

HISTORY



Marine Corps veteran Tom Teela said he became “pretty good friends” with Rishi Sharma after being interviewed.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF RISHI SHARMA

A HEROES' HISTORIAN

Rishi Sharma, 18, wants to capture as many World War II stories as he can — while veterans are still alive to tell them

By Matt Alderton

RISHI SHARMA IS NOT a typical teenage boy. Instead of social media, supermodels and sports cars, the real estate in his young mind belongs almost exclusively to history — specifically, to World War II. Instead of comic books about fictional heroes like Superman, he grew up reading history books about real ones like Gen. George S. Patton. Instead of cartoons, he voraciously watched documentaries about Hiroshima and the Holocaust. And his favorite film isn't *Deadpool* or *Mad Max: Fury Road*; it's *Saving Private Ryan*.

It's not just the war that captivates Sharma, it's the Americans who more than

CONTINUED »



Rishi Sharma, right, poses with Arnold Seretan, who fought in the Battle of Saipan in July 1944. “Hell broke loose. Gunfire was coming from everywhere,” he said.

HISTORY

70 years ago helped Allied forces win it.

"I've always been fascinated by World War II and the guys who fought in it. In my heart of hearts, I believe that they are my kindred spirits," said Sharma, 18, of Agoura Hills, Calif. "These are guys who've spent their entire lives giving and doing things for other people without taking a single day for themselves. These are guys who grew up during the Great Depression and at 7 or 8 years old started working to provide for their families. These are guys who lived in the Dust Bowl and breathed in dust for days. And when Pearl Harbor happened, these are guys who were willing to give up their lives and go off and fight. ... They're really the only people I like talking to and spending time with."

Unfortunately, the men Sharma loves so much won't be around forever. Although approximately 16 million Americans served during the war, only 620,000 of them are still alive today, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs, which estimates that World War II veterans are dying at a rate of approximately 372 per day.

And when these veterans pass away, they take their memories with them. To collect them, Sharma in April 2015 created Heroes of the Second World War, a nonprofit organization through which he plans to interview a new WWII combat veteran every day. His goal: to capture on video as many firsthand accounts of the war as possible.

"World War II veterans have gone through so much. They gave all of us the lives we have today, but now they're being forgotten," said Sharma, who graduated from high school in June and has decided to forgo college to focus full time on interviewing veterans. "I think it's important that we all learn from them."

Sharma hatched his idea as a sophomore in high school, after reading *Citizen Soldiers* by Stephen E. Ambrose. In it, Ambrose recounts the story of 20-year-old Lyle Bouck, an Army lieutenant whose 18-man unit held off a German battalion of more than 500 men for nearly an entire day during the Battle of the Bulge. Enamored with the story, Sharma found Bouck's phone number and ended up having an hour-long conversation with the former soldier about the famous battle in which he fought.



Eli Baker flew in Canadian bombers and was shot down, captured and spent time in a German POW camp.

home to his parents and girlfriend. Many are inspiring, like the one told by a Medal of Honor recipient who threw himself on top of a live grenade to save the lives of his fellow soldiers. Others are tragic, like the veteran who witnessed his best friend's decapitation mere feet from him on the battlefield. And a few are downright gruesome, like the account Army veteran Bill Keyes gave of his last day of combat as an infantryman in the 91st Division, fighting on the Italian front.

"(Germans) were giving up by the dozens and I figured they'd given up," recalled Keyes, 92, a Silver Star recipient who lives in Lebanon, Ore. "Well, this machine-gunner didn't know about that giving up stuff, and he let me have a burst right in the middle. It knocked my belt buckle off my ammunition belt and it crashed to the ground with my bayonet, my canteen and two grenades I'd made by hand. I jumped back and he let me have another burst that took away my whole front end. My intestines fell out in the dirt, along with some other stuff. I put it all back in the hole and ...

as he turned his back on me I got my right foot under my rifle barrel and lifted it up high enough to shoot him right between the shoulders."

Marine Corps veteran Tom Teela of La Pine, Ore., saw his share of bloodshed, too. Fighting on the Pacific front in the battles of Tarawa, Tinian and Saipan, where an explosion wounded him in the

face and hand, he survived several suicidal "banzai" counterattacks by Japanese fighters and was among the occupying forces in Nagasaki after the United States dropped its second atomic bomb there in 1945. Although he recalls the physical destruction, what he remembers most about Nagasaki is the genteel

"It was amazing. I'd put these warriors up on a pedestal, and that's when I realized I could actually go out and meet them and talk with them," said Sharma, who subsequently learned about the Library of Congress' Veterans History Project (see page 140) and decided to create his own version of it dedicated to World War II combat veterans.

To date, Sharma has conducted more than 150 interviews with veterans. Armed with a camera, tripod and microphone, he conducts most of them in veterans' homes, which he drives to in the family car that he borrows from his parents. Each interview lasts several hours, during which time he takes his subjects — whom he respectfully calls "sir" — through an exhaustive questionnaire encompassing not only their wartime service, but also their childhood, homecoming and postwar life.

Some of the stories are sweet, like the memory one veteran shared about the "very happy day" he came

GET INVOLVED

To learn more about Heroes of the Second World War, or to lend your support, visit heroesofthesecondworldwar.org or gofundme.com/ww2heroes.



Steve Politis lost 13 men (of his 14-man unit) in less than a minute during the invasion of Sicily.



Arnold Seretan says he's now a pacifist. "I don't understand how anyone who was in war can justify war."



