

*By Mary Michel Hinton*

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*The John H. Reagan WWII Memorial Association installed twenty-three cast stone bollards encircling the Heights WWII Memorial Plaza. Each describes a different event that took place during the war. Their goal was to share information about WWII with the community and all who visit the "freedom walk" at the Heights WWII Memorial.*

various web sites on World War II. One of our favorite web sites was "What Did You Do in the War Grandma?"<sup>1</sup> This was another oral history project conducted and written by high school students in Rhode Island. Another interesting web site we used was "We Witnessed the Attack on Pearl Harbor."<sup>2</sup> Allowing students to conduct guided research on the Internet gave students more ownership in the process of preparing for the interviews and learning about WWII. After finding something of interest, students would often come to me excited about an interesting fact they had discovered on WWII.

Next, we had to find people to interview. We started with ads in the *Houston Chronicle* and *The Leader*, the local paper in the Heights and surrounding area. We also contacted the John H. Reagan WWII Memorial Association. Many veterans from the Association agreed to participate in the interviews. Prior to the interview, we contacted the veteran or community member to get some basic background information and to set up a time for the interview.

Most of the interviewees were able to come to Hogg for the interview. They stopped by the classroom before the interview and the class was genuinely curious about the visitor. One veteran, Arvil Steele shared how he dodged bullets, except for the one that grazed his head. Another commu-

nity member, Mr. Robert Browning, shared photographs of "The Priscilla Test Shot," photos he had taken during his service in the Army at the Nevada Test Site from 1956-1958. Many interviewees brought memorabilia from WWII, including books, ration coupons, flags, photographs, and medal patches from their units.

On two occasions, students went to the home of the interviewee. With parent permission slips, I packed up a video camera, tape recorder, and students and then headed off to the interview. At a home interview, Billy Lindley, a Hogg and Reagan graduate, eagerly shared his memories and collection of photographs during his time as a pilot of a B-24 bomber. Off camera, he told how

many pilots used the silk maps from previous missions as gifts to friends.

## EDITING PROCESS

Melinda Wolfrum, a Rice University undergraduate History major at the time, was also the narrative author and research assistant for the oral history project. Wolfrum videotaped and recorded several of the interviews.

When we first began discussing the "Heights Remembers World War II" project, I was skeptical that it could impart meaningful knowledge about World War II to students; but, while watching the first interview, my doubts quickly faded away. I learned that not only can this history project teach historical fact and oral history technique, it can also ignite a hunger for knowledge in its participants and help them see the connection between global and local history.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the summer of 2000, Wolfrum organized materials, interviewed students, and edited hours of tapes to create the narrative for "The Heights Remembers World War II." Donna Smith, a staff member of the Center for Technology in Teaching and Learning at Rice University, designed the booklet and web site.

## PROJECT CHALLENGES

The biggest challenge was time and curriculum fit. The Texas history curriculum covers World War II and its impact on Texas, but not much time is spent on the topic. We waited until after the TAAS test to begin the project with our students, which left us the month of May to prepare students to research and interview the community

*"Working on the Heights Remembers World War II project was very exciting for me as well as for my students. I thoroughly enjoyed watching them realize that history happens to local people and that they themselves are creating history. While conducting these interviews, Hogg students met veterans from their neighborhood, many of whom had attended Hogg Middle School years ago. The students recognized that the halls they walk daily are the same halls that these veterans walked in decades past. They undoubtedly enjoyed this learning experience, and I think that it will continue to impact their future experiences and attitudes toward learning."*

Ms. Shelly Hulbirt  
Project Teacher, Hogg Middle School



**Student Perspective:** Working in Ship's Service. An oral history of Fred Huebner.

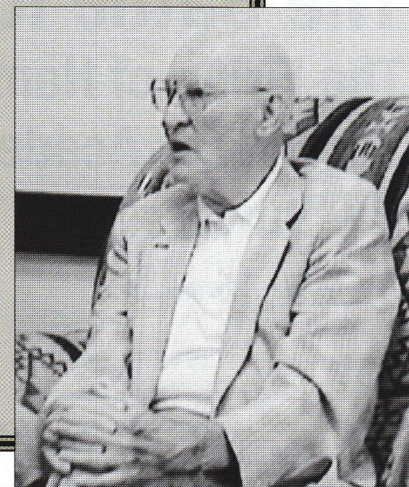
**Interviewers:** Maritza, Ebonea, and Joe.

