Recently, a reunion transpired between Robert Gross, a World War II aviator, and the son of a fellow aircrewman. During the Second World War, Gross served as a navigator aboard a B-24H “Liberator” bomber. Prior to their overseas deployment, the father of the aircraft’s bombardier, Robert Swarthouse, awoke with a premonition of his son’s death. As a result, morbid fascination spread among the crew, prompting them to rechristen their ship from “Tommy Thumper” to the aptly titled “Misery Agent.”

Disaster struck the flight crew on June 6, 1944, when their bomber crash-landed after a D-Day sortie. The Normandy landings were supported by an intense barrage of naval gunfire, which quickly obscured the landscape below them. As a consequence, visual confirmation of ground targets became virtually impossible. Moreover, the presence of Allied ground forces prohibited them from jettisoning their deadly payload. Laden with bombs and low on fuel, the plane attempted a return to their airfield. In desperation, H.M. Doell, pilot of the Misery Agent, attempted to land in the British countryside. However, the ensuing explosion from their twelve 500 pound bombs killed everyone aboard.

Nevertheless, a sole crew member survived. Their navigator, Robert Gross, was never awakened for the flight and missed the squadron’s 2:30 AM departure. Amidst the preparations for the D-Day airstrike, Gross’ flight position was occupied by an additional crew member. The Allied air forces anticipated heavy resistance from the Luftwaffe and assigned an extra man to each bomber. The additional gunner manned the front turret in case of enemy “head on” attacks. As this ninth man completed the standard duty roster, the doomed Misery Agent took off, leaving Gross stranded on the flight line.

Interviewed by the Veterans History Project, Robert Gross recounted his chilling account of the accident. After decades of investigation, Robert Swarthouse, Jr., son of the aircraft’s navigator, found the interview and immediately contacted the Veterans History Project. A telephone meeting was arranged, during which Gross shared the details of the crash, as well as his fond memories of Swarthouse, Sr.. Gross recalled an interaction from an early mission together; he had commented on the bad weather conditions over a target, to which Swarthouse replied that the dark clouds were caused by flak, rather than thunderstorms!

Through this reunion, the Swarthouse family received the closure they had pursued for decades. After the war, Gross attempted to contact the families of his former flight crew. He had traveled to both Texas and Colorado in order to relay the circumstances of the accident, meeting with the families of both the copilot and radio operator, but had been unable to locate the Swarthouse family.
Samantha Zatarain, a graduate student enrolled in CCSU’s U.S. History program, has chosen to document an issue that has been largely underappreciated until recently: the often negative - and sometimes hostile - reception given to homecoming Vietnam veterans by their fellow citizens. Samantha contacted the VHP, as well as the VFW Post in East Hampton, to connect with Vietnam veterans and hear their untold stories. Utilizing both resources, she has interviewed around 18 veterans; some have told their stories face-to-face or over the telephone, while more than half of the veterans have responded through written surveys. Stories of American apathy and anger during the Vietnam-era are emerging through these interviews. Samantha shared this story that she heard from one of the veterans: “During the war it was mandatory to wear your uniform to get the reduced air travel tickets home. As a result, almost every veteran has had some type of an occurrence in the airport. One veteran, while in a California airport bathroom, saw a pile of dress uniforms in the corner. Apparently, those veterans did not want to risk traveling in their uniform.” This anecdote, and others like them, bring a new poignancy and import to the Vietnam era – its soldiers, its citizens, and its lingering effects on both groups.

Vietnam Helicopter Pilot Finds Former Aircraft

Kjell Tollefsen, one of our interviewed veterans and a dedicated VHP volunteer, served as a helicopter pilot in Vietnam with the “Black Widows” 188th Assault Helicopter Company. He flew “Smokie”, a UH-1 Huey helicopter capable of providing a smokescreen, behind which troops could be safely inserted into open landing zones for combat.

The workings behind this helicopter’s special ability are simple but ingenious. Under the aircraft’s backseat, a large rubber cell is filled with oil. The oil is pumped up, through a hose, and out of the exhaust, which is just below the propeller blades. The resulting cloud of smoke is about 700 feet in diameter.

Smokie would be flown about a quarter mile ahead of landing helicopters, only two or three feet above the ground and travelling at 138 miles per hour. A helicopter gunship flew on either side of the craft, providing defensive fire. At this point, Kjell would push a button and the all-important visual barrier billowed forth.