Sam Lee Anderson borrowed a lighter from a buddy right before a sniper shot his friend between the eyes.



Robert Swanson served on the submarine USS Parche, which after an attack with depth charges, stayed underwater for more than 30 hours.

CONTINUED »

HISTORY

Cesar Morales was a rifleman in the Philippines and received a Bronze Star for using grenades and a few “well-placed shots” to take out a Japanese machine gun nest that had pinned down his entire unit.



Japanese people: “They were very polite,” said Teela, 91.

As grisly as the stories get, Sharma doesn’t flinch. Rather, he thoughtfully digests them — thorns and all. Because he doesn’t sell or distribute his footage, he receives neither prestige nor profit. Instead, his compensation is the gratitude he receives from the veterans he interviews, who receive a DVD recording of their interview, the rights to which are theirs exclusively to use as they wish.

Some veterans give Sharma permission to donate their interview to the National WWII Museum in New Orleans. Some, like Keyes and Teela, intend it to be a keepsake bequeathed to children and grandchildren when they’re gone. For others, it’s a means for catharsis.

“A lot of times, the families of guys who have passed watch the DVDs, and that’s really beautiful. What’s even better, though, is when a guy starts talking to his kids and wife about the war for the first time after the interview, while he’s still alive,” said Sharma, who is supporting his efforts with a crowd-funding campaign that has raised more than \$3,000 to date; his present fundraising goal is \$18,500, which along with corporate sponsorships he’s currently seeking will help him

interview veterans across the country, beyond the West Coast reach of his parents’ car.

“Many World War II veterans never talk about the war. That weighs them down like an anchor. When they’re able to start talking about it, it’s like a weight has been lifted,” Sharma said.

As treasured as they are by veterans and their families, Sharma said his interviews are a means

to another end: Someday, he hopes to start a “Become Friends With a WWII Vet” initiative that will forge intergenerational friendships between World War II veterans and young Americans who pledge to “adopt” them.

“What’s better than watching

a DVD 20 years after someone is dead is actually interacting with them while they’re still alive,” Sharma noted. “Oftentimes, these guys are dumped in a senior home, or are widowed, or both. ... To have a random stranger come into their life to spend time with them, express interest in them and let them know how important their sacrifices were does wonders for their health and well-being.”

The benefits to the young person can be equally salient. “Most of my peers can’t tell you when World War II was, let alone the reasons it was fought. Yet, they can name all the Kardashians and

what they were wearing,” Sharma continued. “Having one of these joyful, inspiring, wonderful guys to talk to and interact with would change their lives forever. It’s certainly changed mine.”

Indeed, Sharma said his relationships with World War II veterans have humbled him in ways that will affect him for the rest of his life. “I’m not religious, but I feel blessed,” he remarked. “I’ve never been hungry. I’ve never lived in a foxhole in the cold with frostbite on my feet. I’ve never seen my best friend killed in front of me. These guys have, and that’s given me a sense for how lucky I am and how short my life is.”

Sharma is teaching veterans a thing or two, as well. Namely, that not all young people are as frivolous as some people imagine. “I can’t believe that boy is so intelligent. He’s sharp,” Keyes said of Sharma, referencing his encyclopedic knowledge of World War II people, places and events. “I think it’s wonderful what he’s doing. He is awesome, that boy.”

Added Teela, “He was extremely polite, and he had no ulterior motives behind what he was doing. He stayed the better part of a day when he did the interview, and we became pretty good friends in that short time.”

The feeling is mutual. “When I’m in a room with one of these guys, it’s as if they were talking to someone they served with. They talk to me as if I were a buddy,” Sharma concluded. “That’s what I really love, because they are my buddies. I’m proud to say my best friends are 93 to 99 years old. They’re my heroes.” ●

STORIES TO TELL

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS PROJECT COLLECTS VETERANS’ STORIES

The United States is home to approximately 19.3 million veterans with 19.3 million different stories to tell, too many for any one person to capture. Fortunately, Rishi Sharma’s Heroes of the Second World War project is just one of many oral history efforts collecting stories from veterans across the country. Others include Texas Tech University’s Vietnam Center and Archive Oral History Project, the U.S. Naval Institute’s Oral History Program, the Women’s Memorial Foundation Oral History Program, Rutgers University’s Rutgers Oral History Archives and the Air Force Historical Research Agency’s Oral History Catalogue, among others.

The granddaddy of them all is the Library of Congress’ Veterans History Project.

The creation of Rep. Ron Kind (D-Wis.), the Veterans History Project was conceived at a backyard barbecue during which Kind decided to film his father, a Korean War veteran, and uncle, a World War II veteran, exchanging war stories so he could later

share them with his two sons. Inspired, he authored legislation establishing a federal office to collect, preserve and make accessible for future generations the personal accounts of American war veterans. The bill was signed into law in 2000.

“That was our birth certificate,” explained Karen Lloyd, acting director of the Veterans History Project, whose office has archived more than 100,000 interviews with veterans. “We want to make sure that every voice is heard. And when veterans die without having had a chance to tell their story, that’s a loss to us, the American people.”

Because it lacks the staff and resources to conduct interviews itself, the Veterans History Project relies on partners, including the Daughters of the American Revolution,



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the American Red Cross and the Boy and Girl Scouts, the latter two require youth to interview veterans in order to become senior-level scouts. The Veterans History Project provides a field kit and training video; volunteers conduct the interviews. Along with an audio or video interview, a veteran’s “collection” can include photos, letters and journals.

For more information about the Veterans History Project, visit its website at loc.gov/vets.

— Matt Alderton