre dedicated to supporting and training practitioners of narrative therapy in association with therapy and community work.

## Further references

The following material is general in nature. Before relying on the material in any important matter, users should carefully evaluate its accuracy, currency, completeness and relevance for their purposes. Links to other websites are inserted for convenience and do not constitute endorsement of material at those sites, or any associated organisation, product or service.

### Oral history practice

A number of publications provide useful "How To" information for those wanting to apply oral recording methods in Australia. These include:

- Interviewing for Oral History at the National Library of Australia: A Short Guide*, Alec Bolton, Canberra, National Library of Australia, 1994.
- Oral History: A Handbook*, Louise Douglas et al, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1988.
- Oral History: How to Interview*, Ronda Jamieson, Perth, WA Lib Board, 1988.
- Talking Together – a Guide to Community Oral History Projects*, Lesley Jenkins. Oral History Association of Australia, Queensland 1999.
- Capturing the Past: an oral history workshop*, by Stuart Reid (20-minute DVD). Oral History Association of WA, 1998.
- Oral History Handbook*, Beth Robertson, Adelaide, OHAA, 1994.
- Guidelines for audio and audiovisual recording in the South Pacific*, Edgar Waters, Canberra, National Library of Australia, 1995.
- Recording Oral History : A guide for humanities and social sciences*, Second edition, Valerie Raleigh Yow. Alta Mira Press, 2005. Also available as a free online publication : <http://granturi.ubbcluj.ro/tlnistorie/pdf/Recording%20Oral%20History.pdf>
- The Oral History Australia Journal* – a journal by the Oral History Association of Australia: <http://www.oralhistoryaustralia.org.au/page/publications.html>
- The Oral History Review* (US publication) – a journal by the Oral History Association: [http://www.oxfordjournals.org/our\\_journals/ohr/about.html](http://www.oxfordjournals.org/our_journals/ohr/about.html)

The OHA has branches in NSW, SA& NT, QLD and WA. See also the website of the Oral History Association of Australia for more information, links to other resources, and scheduled oral history workshops: <http://www.oralhistoryaustralia.org.au/>

Other sites which may be of assistance or interest :

Australian Family History Compendium (a free online resource for family history researchers) <http://www.cohsoft.com.au/afhc/#isps>

The Australian Historical Association  
<http://www.theaha.org.au/>

Examples of existing large scale oral history projects are:

The Department of Veterans' Affairs website of filmed interviews with veterans : <http://www.australiansatwarfilmarchive.gov.au/aawfa/>

The Library of Congress' Veterans History Project  
[www.loc.gov/vets](http://www.loc.gov/vets)

Monash University's *The Australian Generations Project* :

<http://artsonline.monash.edu.au/australian-generations/>

National Library of Australia's *Bringing Them Home* oral history project:

<http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/133365/20120410-1246/www.nla.gov.au/oh/bth/index.html>

## **Advisory services for current and former military personnel and their supporters**

Please note the Memorial administers an oral history program and does not handle veterans' official service records, benefits or health care. Please refer to the following resources if you or a veteran you know need assistance.

Defence Care <http://www.defencecare.org.au/>

Lifeline : call 13 11 14

Mates 4 Mates <http://mates4mates.org/>

The Military Brotherhood <http://www.militarybrotherhood.com.au/>

Picking up the Peaces <http://www.pickingupthepeaces.org.au/>

Soldier On <http://soldieron.org.au/>

The White Cloud Foundation <http://www.whitecloudfoundation.org/>

Vietnam Veterans Counselling Service <http://www.vvcs.gov.au/>

Women Veterans Network Australia <https://wvna.org.au>

## **Further information on vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue**

Department of Defence Self Help information sheet

[http://www.defence.gov.au/health/DMH/SelfHelp/Documents/FS\\_Vicarious\\_Trauma.pdf](http://www.defence.gov.au/health/DMH/SelfHelp/Documents/FS_Vicarious_Trauma.pdf)

State Government of NSW Self Care information sheet

[http://www.community.nsw.gov.au/docs\\_menu/for\\_agencies\\_that\\_work\\_with\\_us/home\\_training/shs\\_training/self\\_care\\_tool\\_kit.html](http://www.community.nsw.gov.au/docs_menu/for_agencies_that_work_with_us/home_training/shs_training/self_care_tool_kit.html)

*Transforming the Pain : a workbook on vicarious traumatization.* Saakvitne, Pearlman & Staff of TSI/CAAP, Norton 1996.

## Copyright advice

See Australia's *Copyright Council* for advice on managing and observing copyright.

<http://www.copyright.org.au/>

The Attorney General's Department

<http://www.ag.gov.au/RightsAndProtections/IntellectualProperty/Pages/default.aspx>

## Technical information

Technical advice for oral historians (purchasing equipment, FAQ and more)

<http://www.oralhistorynsw.org.au/technical-advice-for-oral-historians.html>

Oral history in the digital age – a guide to selecting and using digital equipment

<http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/>

The Oral Historian's Digital Toolbox

<http://storytelling.concordia.ca/oralhistorianstoolbox/>

Equipment - a guide to recording oral history, Ministry for Culture and Heritage

<http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/hands/equipment-a-guide-to-recording-oral-history>

Videos about common digital audio recorders, a digital audio calculator and a tutorial on achieving optimal recording levels. By the Louis B Nunn Centre for Oral History.

[http://www.uky.edu/Libraries/libpage.php?lweb\\_id=11&llib\\_id=13&ltab\\_id=1369](http://www.uky.edu/Libraries/libpage.php?lweb_id=11&llib_id=13&ltab_id=1369)

Using optical disks - CDs/DVDs - National Library of Australia

<http://www.nla.gov.au/padi/topics/53.html>

"Risks Associated with the Use of Recordable CDs and DVDs as Reliable Storage Media in Archival Collections : Strategies and Alternatives" by Kevin Bradley, National Library Australia.

<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001477/147782E.pdf>

A free online guide to digital recording, by the Florida Electronic Library.

<http://www.fcla.edu/FloridaVoices/RecordingDigitally.shtml>

Advice about recording with some models of digital recorder

[http://www.vermontfolklifecenter.org/archive/res\\_audioequip.htm](http://www.vermontfolklifecenter.org/archive/res_audioequip.htm) (last updated 2012)

Advice on the care and preservation of personal audio visual collections

<http://nfsa.gov.au/preservation/care/>

Resources for digital storytelling

<http://www.umbc.edu/oit/newmedia/studio/digitalstories/resources.php>

**Cover image :** SHA/65/0327/VN Binh Tuy Province, Vietnam, December 1965. An unidentified soldier uses microphone and tape recorder to record a Christmas message which could be heard back in Australia on Christmas Day. Photographer : Michael Barry Shannon. Copyright Australian War Memorial.