From their interview with Mr. Huebner, Maritza, Ebonea, and Joe learned what one sacrifices when serving in the military. "He was not there by choice," Maritza explains. "Mr. Huebner had to leave his wife and ...belongings," continues Ebonea. When Joe asked if he would serve again given the chance, Mr. Huebner said, "Only if they needed me." "He was a great man [who made] a great sacrifice," Ebonea reflects. Joe adds, "He really inspired me."

**Student Perspective:** A Story from the European Front. An oral history of Julian Philips.

**Interviewers:** Nelly and Celestino.

The students found Mr. Philip's reflections on the duty of a soldier particularly striking. They were fascinated by his struggle to cope with the realities of war. Celestino noted, "He told me that he hated killing people, but he dealt with it." "His commanders said he was a good soldier," added Nelly.



*"During the course of the interviews, it became apparent that the students participating in the project were hungry for more knowledge about the involvement of the United States Armed Forces in WWII," remembers Art Bleimeyer, former Hogg student and U.S. Army WWII Veteran.*

Courtesy Hogg Middle School Oral History Project and Rice University

members. We also did not have adequate time to work with our students during the post-interview process. The "Focus on Your Community Resource" web site contains the lesson plans we created from our experience with the project.<sup>4</sup> It also places research, the interview, and writing process in student hands.

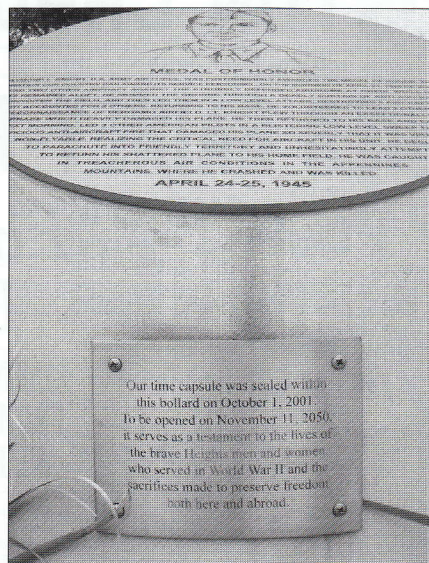
Another challenge to the project was finding enough interviewees for all of the students. In my classes, students were assigned in groups of two or three and as the interviews became available, students were chosen to participate. In Ms. Hulbirt's class, several students volunteered to participate in the interviews. In hindsight, more students could have participated if the interviewees spoke to a class, versus just a few students conducting an interview.

We experienced one minor technical problem that every oral historian fears: the sound on our tape of the Jenke interview did not work. We contacted Mr. and Mrs. Jenke, and luckily, they were able to come back for a second interview.

## IMPACT ON THE COMMUNITY

After the veterans shared their stories with Hogg students, there was a growing realization that students wanted more information about World War II. Just around the same time, a new "freedom walk" installation was being added to the area surrounding the John H. Reagan WWII Memorial. This new area included 23 cast stone bollards, each highlighting significant events of World War II. Each bollard contains a plaque with a short summary and a photograph of a sig-

nificant event, starting with Pearl Harbor and ending with victory in Japan. This is when the veterans from the John H. Reagan WWII Memorial Association developed the idea of creating an educational guide for teachers to use in the classroom. The veterans raised enough funds from local donors to cover the cost of development, publishing, and distribution of *Twenty-five Events Students Should Know About America's Involvement in WWII*. The guide contains summaries, photographs, maps, geography, technical specifications, learning activities, links to the "Handbook of Texas Online," TAKS, TEKS, and links to helpful Internet



*Within one of the bollards, a time capsule was included, which will not be opened until November 11, 2050. The plaque clearly describes the goal of this memorial. "It serves as a testament to the lives of the brave Heights men and women who served in World War II and the sacrifices made to preserve freedom both here and abroad."*

sites. A copy of this resource is in the process of being distributed to local schools in Region IV.

In October 2000, months after the project ended, several 7th graders from Hogg Middle School gathered in a small room to meet and greet with WWII veterans and other community members to celebrate the publishing of our oral history project, "The Heights Remembers WWII, Our Community in History." Veterans and students began to sign each other's books and shared stories of days gone by, including memories of walking down the same hallways as many of the current 7th graders. Some of the veterans had fought in battles students only read about in textbooks or on the Internet or saw in a movie. The experiences gained while working on this oral history project helped the students to grasp the enormity of WWII and its impact on their small Heights community. They gained a greater appreciation for the sacrifices made over fifty years ago and for the importance of learning about their history. As the students listened, they began to realize that history now has a recognizable face. ★