

wenty-year-old Ed Kolodziej figured that if he was going to die, he might as well go down fighting. A member of the 95th Infantry Division in November 1944, Kolodziej and his partner were pinned down and getting shelled by the Germans near the French city of Metz in a rain- and blood-soaked ditch. After a day and night of the pummeling, the two men gambled that the early morning sun would blind the German soldiers who controlled a seemingly impenetrable bunker, giving them the precious seconds they needed to make their move. "We inched close enough to where we were able to shoot into their tiny porthole openings," says Kolodziej RC'48, NLAW'51. "A few minutes later, a white flag comes out and about 40 German soldiers surrender. I'll never forget the look on their faces when they realized that just two American GIs had pulled it off."

Kolodziej, who received the Silver Star for valor, recounts the circumstances surrounding the experience in much greater detail in his interview with the Rutgers Oral History Archives

(ROHA). His interview transcript—which includes stories about killing 30 Germans in another engagement, twice meeting General George S. Patton on the same day, and his pre- and postwar life—reads like the Great American Novel. His is one of 1,000 interviews, more than 500 of which are available online as full-text transcripts, that trace the life stories and family histories of the men and women who lived through the most devastating conflict in history, as well as the stories from veterans of other wars and from observers of Rutgers and New Jersey history.

Since the 1930s, when the Works Progress Administration first hired unemployed writers to interview and transcribe the stories of former slaves as a way to understand the antebellum South, the formal documentation of oral history has become central to adding human emotions and thoughts to the historical record. Allan Nevins, who established the first organized oral history program in the world at Columbia University in 1948, built an archive that today consists of close to 8,000 taped memoirs and nearly one million pages of transcript. Studs Terkel's Chicago-based radio show from 1952 to 1997 used oral history methodology to chronicle the 20th century. More recently, filmmaker Steven Spielberg's Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation has gathered nearly 52,000 video testimonies from survivors and other witnesses of the Holocaust.

WAR STORIES

The Rutgers Oral History Archives has become one of the world's best online resources for researching World War II. Now it covers other wars, as well as Rutgers and New Jersey history.

By Bill Glovin





Tom Kindre RC'42 sowed the seeds for a Rutgers oral history archives in 1992. The class historian for the Rutgers College Class of 1942 and an Army first lieutenant during the war, he surveyed more than 200 classmates about the idea of publishing a "class autobiography" that emphasized World War II and underscored Walt Whitman's observation that "real war never gets in the books." Receiving only 17 responses, he realized that his classmates would probably have an easier time talking, rather than writing, about their wartime experiences. Kindre and class officers approached members of the history department in New Brunswick with the idea of presenting a 55th reunion class gift to support an archive that would interview his classmates and create a lasting record, as well as collect their letters, photos, and personal artifacts.

With \$100,000 raised by the class and the support of university administration, the archives began as a center affiliated with the history department. The late Stephen Ambrose—who at the time was a senior visiting fellow at the Rutgers Center for Historical Analysis, and who is the author of *Band of Brothers* (Simon & Schuster, 1992) and *D-Day* (Simon & Schuster, 1994)—was an original adviser to the project. History department chair Rudy Bell, history professor John Chambers, and university archivist Thomas Frusciano also provided input. G. Kurt Piehler GSNB'85, '90, a research fellow at the time in the Rutgers Center for Historical Analysis, became director of ROHA and began interviewing members of Kindre's class. Other class gifts that soon followed allowed Piehler to expand the project's scope to other wartime classes.

Sandra Stewart Holyoak RC'97, the current director of ROHA, says that interviewing the rapidly dwindling group of World War II veterans is the top priority today. In the early 2000s, the archives expanded its mission to include testimonies of veterans of all wars as well as those of alumni and citizens who reflect on Rutgers and New Jersey history, from such topics as the peace movement of the 1960s, to the experience of women at the New Jersey College for Women (now Douglass Residential College), to immigration in New Jersey. The vision for ROHA, says Holyoak, is to create an oral history institute, much like the Regional Oral History Office, part of the Bancroft Library at the University of California at Berkeley. Founded in 1954, it has documented topics as varied as the Oakland Army Base, the Portuguese population in California, and the growth of the food and wine industries.