Smokie II (the helicopter used after the first Smokie crashed), which Kjell also piloted, is kept and displayed by the Hendershott-Mannes VFW Post (No. 374) in Arcade, New York. Kjell recently discovered the whereabouts of his former aircraft and paid Smokie II a visit in November of 2010. He even got to sit in the cockpit again. Between its arrival at the Hendershott-Manned Post and the time when Kjell flew Smokie, the helicopter had been busy; it flew in Germany, then again in Vietnam, and finally served as a medical evacuation vehicle for the National Guard. This last assignment brought about Smokie II’s basic color change, as well as the red cross on its side. However, there is no doubt that this helicopter is Smokie II; the serial number (66-16155) matches the original, as do the patched bullet holes from its Vietnam service.

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John Croce is himself a veteran of the United States Marine Corps, having served as a forward observer in the 4th Marine Division during World War II. The 4th Marine Division participated in the seaborne invasion of Roi Namur, Kwajalein Atoll, Saipan, Tinian, and Iwo Jima, where Croce was wounded by an enemy phosphorous shell. His commitment to interviewing veterans allows him to preserve the memory of “the greatest generation so that it won’t be put in the back of history records, and to remind people of the atrocities that occurred, in order to keep the memory of those who served alive.”

As a Marine Corps aviator, Robert Weisel flew the UH-34 “Choctaw” in support of Marine and Naval operations during the Vietnam War. These helicopter operations ranged from the flight decks of the USS Iwo Jima and USS Princeton aircraft carriers to the red sand of Quang Nam Province in Vietnam. Interviewed for the Veterans History Project, the experience prompted him to conduct additional interviews among the Connecticut veteran population. Presently, Weisel continues his support of the United States armed forces as both a contributor and collector of veterans’ oral histories.

Jonathan Salomone is a junior at CCSU pursuing a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science. His interest in military history derives from his own grandfather’s war experiences and the vivid memories of his service. Conducting interviews with veterans from World War II through the present, Salomone realized a common thread among veterans. Consequently, he feels as though the interview experience is an emotional as well as historical contribution to his own perception of war and furthers his appreciation for “veterans’ service and contributions to their country.”

Kevin Arconti is a junior at CCSU and a student of history. As a component of his Public History curriculum, Arconti says that he applied for the Veterans History Project internship because, “of my desire for experience outside the classroom and the interpersonal relationships with veterans.” Furthermore, his training at the VHP instilled, “a greater appreciation for the deeds of my interviewees as well as all military personnel.” Prior to this opportunity, Kevin’s perception of war came from textbooks, rather than direct experience. Looking towards a professional career, Arconti plans to apply the skills he has honed at the Veterans History Project in his future education.
**I N  M E M O R I A M**

Stuart Meyerhans, 94, of South Windsor, CT, passed away on February 20, 2011. Meyerhans served his country from 1941-1946 as an officer in the United States Army. During the Second World War, Meyerhans deployed to the Pacific Theater of Operations as an engineer. Initially assigned to the 1st Cavalry Division, a transfer to the 492nd Engineer Base Equipment Company prompted a combat deployment to Leyte Island in the Philippines. As a company commander, Meyerhans lead from the front, and only withdrew from service after contracting a debilitating illness. The war ended during his treatment and Meyerhans utilized the GI Bill for an accountant certification.

Joseph Steven Lickwar, 92, of West Hartford, CT passed away on April 18, 2011. He served in the United States Army Air Corps during World War II as a flight engineer and mechanic for the Consolidated B-24 “Liberator” bomber. Lickwar earned the rank of sergeant, serving in both Biloxi, Mississippi, and Las Vegas, Nevada, where he performed the invaluable task of maintaining aircraft bound for the European Theatre of Operations. Following his discharge, he returned to Connecticut where he continued his engineering talents as a boat builder and property manager.

**C O M M U N I C A T I O N  C O U R S E  A S S I S T S  V E T E R A N S**

*by Briana McGuckin*

In Dr. Glynis Fitzgerald’s fall 2010 class, titled “Interviewing Theory and Practice,” students learned the latter – practice - through WWII veterans. Each of Dr. Fitzgerald’s students conducted an interview for the Veterans History Project as part of their course work and acquired real-world experience in addition to providing a huge community service. Dr. Fitzgerald remarks, “It has been a real privilege to work with the VHP, providing students with a valuable learning experience while helping to preserve these important stories.”

**VI E T N A M  H E L I C O P T E R  P I L O T**

*Continued from Page 2*

Kjell reflects that his visit to see Smokie II was “fun, but not emotional.” During his time as a pilot, death – and tragedy in general – was undeniably the norm. The helicopter served him well and he would like to see it repainted, bearing its name and spider “nose art” once again, without omitting the red cross of its later role. He is ready and willing to organize a trip with two of his crew members, so that they might do the restoration work themselves.

