

The Importance of Oral Interviews

Interviews preserve the perspective of the individual. The purpose of oral history, therefore, is to interview individuals in order to capture and preserve their spoken perspectives, judgments, and recollections. As explained in Army Regulation (AR) 870-5, Military History: Responsibilities, Policies, and Procedures, oral history activities "are conducted to obtain historical information that may not otherwise be recorded."

Interviews supplement the written record, which all too often slights the role of individuals in important decisions and events and generally omits the detailed information that nonparticipants require in order to understand what happened and why. Command reports, press conferences, and memoirs of senior officers, for example, while useful in providing a high-level perspective, cannot adequately portray the commander. Nor can PowerPoint briefings, information papers, and press releases adequately chronicle the complexities and nuances inherent in senior leader decision-making-particularly in this period of sweeping change for the Army. Interviews help elucidate the background of important events and place decisions in context. Interviews that explain, for example, how previous Army Staff and Secretariat principals dealt with problems and issues also can provide insights for current and future Army leaders confronting similar challenges.

It is important to note that "oral history" and "interview" are not synonymous. An interview is the recording of an individual's words in response to the questions of the historian. The interview, in whatever form it is recorded, constitutes an official record and must be treated (and preserved) as such. The "oral history" is a collaborative venture that reflects the twin efforts of the interviewer and interviewee to create a unique historical source through reviewing and editing the transcript of the interview. An unedited transcript of an interview is neither an oral history nor a substitute, from the perspective of Army records management, for the original recording.

Like all historical sources, oral history has inherent strengths and weaknesses. The greatest strength of oral history is its ability to capture and preserve information that may not otherwise be saved, particularly personal perspectives and anecdotes that will not be found in official records. The weaknesses of oral history are often overstated and usually attributable to human failings-that is, shortcomings on the part of either practitioners or users. All historical sources-from command reports to after-action reviews (AARs) and unit records-contain biases and shortcomings. Interviews will reflect personal biases: interviewees may be unwilling to address directly controversial issues or mistakes and errors they made, while the passage of time may render the interviewee's memory suspect on points of fact. (Evidence of personal bias or touchiness on a particular topic, it should be noted, may prove useful information at a later date.) Any interview can produce useful historical information. It is the task of the oral historian to discover and record that information; it is the responsibility of the historian who later uses that information to determine its significance.