The people who have been interviewed include the rank-and-file as well as men and women who never garnered fame or glory for their service. But the archives, which identifies candidates through word-of-mouth and recommendations, also includes the reflections of better-known veterans such as Frederick J. Kroesen



When History Speaks: Tom Kindre (left), who initiated the idea of an oral history archives at Rutgers, with Bart Klion, the president of the Rutgers Living History Society, and Sandra Stewart Holyoak, the director of the Rutgers Oral History Archives.

RC'44, a retired four-star Army general, and Jack Jacobs RC'66, GSNB'72, a retired Army colonel who received the Medal of Honor for his service in Vietnam. The stories recount not only the tedium of military life such as basic training, but also dramatic moments such as avoiding death by jumping from a burning plane or the Allied liberators' first encounters with the horrors of a concentration camp. The archives also has the testimonies of citizens who supported the crucial efforts on the home front, such as Freda Finklestein Feller DC'41, whose work in a "secret inks" office led to the capture of a spy, or Carl Woodward Jr. RC'40, who played a role in the development of penicillin.

The ROHA website (oralhistory.rutgers.edu), which averages about 50,000 hits a year, has become a popular resource for historians, some of them prominent authors and filmmakers. Kolodziej and his wife, Irene, flew to Hollywood twice after History Channel documentary filmmakers found his John Wayne-like story online and asked him to tell it in front of a camera while actors recreated his combat experience. The first two books in Pulitzer Prize-winning author Rick Atkinson's "Liberation Trilogy" on World War II in Europe, *An Army at Dawn* (Henry Holt, 2002) and *The Day of Battle* (Henry Holt, 2007), cited ROHA oral histories, as did Elizabeth Borgwardt's *A New Deal for the World* (Harvard, 2005) and Thomas Childers's *Soldier from the War Returning* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009). The Library of Congress relied on the ROHA website as a template for its own Veterans History Project in 2000 and invited a team of faculty, alumni, and interns to Washington, D.C., in 2004 to conduct interviews at the opening of the National World War II Memorial. The Smithsonian

National Museum of American History uses text from ROHA interviews in its permanent "Price of Freedom" exhibit.

The ROHA office, located in the Bevier House on the College Avenue Campus, is a beehive of interns, scholars, and volunteers who schedule interviews, handle office work, and help assemble *History Alive*, a quarterly newsletter of the Rutgers Living History Society (see related story). Holyoak and Shaun Illingworth RC'01, SCILS'04, assistant director of ROHA, learned the ropes as interns; today they conduct the interviews and try to include interns in as many activities associated with the interview process as possible. "Many of our former interns credit their success as lawyers and academics to the knowledge and critical thinking skills they acquired here," says Illingworth. "They also come back as volunteers for our events or as high school history teachers who bring their own students to get a crash course in starting their own oral history archives."

Student involvement is a cornerstone of ROHA. Many students have recommended a grandparent for an interview and then been astonished by what they learned about their family's past. Sophomore Lindsey Bernstein, an Aresty Scholar at ROHA, sees the archives as an opportunity to think more seriously about studying history, an academic discipline that many fellow students avoid. "Too often, history gets a bad rap among my peers because too many history teachers drone on and on," she says. "If more were exposed to oral history, they might feel differently. It brings the past to life. It also prepares us to deal with problems in the present because so many political, religious, and economic trends tend to repeat."