One of those fellow crew members, Ted Alley, contacted Kjell after hearing about his visit to see Smokie. He writes, “I sat [in the back of the helicopter] half asleep some days and never worried about a thing… I can still see you flying Smokie through the weeds and trees and never making a bobble.” It seems only fitting that Smokie II’s capable pilot should have a hand in its restoration.

Remember Your Heroes this Memorial Day.

**C E N T E R  F O R  P U B L I C  P O L I C Y  &  S O C I A L  R E S E A R C H  A T  C C S U**

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Visit the Veterans History Project!

Online at [http://www.ccsu.edu/vhp](http://www.ccsu.edu/vhp)
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On March 2, 2011, through an event entitled “Service Through the Centuries,” the Veterans History Project and Dr. Matthew Warshauer examined the ways in which we remember war. With the Civil War sesquicentennial just around the corner, it made sense to begin with Dr. Warshauer’s lecture on Connecticut’s Civil War monuments. But we do not only remember war with statues and plaques; staff members of the VHP read passages from letters written by Civil War soldiers, showing that individual voices also serve as monuments of their personal experiences. Finally, video clips from veterans’ VHP interviews were shown. This screening demonstrated that the VHP serves as a digital monument to history, preserving the past for future generations alongside Connecticut’s many statues and plaques.

By the end of these presentations, everyone in attendance could surely sense the connection between all forms of monuments, as well as the one between all soldiers—whether they served in 1861 or 2011.

As the keynote speaker, Professor Matthew Warshauer explained the symbolism of Connecticut’s varied Civil War monuments, as well as the circumstances under which they were built. Although the Constitution State never experienced a battle, these sacred structures were erected as silent guardians of history.

After Lieutenant Governor Nancy Wyman commended the veteran community, Commissioner Linda Schwartz spoke about the value of Connecticut monuments. Commissioner Schwartz’s specific concern was the “Forlorn Soldier;” she promised the monument a new home in an expanded memorial at the Rocky Hill Veterans Center. An Air Force veteran and participant in the Veterans History Project herself, Schwartz linked the proper care for this monument with the ongoing preservation efforts at Central Connecticut State University. The “Forlorn Soldier,” a weathered representation of a Civil War infantryman, serves as a reminder of veterans’ sacrifices, an aim shared by the VHP.

Next, Briana McGuckin and Owen Rogers performed dramatic readings of Civil War letters. The authors ranged from volunteer infantrymen to soldiers in artillery regiments. Video clips of interviews conducted by the VHP were interspersed thematically with the Civil War letters, reinforcing the shared experiences of all soldiers. Regardless of how much time had passed since the letters were written, the details of their hardships resonated with the audience of twentieth century veterans.

Continued on reverse
The VHP takes up the mantle of memorializing history where letters and monuments leave off, building digital monuments in a largely digital age. Accessible online, veterans preserve history as they saw it, in their own words. Furthermore, veterans’ digital oral histories are accessible to anyone with an Internet connection, almost always close at hand. As the wars of the twentieth century reach a sesquicentennial, communities will surely reflect on its military past through VHP interviews and digital collections, never needing to leave their computers.

Approximately 200 people attended the luncheon, 75 of whom were veterans. As participants in the Veterans History Project, many of them were viewing screened clips of their own VHP interviews, making their contribution to history evident. Across the room, an emotional awe gripped the audience as veterans recounted their experiences, confiding moments of horror, sacrifice and, in certain cases, hilarity. These narratives reinforced Central Connecticut State University’s mission to engage the community.

Staff members of the Central Connecticut State University VHP have since been honored with an invitation to repeat the “Service Through the Centuries” presentation in July, at the Old State House in Hartford. This condensed, hour-long version will include Dr. Warshauer’s remarks on the history and meaning of Connecticut’s Civil War monuments, a reading of Civil War letters, and a screening of VHP interviews.

The public nature of the VHP and its easily accessible records contribute to the community understanding of war and the resulting issues faced by its veterans. An ongoing effort, the documentation of Connecticut military experiences provides a rapidly expanding glimpse into conflict, past and present, and its startlingly consistent effect on soldiers through history.

While pausing to observe the Civil War’s sesquicentennial, we should be grateful for the monuments that memorialize the soldiers who have served our country. From statues and letters to the Veterans History Project, Connecticut’s war monuments preserve the past for future generations.