Overview

IWMs’ Sound Archive holds over 33,000 recordings relating to conflict since 1914. This consists of the largest oral history collection of its type in the world, with contributions from both service personnel and non-combatants as well as significant holdings of speeches, sound effects, broadcasts, poetry and music. In this resource, IWM curator Richard McDonough offers his advice on conducting oral history interviews.

Tips and ideas

- Contact the potential interviewee, preferably by telephone, prior to making the recording to check that they are happy to participate in a recording session. If they are, then use the conversation to elicit background information and details.

- The interview should be carried out in a quiet location, where the interviewee feels comfortable. The best recordings are made, when interviewees feel at ease in a familiar environment.

- Recordings should be made with only one person at a time. More than one individual or groups become difficult to manage and always end up with a jumble of voices, which is confusing to the listener.

- Check that you have the documentation and equipment you need to carry out the interview.

- The recording should take the form of a flexible chronology – starting with background information on the interviewee. The recorder should have an idea of structure of the interview and the questions to be asked. Preferably any questions should be committed to the interviewer’s memory, rather than a written list. Equally the interviewer shouldn’t follow the sequence of questioning slavishly, but be prepared to be flexible and follow up lines of questioning that arise during the recording.
As a general rule of thumb, if the interviewer doesn’t understand some element of the interview, just ask and clarify.

Remember that the Interviewer is the medium through which interviewee speaks of their experiences. As such the recording is essentially a one sided conversation in which the interviewer asks a question, then allows the interviewee to respond. It is therefore important to maintain the following aspects of recording discipline:

1. Maintain eye contact.
2. Don’t ‘um and argh’, constantly say yes or contradict the interviewee. Ask a question, then nod and smile to acknowledge your presence.
3. Interviewers should not make personal remarks or give opinions during the recording session.
4. If an interviewee becomes upset during the recording, pause the recorder and allow them to collect their thoughts.
5. Above all, don’t be frightened by the process, strive to obtain good results and always remember the interview is ultimately made for the listener.

Further information:

Oral History Society website [www.ohs.org.uk](http://www.ohs.org.uk)

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