Chambers teaches "Oral History of the American Experience in World War II" to junior and senior history majors. Based on its popularity, he also began teaching it in 2007 as part of the Byrne Family First-Year Seminar Program, which introduces first-year students to the breadth of intellectual endeavor at Rutgers. "I always have a veteran come in, and students are always inspired by the notion of someone's willingness to put it all on the line for their country," he says. "Oral history is a wonderful way to get students to think critically. They write questions, learn interview techniques, and edit transcripts. By evaluating what they hear, they realize that important information is sometimes omitted from a book or documentary—small things that can lead to a truer understanding of events."

Perhaps no one appreciates oral history and an archive such as ROHA more than someone who never recorded the story of a loved one now gone. Holyoak, who grew up on a ranch in Wyoming that her grandparents had homesteaded, regrets never having documented their compelling stories. Frusciano, whose father was a U.S. Marine who was wounded in Iwo Jima and received the Purple Heart, would tell his dad about the vets interviewed for the archives. "He was always interested, but I never took a tape recorder and said, 'Let me interview you,'" says Frusciano. "My dad died and now I'm kicking myself for never getting his story down on tape or paper for the generations hopefully to come in my own family. You can never get that back." •

Requests to hear audiotapes can be made to Rutgers' Special Collections and University Archives at Alexander Library in New Brunswick: 732-932-7006.

FIGHTING TO SURVIVE

● The struggle to keep the Rutgers Oral History Archives (ROHA) viable has seen its share of hard-fought battles and hairbreadth escapes. Within years of its founding, when it became clear that help was needed, the Class of '49 came to the rescue, bringing potential interviewees plus some substantial contributions.

Other alumni soon came aboard, and over the years the largest single source of sustenance has been gifts from classes celebrating five-year reunions. But it's never been quite enough. Supporters formed a fundraising committee, and at one low point, the committee chair brought a bottle of champagne and glasses to a meeting and proposed a "farewell toast." But a wealthy alumnus, informed of the problem, rode to the rescue.

Meanwhile, the scope of the project was growing. ROHA's original mission, to interview Class of 1942 members, was enlarged to other WW II-era classes. It was expanded again to include the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Cold War, and became affiliated with the Library of Congress Veterans History Project. It continued to grow to include testimonies of residents of New Jersey, members of the Rutgers faculty, and others.

In 2002, the Rutgers Living History Society was founded to recognize "those who participate in or loyally support" the oral archives. In 2004, Tom Kindre published a book, *The Boys from New Jersey* (Trafford, 2004), based on stories from the archives. In 2005, the society's executive committee established the Stephen E. Ambrose Oral History Award, given each year to an individual who has made an outstanding contribution to the practice or use of oral history. Tom Brokaw, NBC's former news anchor, was the first recipient. Others have been Steven Spielberg, Studs Terkel, Rick Atkinson, and Ken Burns. This year's recipient is National Public Radio's Dave Isay, founder of the StoryCorps oral history project.

Supporters and staff have stopped calling ROHA a "project" and refer to it as a "program." ROHA couldn't be administered without its small army of student interns (many supported by donors): the Crandon Clark Scholar (to research the Korean War), an Aresty Scholar (for undergraduate research), and scholars supported by the Classes of 1948 and 1956. Domingo Duarte, the father of a former intern and ROHA's part-time transcriber, participated in an interview that relived his growing up in the Philippines during the Japanese occupation. Despite all that help, finding adequate funding grows more perilous each year. Ed Kolodziej, the society's vice president of fundraising and legislative affairs, secured two \$100,000 state grants in recent years, but with the depressed economy, new state money won't be forthcoming, and ROHA's operating funds are steadily shrinking.

Yet hope springs eternal, thanks to the efforts of alumni such as Bart Klion RC'48, the society's president. Thomas Frusciano, university archivist and chair of the society's Ambrose Award Selection Committee, says the program has lasted 16 years because of its "dedicated alumni group." And Sandra Stewart Holyoak, director of ROHA, and Shaun Illingworth, assistant director, are boldly on track to conduct 500 interviews by 2016, the 250th anniversary of Rutgers.

To make a contribution to ROHA, visit oralhistory.rutgers.edu/support_roha.html.

— Bill Glovin