

Practical Suggestions for Combat Historians.

1. If possible, study Army and Corps plans before going to Divisions. One is thus able to ask more intelligent questions concerning the smaller actions.

2. In conducting an interview, use a map of the same scale used originally by the person being interviewed. If possible, have him to bring his own map, and any additional sketch maps, patrols reports, or overlays which he may have used.

When enlisted men are interviewed, remember that most of them never saw a map of the area over which they fought.

3. Do not lead the person being interviewed. Unless great care is used, there is a danger that he will agree with a certain identification in your attempt to help him, you point out what you think his position was. It is better to let the interview lag while he summons platoon and squad leaders to help establish positions.

4. If possible, get the person interviewed to show you the terrain where the battle was fought.

There is no substitute for going over the ground with the men who fought the action. In general, their knowledge is much better if pointed up by study of the ground with the historian. If the tactical situation permits, it is valuable to go over the battlefield with battalion and company commanders, platoon leaders, platoon sergeants and squad leaders.

5. In case of the relief of commanders at regimental level and higher, try to talk to the individuals as soon as possible after their relief. These people will come back to Corps or Army for reclassification or reassignment and can be interviewed there. They will usually talk only if they are made aware that the interview does not go back through normal command channels.

6. If possible, try to persuade the person being interviewed to permit you to take full notes. If it is clear that he is hesitant, you should make only occasional notes to help you later. If the individual is clearly disturbed by note-taking, trust your memory. It is better to have fragmentary notes than a cover-up statement.

7. Suspect the interviewee who tells you that his unit made no errors. Ask the people to his right and left what they think about his outfit. On the other hand distrust information on adjacent and supporting units who are generally supposed to have been of no help.

8. Be wary of accepting strong criticism of a previous action by someone newly arrived in the command. Often, there is a tendency of newly arrived commanders to improve their reputations by telling how bad their predecessor was. This applies to assistant commanders and executive officers who are unduly critical of their former commanders.

9. Always check such statements as "there were a lot of casualties." To many people new in action or new to losses, there is a tendency to use the term to mean four or five men.
10. Whenever you have a chance, get the estimate of losses from the first sergeant of a company (if you are working at that level) or from the sergeant major of the regiment. These are valuable checks against later reports.
11. At the risk of duplicating later collections, ask for any photographs, sketch maps, special studies of enemy positions, terrain studies, and the like, which the interviewee may have found to be unusually valuable. (I recall examples of attacks in towns in which each house had been charted and numbered. In another case the enemy fortifications had been plotted on aerial photographs.)
12. Always be on the lookout for new problems and new methods of coping with difficult situations. Reports on such things as the hedgerow cutter, means of penetrating the Westwall defenses, of mine clearing which were gathered by ETO historians have proved to be most valuable.
13. If there were peculiarities of terrain or fortifications which gave unusual difficulty, try to examine them. Failing that ask the person being interviewed to make a sketch and try to locate it precisely on the map.
14. If possible, have the interviewee trace the progress of his unit along certain road nets, recalling if possible the units to the right and left. Make certain that his information is based on actual observation and not on hearsay.
15. Doublecheck slurs on the bravery, efficiency, and intelligence of tankmen by infantry and vice versa. Do the same thing when the two are speaking of the air corps, the engineers, and particularly the supply people.
16. Try in all cases to talk with the artillery officer and with the supporting engineers in covering infantry actions. They will frequently give important details on what the infantry meant when they said "the artillery was right in there all day." Always check on the claim by the infantry that "our artillery fell short." The Germans are supposed to have made clever use of the device of firing at a time our artillery was beginning to give support to our infantry movements. The information furnished by forward observers is especially useful. They frequently have unusually valuable material on the enemy.
17. It is always helpful in carrying on company interviews to ask that information be checked with platoon and squad leaders. If there is a tendency for the company commander (or for higher officers) to say "the interviewer doesn't want to know about that" it is usually wise to see the individual who has been hushed up after the main interview. Unless, of course, the person in question is obviously someone who wants to do all the talking.

18. If possible get detailed accounts of methods by which individuals won various high awards. Don't take the story from the PRO, but interview the individual as you would anyone else. If he has been interviewed by the press, and he has seen the account in the paper, you will have to guide him back to a more truthful account.

Citations are useful as "leads", but can not be relied on for an accurate account for an individual or group action. In checking them for detail try to get first-hand eye-witness accounts of what happened.

