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# Oral History at the Canadian War Museum

Angus Brown

One little-known resource that the Canadian War Museum (CWM) offers to researchers is the oral history collection. Now approaching 400 interviews, the oral history collection has been slowly building over the past seven years.

This ongoing program began in 1999. The CWM has long been interested in establishing such a program, but never had the staff resources necessary for such a time-intensive undertaking. But the Friends of the Canadian War Museum were looking for more ways to contribute their expertise than simply raising money for the construction of a new building. The Director of Programs of the Friends at the time suggested a series of interviews with Friends, many of whom were veterans of the Second World War, and some of whom had more recent operational experience. With the museum's historical staff supporting the concept, an initial donation from the Chawkers Foundation enabled the program to be born.

Dr. Serge Durlinger of the CWM's historical staff, who had had experience with oral history in his own research work, provided initial guidance as to the techniques and procedures used in the program. A survey of existing oral history programs in Canada and abroad revealed that they varied widely, both in purpose and in execution. Some were tailored to the needs of specific institutions, historical time frames, or special interest groups. Quality of product ranged from excellent to poor, and there was a mix of audio and video. Some had been published in book form and others as audio-visual products.



As in all good military operations and scholarly projects, it was necessary to be clear about the aim. For the CWM program, this was to document the Canadian military experience in the words of the participants. The three uses of the interviews would be:

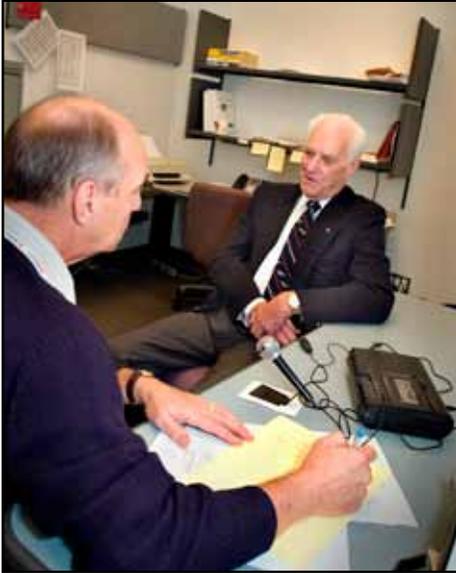
A serious research collection;

A resource for future museum displays and exhibits;

A source of material for outreach and educational programs conducted by the Museum.

The first use, building a serious research collection, determined the standard of the interviews. Many oral history programs are what might be termed "commemorative" in nature. While preserving military stories is a laudable goal in itself, these types of programs are often unfocussed and highly anecdotal in character. A serious research collection needed to be historically based and, to be useful to future researchers, needed to delve deeper into the related experiences to allow for eventual analysis.

To accomplish this, a series of topic lists were devised for use in the interviews. These include a number of suggested points to guide the interview in certain areas of interest. The topics are framed, as much as possible to allow for depth of discussion and to be free of bias. By using these guides for the interview, a certain commonality among interviews is introduced that will allow future historians to do some comparative study in various areas such as deployment training, technology, tactics, organization, and doctrine. Interviews are approximately 90 minutes long, depending upon the subject and interviewer.



Photograph by Marie-Louise Deruaz, CMCC

An interview in progress. LGen Ken Thorneycroft, former Deputy Commander in Chief of NORAD, responds to a question from Angus Brown, for the CWM's oral history archive, 25 October 2006.

The topic lists are only road maps, however, and interviewers are free to suggest other points to cover in the interview. But long, rambling, wide-ranging, anecdotal or "life experience" interviews are avoided in favour of focussed interviews that deal with one specific area of interest in detail.

As important as anything else, the quality of the interviewers had to be high. Interviewers had to have credibility and a depth of knowledge, often equal or superior to that of the narrator, in order to dig deeply and extract details that many interviewees would either not mention or take for granted that a listener knew. This ability to prod, to challenge (diplomatically), and to ask "the next question" was found in a number of ex-military officers, most of them Friends, who were staff-qualified or who had experience in a broad range of military fields at home and abroad. Often they possessed history or other degrees at the baccalaureate or advanced level. In later years, some member of the Museum's historical staff joined these interviewers and conducted interviews for their own research or exhibit purposes.

The first year was a success, so much so that the museum incorporated the Oral History Program into its budget for successive years. The

number of interviews was set at 50 each year and this has been met, and sometimes exceeded, each year subsequently.

It soon became obvious, however, that the Second World War, while extremely important, was receiving a great deal of coverage in other formats, such as biographies, autobiographies, commemorative oral history programs, and general historical writing. At the same time, little work was being done, relatively speaking, on the military experience of the post-war era, while people who had participated in the operations of this era were now growing older. Consequently, the focus of the program gradually shifted to emphasize this later era.

Each year, the Program Director suggests to the CWM's Head of Historical Research and Exhibition Development the general areas of interest for the forthcoming year. Discussions ensue about forthcoming displays and exhibits, or any areas in which the Museum may need more material. This is balanced against the feasibility of finding and arranging interviews. The budget is considered and all the factors result in a general work plan which is then translated into an actual interview schedule. The Director solicits interviewees and recruits interviewers and transcribers.

