

Writing the Flash Profile: Assignment Details

The Veterans History Project, a program of the Library of Congress, offers writers a rich online database of interviews with survivors of the last century's major wars: World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. This material provides excellent listening practice and a chance to try to see a character in the story he or she tells.

You can find the Veterans History Project at the following URL: <http://www.loc.gov/vets/>. From the home page, you can find audio (and sometimes video) files of veterans talking about their war experiences. Choose a few to listen to or watch (the link to "featured interviews" or "staff favorites" can be a good place to start). Listen to all or a portion of the audio, and then focus on four or five minutes that you find most compelling. Take notes.

Drawing on this material, write a sketch that profiles a veteran from material from the site. It will be due on Tuesday, October 5. Your sketch should tell a revealing story about your subject in its historical context. Because you are writing about people who participated in public events—battles overseas or service back home—you may find information online that will help you write this flash profile. In particular, you might find information that sets the stage for the story you're telling. But especially work with the material the subjects provide in their interviews, and actively look for opportunities to incorporate their voices.

For example, here's the lead paragraph to a sketch I began on a veteran named Dan Akee about the horrors of fighting on Iwo Jima in the Pacific theater.

Dan Akee remembers stepping over the bodies, so numerous and so randomly scattered that they seemed like "trash." After the third day, it broke him. "I was getting tired of all the battles I went through," Akee said. "I was scared." By the time the five marines and one navy corpsman raised the flag on Mt. Suribachi in the famous photograph, Iwo Jima was littered with the dead, and Akee was not among them. One reason, perhaps, is that when he went crazy after hours of Japanese shelling, Akee did not run out of his foxhole. He imagined it. "I felt like I was running. We should go, that's on my mind. But somehow I left there. I was out of my mind. Before I left . . . the foxhole, I sat down, and I said 'God help me. I'm too young to die.'"

A lot of people did die young on Iwo Jima. Of the 18,000 Japanese soldiers who occupied the island when the marines landed, only 216 were captured. Akee's marines suffered, too. Seven thousand were killed and there were over 20,000 casualties. But sometimes the dying is slow, and comes from a bottle not a bullet, and when Dan Akee returned from the war, the nightmares began....

Choose a profile subject that

1. You find interesting, and has a good story.
2. Has sufficient information—background, audio, transcripts, etc.—on which to write your profile.