19. Hold your temper when someone snickers about you being from "the hysterical section", orders you out of the war room, or suggests that you are in the way. You shouldn't be there, without an invitation, in the midst of action. At any other time, you have a clear right to be there, and need only quietly cite the fact that you are under orders and doing your duty.

20. Accept nothing but creature comforts from the PRO. If you wish to keep the handouts as souvenirs all right. But his job is to sell the Division, and he will usually tell you that he doesn't expect to stick too close to the facts. The same applies rather frequently to the prepared statements by regimental and divisional commanders about their victories.

21. Make clear that you are not concerned with newspapers. Someone is always angry about the failure of the papers to carry news about his exploits. It is possible on occasion to make good use of this opportunity by offering to get it straight in history books.

22. Try to wait, if possible, until the men have had one or two day's rest, a shower, and some warm food before trying to talk to them. Never interfere with any program intended to give them any of these things. At the same time, don't wait too long.

23. If interviewing forward of regiment take your own food, and don't eat their food unless it is clear that they have an ample supply. Never arrive just at meal time.

24. Occasionally a battalion or regimental commander is quite willing to do extra interviewing on his own part in connection with an action that is of unusual interest. In such a case, it is worthwhile indicating the type of information you want and giving such other advice as is needed to insure gathering of accurate information. In one action in the Ardennes, a Cavalry Reconnaissance Group commander had more than fifty of his personnel tell their individual stories. They even went to the extent of noting where enemy bodies were found, and of determining the point at which American fire was most effective. Similar studies were initiated by 1st Division and some of the tank units on D-Day. Often such information is intended only for the purpose of filling in some special report for the Division, but can be turned into something far more complete if the combat historian will give a little advice.

25. If After Action reports have been received before the interview takes place, try checking it against the Journal. When it appears that something is being covered up, try to get more complete information in the interviews.
26. Normally fighting men are willing to talk about their actions, provided they have had a chance to get a little rest, and if they are in something approaching a static situation. It must be made clear that you are trying to establish the facts in order that their work may be recognized, instead of giving the impression that you are trying to catch someone in an error. Make clear that in exploring errors, there is no intention of assessing blame, but rather one of preserving lessons for the future.
27. Stress the value of the work for the future. Point to the historical program of World War II.
28. If you can take along a recent newspaper, magazine or book from your headquarters for the people you are visiting it will make you more welcome.
29. Don't permit your desire to hide your ignorance prevent you from asking questions which will enable you to know what the interviewee is talking about.
30. Always ask what the individual thought his mission was. This should be checked later against the actual order given.
31. Try always to get the individual's full name and rank. It's worth the extra effort.
32. Where an action is contrary to accepted principles, give explanation. Apply "common sense" rule.
33. When an interviewee says "we fought this one according to the book", ask him to be more specific and put it into language that both you and the man who reads it later can understand.
34. At the risk of being thought slow-witted, have the interviewee repeat directions and locations. Much history has been changed because the interviewer wrote south for north, or east for west.
35. Check with persons being interviewed as to their understanding of the support they were to receive from artillery and air power. Frequently severe criticism can be checked by reference to the actual fire plan issued at higher headquarters. For example, on Omaha Beach the air force was strongly criticized for its failure to bomb the beaches. The lower units were briefed to expect this bombing, but a check at higher echelons show that the Air Force had said that it could not perform this mission and had been permitted to change the targets.
36. Check constantly on the morale factor, adequacy of food, ammunition, and clothing supply.
37. Use the opportunity you have in moving about to note differences of various units in meeting such questions as handling of prisoners, supply, food, breaking in of new men, and the like.

38. If he wants details of Small Unit Actions, the combat historian would do well to stay forward of Division as much as possible in carrying on his interviews. The Division officers can brief the interviewer but they don't know the details. And all too often neither does the executive officer at Battalion. Of course, the command picture must be sought at Divisional Headquarters.

39. It is often valuable to stay at Division long enough to get the goodwill of the people there, accept their handouts, meet the G-3, and then move down to regimental and battalion level. If the material he gets at the lower levels proves to be provocative, the historian is in a position to ask much better questions, and will be well enough informed that he cannot be turned aside with a cover-up statement. It is always valuable to have your headquarters call the next lowest echelon and introduce you. You will be expected and little time will be spent in preliminaries. If this is not possible, don't be afraid to introduce yourself.

