

Recording Memories of Our Veterans

By Daniel Bobinski

Idaho Families. That's the focus of this magazine. Normally when the words, "Idaho families" leave my mouth I'm speaking about mom, dad, and the kids. I must confess, I am often guilty of forgetting about the grandparents. And with Veteran's Day on November 11 and Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day on December 7, I am nudged to make up for my oversights by highlighting the story of my wife's grandfather, Ray Sulfridge, a resident of Mountain Home.

Why Ray? Because Ray is a veteran with interesting stories, and Thanksgiving and Christmas already get a lot of airplay. I thought a Veteran's story should be highlighted in a publication other than VFW magazine.

Not long ago, some of us in Ray's family gathered to "interview" him and record it on video. This is something anyone can do, and I highly recommend that more families do this, especially with our veterans. What follows are some interesting stories from Ray that we now have on video.

Ray was 15 years old when Pearl Harbor was attacked. Although he was young, Ray was tall for his age. "I turned 16 in June [of 1943], and that September, instead of me going to school I was taking my physical to join the service. But the recruiter didn't quite believe I was old enough, even though I was bigger than he was." Rays says that after the physical, "[The recruiter] reached into his briefcase and pulled out my birth certificate. I guess my chin dropped about six inches, but he looked up at me and said, 'You're big enough, and you're ugly enough. If you'll keep your mouth shut, I'll keep my mouth shut.' And then he shipped me out."

Ray went to basic training and then reported to the USS San Diego five months before his 17th birthday. "I thought it was a battleship," he says. "It was an anti-aircraft cruiser, but I'd never seen a ship before, so I thought it was a battleship when I saw all those guns." He first saw action off the Marshall Islands. Because of his size, he was soon assigned to loading 5-inch shells with the team in gun turret #3, right under the bridge, and he stayed with that team throughout the duration of the war.

When you get him talking, Ray gives you the inside scoop on what was going on during many battles, including the Battles of Midway and Okinawa. You can pull up the Wikipedia entry on his ship and start reading about the different battles his ship was in, and he'll interrupt you to explain with good detail what happened at each of those engagements. Ray is like a living history book sitting across from you, filling in the details that no book can possibly do.

Amazingly, Ray's ship was the only Pacific Fleet ship not to sustain any battle damage during the war, despite being in 18 battles. "From Guadalcanal all the way to Tokyo Bay we didn't have one hit from the enemy. Not one bomb. I've seen 'em splash in the water beside us – that's

how close they were. And I saw torpedoes go through the water in front of us and behind us, but we never did get hit.”

As a result of that amazing battle record, Ray’s ship was chosen to be the US flagship during Japan’s surrender. “We led the whole convoy into Tokyo Bay,” he says. And, the USS San Diego was the only Allied ship to dock. Ray was an eyewitness when all the Japanese officials arrived for the formal surrender. “I got to see a lot of that because I was on guard duty on the gang plank. Every one of those Japanese admirals and generals had to come up that gang plank, get on our ship, and then go down the other side to get on the captain’s gig to take them to the [battleship] Missouri. Truman was President, and he said, ‘It will be signed on the Missouri,’ so that’s where they signed the treaty.”

Not long after the war Ray was discharged and he returned home. However, he soon learned he was in trouble. His dad told him, “The draft board is hunting for you. They’re sending threatening letters.” When Ray went down to their office, they said, “Where have you been? We’ve been looking for you for six months.” Things got cleared up after Ray told them he’d been serving in the South Pacific and had already been discharged.

Finding steady work after the war was difficult. At age 18 he taught himself how to drive and he hauled coal and logs for a while. But he didn’t like the work, so he ended up enlisting in the Army. The Army put him in the then-nascent Army Air Corps at Langley, Virginia, and before long that became the Air Force. Ray then spent several decades in multiple roles, both receiving and delivering much training along the way. He laughs as he says, “Here I was, a high school dropout, and I retired as the education and training superintendent.”

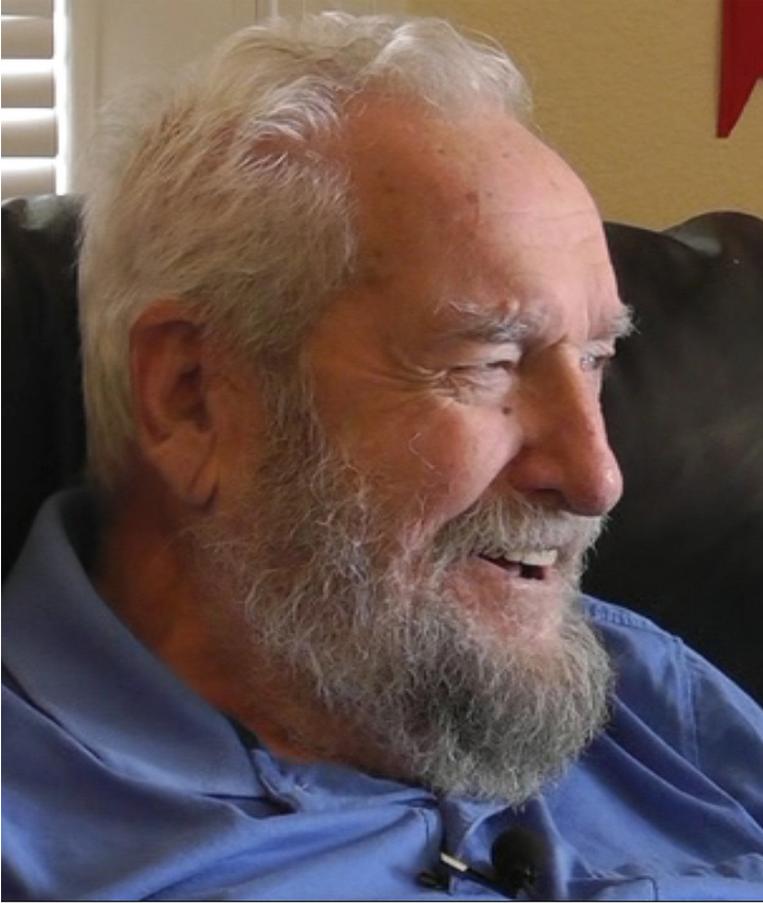
We now have Ray’s interview on DVD and many family members have copies.

If you have grandparents who are veterans, no doubt they have stories, too. If not a grandparent, maybe your own parent, aunt, or uncle served our country in uniform. These are family members with a unique part of America’s history in their memories, and I want to encourage you to capture those memories.

Doing an interview is not difficult. Just set up your camera on a small tripod and have a conversation. Your family members may not want to talk about everything they did in the service, but by recording these conversations you can capture their stories to share with your children and your children’s children. The technology is available. Don’t wait until it’s too late.

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Ray Sulfridge