All interviewers are volunteers. Most are Friends of the Canadian War Museum and are reimbursed only for expenses such as gasoline incurred when doing the interviews. Recorders, mikes, and tapes are supplied by the museum. Transcribers are paid a stipend for their work. For the most part, these are women who have left the work force temporarily for family reasons, but who still want to stay active. Many have little or no military background and find the whole process an interesting learning experience.

Each participant in the program fills out a biographical data sheet that is on file at the CWM. After the interview, the interviewer completes a synopsis sheet that records the tombstone data of the narrator and highlights the points of general or special interest on the tape. Interviewers compile keywords for computerized archive cataloguing and a tape counter log on the sheet to allow future researchers to quickly scan and assess each interview.

As the program began, it quickly became apparent that focus and concentration would pay greater dividends to the program than a shotgun approach. Grouping similar interviews maximized the research time of the interviewers and resulted in more complete interviews. A series of interviews about the same time frame, operation, or theme, resulted in a more comprehensive collection that can be used for comparative research in future. This has been done with various projects.

Over the years, a number of interviews were grouped into specific areas of interest. Almost 20 interviews were done with people who served in UNEF (United Nations Emergency Force – Egypt) in 1956-67. The same was done with 4 Canadian Brigade in NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization); one series concentrated upon the brigade in the north of Germany, and the other on the brigade in the south at Lahr and Baden. Another set of interviews dealt with post-war carrier aviation and covered all rank levels, including pilots, sailors, carrier commanding officers, maritime and aviation engineers, crewmen who operated the catapult, and even the chaplain. This was followed the next year with a project that traced the experiences of helicopter destroyer operations and the problems of flying big helicopters from small ships in the North Atlantic. Air Force pilot training was examined by way of interviews with students and instructors who had experienced the transition from propeller to *ab initio* jet training. Airborne Intercept Navigators were interviewed about their training and employment on CF-100 and CF-101 interceptors in both the NATO and NORAD (North American Aerospace Defense Command) roles.

More recent operations have also received attention. This includes the Balkans, various other smaller peacekeeping missions, Somalia and Afghanistan, all of which are still ongoing. Another more recent variation has centred upon senior Canadian officers in positions of multinational command and staff positions. Almost all former Canadian STANAVFORLANT (Standing Naval Force Atlantic) commanders have been interviewed about their period in command and their views of the world situation at the time. This year, seven former Deputy Commanders-in-Chief of NORAD will be recorded.

Photograph by Marie-Louise Deruaz, CMCC



Angus Brown shows Cameron Pulsifer one of the tapes from the collection of oral interviews in the CWM's Military History Research Centre's archives. The tapes are also digitized onto CD-ROM.

One type of interview project remains constant each year. This is the "Opportunity" project. A certain number of interview slots are set aside annually for interviews that arise from short notice requirements of the staff, from topical subjects, and from "walk-in business." The last category is normally developed as a result of a visit by someone to the Museum. Although Second World War interviews are fewer these days, some first-hand accounts were too good to miss. As an example, one visitor mentioned that he had been the pilot of Spitfire 8332 hanging on display in the museum. Further, he had his log book describing how he had crash-landed the aircraft in England after a dogfight over the Channel. Another pointed out that he had been a squadron mate of Lieutenant Hampton Gray, VC. A visit by two Ottawa men revealed that one had been a wartime tank squadron commander in the Governor General's Foot Guards and the other had been the driver of FORCEFUL II, the Sherman tank on display in the galleries. Needless to say, they all were interviewed despite our more modern focus.

To improve the visibility of the collection and to gain access to a wide field of interviewees, the Museum has collaborated with other agencies. Transcripts of many of the naval interviews, for instance, were made available to the Directorate of History and Heritage official naval history writing team for their work. Some have found

their way to a joint US-Canadian navy historical project. In anticipation of future volumes of the Engineer Branch history, interviews are now being collected with senior and mid-level officers who either deployed on various operations or were instrumental in making Engineer Branch policy and organizational changes over the years.

After reviewing the program, at least two other military oral history programs in the country copied the Canadian War Museum's philosophy and adopted the CWM formats in their entirety for their own purposes. In addition, a brief on the program was delivered at the Canadian Oral History conference in Winnipeg in 2005 and was the subject of a major article in the latest Canadian Oral History Association journal, *FORUM*.<sup>1</sup> The Program Director has addressed a number of other associations and interested groups in Canada and the US over the past two years.

Researchers can access the general collection by using the computerized search engine available through the War Museum web site <[www.warmuseum.ca](http://www.warmuseum.ca)>. Some of the more recent interviews are not yet entered into the catalogue. Synopsis sheets and transcripts are all in electronic format but audio is not yet computerized.

In summation, the oral history program represents an important and growing component

of the rich resources available at the Canadian War Museum for documenting and comprehending Canada's military history. The Friends of the Canadian War Museum are proud of the integral role they have played in this program and look forward to carrying it on into the future. Queries should be addressed to the Military History Research Centre at the War Museum.

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### Notes

1. Angus Brown, "The Oral History Program of the Canadian War Museum," *FORUM*, Vol. 26, 2006, pp.11-40.

Angus Brown retired after 35 years of service in the Armoured Corps. He is the Director of the Oral history program at the CWM and the co-author of the recently-published book *In the Footsteps of the Canadian Corps*.