40. Men at any level tend to protect their chiefs in interviews. If they don't there is a reason, and such information should be checked on a personal basis. If they do protect their chiefs, the historian should endeavor to show them that it is to their chief's interest to give the facts about errors, rather than to have distorted versions of the story to appear. It should always be made clear that no Inspector-General's function is being informed, but rather an attempt is being made to let the individual have his full say. There is no promise that his version will be accepted, but at least it is in the record.

41. Normally people will tell the truth if they do not become unusually conscious of a need to perpetuate a fixed story which has already gained credence or if they do not feel they have to change an unfavorable report which has gained circulation. The combat historian has to create an atmosphere in which the interviewee is willing to tell the whole truth as he sees it.

42. Don't accept times given by men in combat unless they can give a good reason for remembering it. In getting interviews on the Omaha Beach landings, interviewers found a tendency for men to say "We jumped off/on time." Then, when they were asked for the exact time, they said "Whatever time we were supposed to jump off." If one made the mistake of saying that was supposed to be 0630, they would say "That's when we left." Some were mistaken by as much as an hour. Normally, however, the interviewee will merely say "Don't you think I have anything better to do than look at my watch." In such a case it is much better to establish comparative time by asking if such and such a company had arrived, or where his unit was located at the period of the morning or afternoon in question. Intervals before or after preparations, bombardments, beginning or stopping of rain — all help establish the time factor.

43. Despite weather maps, reports, and the like, it is still valuable to ask everyone interviewed about the weather he encountered, conditions under foot, and overhead, at the time of the action in question.

44. Make a habit of testing certain well known assumptions with everybody.

Make a practice of asking every rifleman if he fired at anyone, if he fired often, or if he hit anyone. Did he use the bayonet? How soon did he throw away his gas mask? What weapon did he consider most valuable to him? What enemy weapon was most effective against him?

45. Fight shy of people who give you positive identification on the type of fire they received. There was a tendency in Europe for every shell to be an 88, although often there were only mortars in the vicinity. Burp guns were reported much more frequently than appears to be possible. Try to pin them down as to what they mean by "There was a lot of artillery fire." Get an opinion on the number and severity of concentrations.

46. "A lot of the enemy broke through on our right" is another thing to check.

47. Don't overlook the boys who fixed the signal communications after enemy fire knocked out the lines five or six times. The aid men deserve to be included in any infantry story. So do the people who take up ammunition and hot food.

48. In river crossing actions be certain to get the engineer story.

49. Try in every interview to get the full story on communications. Nothing is more important to command and to the operational story than whether the radio or telephone was working. Break down in communications between combat echelons is frequently the key to the result in battle.

50. Limit the number of people you interview at one time. Men will talk more frankly alone or in small groups. In the large groups - a company, say - the interviewer is likely to get the story from the more talkative man while the reticent holds his own counsel. Frequently the account of the more reticent is more valuable than what the "blow-hard" says. In a group, rank frequently cramps the style of the officers and enlisted men who are present. Lieutenants seldom disagree publicly with the stories told in their presence by their company commanders. Riflemen or squad leaders are overawed frequently by platoon leaders. In private or in small groups where he is not conscious of rank, the average man will tell the truth.

51. The larger the group interviewed, the harder it is to control the discussion, pin down the fighting or to follow the diverse strands of the operation. In general, the interview of large groups will be limited by training and rest programs, and tactical operations.

52. Weigh the reliability of the witness, where he was at a given time, and whether his statement came from first-hand observation. Prejudices and favoritism within an outfit as well as the known and demonstrated abilities of the individuals always have to be taken into account in assessing the value of the testimony. This rule applies especially when the person interviewed tries to explain away mistakes he made, to discredit the action of another soldier or officer he does not like or claim great credit for feats which were performed.

53. At each level of command try to get each officer or enlisted man to tell only what he saw of the battle, of the decisions which he took, of the information which he had from his subordinate or higher commanders. Since a company, battalion or regimental commander sees only a small part of any action, what they know of the actual fighting is at best a general and partial picture of what took place. In many cases there are serious misconceptions. In Italy one regimental commander at the time of the battle was sure his outfit had taken its objective and then had been pushed back. From interviews with the men who had been in the forward rifle companies it was found that the unit had never approached closer than 600 yards to the objective.

54. Reasons for command decision
are important, even down to & including
squad leaders. They are doubly important
as rank goes higher.