

**'Performing for the Camera' [?]:
Oral History Interviews of Female Military Service Personnel**

Mariana Grohowski (mgrohow@bgsu.edu)

Bowling Green State University

Abstract

This paper examines the discourse female military service personnel use to describe their military service. Using video-recorded oral history interviews available online from the Library of Congress Veterans History Project, the author tests the claim of filmmaker Marcia Rock (*Service: When Women Come Marching Home*) that the video camera “makes the story important,” compelling interviewees to share more because of the camera (Rock). Female military service personnel’s contributions and accomplishments have historically been redacted or omitted from military and national histories, compelling these women to hide/neglect their military service (Ryan, 2009; Benedict, 2009). Comparing oral history interviews that were not video recorded, which the author collected, as well as those available online from the Betty Carter Women Veterans Historical Project; the author offers future research and deliverables on the affordances of various modalities for collecting military service personnel’s oral histories.

Keywords: female military service personnel, oral history, film

In their chapter “Feminist Qualitative Interviewing” Marjorie L. DeVault and Glenda Gross “urge interview researchers to devote more attention to the reception and use of interview research, an area that has been less explored than the conduct of interviews” (2012, p. 228). Inspired by their call, this presentation is an attempt to attend “to the use of interview research” (2012, p. 228) as a method of collecting the oral histories of female military-service personnel to account for these women’s contributions and sacrifices to military and national histories—stories that often go unheard.

Over the past 2 years I’ve done a lot of interviewing with female and male military-service personnel for my dissertation. I’ve always been fascinated by interview as method for storytelling and information gathering. Some of my favorite people are incredible interviewers: Studs Terkle, Bill Moyers, Charlie Rose, Terry Gross, and Neil Cohen . . . In fact, I came to the topic of my dissertation by listening to *Talk of the Nation* . . .

[talk of the nation theme song played]

But that’s another story. The story I want to introduce was stimulated by spending a day with Documentary filmmaker and Professor Marcia Rock (2014), and one of the women from her Emmy award winning documentary, *Service: When Women Come Marching Home* (2011) BriGette McCoy

Over lunch, Rock claimed, that the video camera “makes the story important,” compelling interviewees to share more *because of* the camera (Rock, 2014). Rock delivered this claim came after knowing I was conducting my own interviews with BriGette and other female military-service personnel.

I was taken with Rock’s claim, given what I have learned from interviewing female military-service personnel that I asked Marcia to elaborate on her claim that the camera gets interviewees to share more. And here’s what she said:

I don’t know why, but in my experience, when I turn a camera on to do an interview, it gets the person’s attention, keeps the attention, and takes them into a different space than they would be in if they were just talking one-on-one. Now, I don’t want to say the camera is a truth serum, but sometimes it can be that way. One of the reasons I think is that having the camera on makes the interview subject feel important. And that their story has a lot of meaning beyond themselves. And that is a huge motivation and also provides some confidence in telling the story. But, it’s an interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. So it’s very important to establish trust. So that the subject will open up and I do that in a few different ways. I do a pre-interview where I’ll talk to them to find out what their story is and to be able to organize an interview and know where and how to move things along. So there’s the pre-interview. But then there’s the interaction when you’re actually doing the interview—the eye-contact, the body language—that shows that what the subject is saying is important and that you’re listening. The other thing I do ah, when um recording an interview is I always try to connect the subject’s answer to my next question. Because it doesn’t break their train of thought. That is so key for them to tell their story well. It take some practice but what a difference it makes. I do an exercise with my students where I actually have them break and ask a question that’s on a completely different subject and it really throws everyone. You have to start all over again to get that momentum going. So the camera helps a lot but the way you actually organize the interview and the listening to the answers and the connecting their answers to the next question is really, really important.

As I mentioned earlier, Marcia and I share the connection of BriGette McCoy. BriGette has graciously allowed me to interview her for my dissertation research and she was featured in Marcia's documentary. Since being in the documentary, BriGette has become a nationally recognized veteran woman and advocate for veterans. In the documentary, BriGette shares a story with Marcia and the camera that she hadn't told anyone for twenty-years, since leaving the military. But the day Marcia came to interview BriGette she told her that she had been raped while serving in the military. So I wanted to know BriGette's experience about sharing that much information with Marcia and the camera.

And here's what she had to say:

Me: Why did you feel compelled to tell Marcia?

BriGette: "When you're digitally telling your narrative to someone who isn't a counselor sitting there taking notes and writing stuff down in your mind your thinking what is the weight of what I'm saying, how is that going to be measured against me later?"

Me: Prior to that meeting of her in your house, did you know you were going to share those details?

BriGette: "No, that was organic, it just, ya know the conversation when she got here. It happened. It was good. I feel like it served everything that was said and how it was edited I feel like it served everything."

Professor of Journalism and Communication, Kathleen M. Ryan (2009) has conducted oral history research with women from all over the country, who served in the Navy and Coast Guard during World War II. Ryan might interpret Marcia and BriGette's comments as exemplifying the process of "re-remembering in oral history interview." According to Ryan, "Re-remembering affirms one's personal history while recovering one's history through the process of storytelling" (2009, p. 30) and "In oral history, the manner of telling the story is as important as the story told" (2009, p. 35). In other words, interviewer and interviewee collaborate with one another to tell a single story—the servicewoman's story. In interview, the "story" is a collaborative process (see also Selfe & Hawisher, 2012).

And of course, Rock (2014) agrees with Ryan (2009). And here's Rock.

"What's so interesting about working with the women in *Service* (2011) is that every interview was very different. When I was with Alexis I was in her kitchen and the kids were playing with the dogs and everything and all the sudden she started talking about service dogs and how her dog had helped her avoid using drugs. Had changed the whole dynamic of her family and had given her independence so I was hand-holding it [the camera] and I didn't want to stop and break her thoughts, so the whole interview is handheld and boy was my arm tired after that. But umm with Sue and um BriGette, it was a formal sit-down interview and ah, Alicia too. Ahh we had talked we had um chatted a little bit, they didn't know me that well, I did travel to see them so that made it an important visit. And with Sue I just asked her, tell me about that day. And I didn't have to interrupt her once. She just told the whole story. With BriGette, ah, she sort of wandered around a little bit, but then started giving me so much detail that I don't think she told anyone about the rape she experienced and her treatment. And I think I was so overwhelmed in a way by everything she told me that I didn't even hear an airplane go by so I could ask her an important question twice so I had to keep the airplane in and everybody when they look at it they go, what's that!? That's how involved I was in umm her interview. And ah, Alicia was really terrific. And ah became a really good foil for Sue and really talked about her PTSD in a really important

way and said 'I tell everyone I have PTSD' in such a defiant tone it was really strong and positive statement. So it was really a great experience and one of the nice things about *Service* (2011) is we got a grant from Disabled American Veterans (DAV) to tour with the film and one of the vets went with one of the producers, Patty er Patricia Lee Stotter and they told their stories again in new and different ways and boy did they grow. From having participated in the film and then talking about it."

Ryan's research with women in World War II also reveals, "women often diminish the importance of their lives. 'I didn't do anything important' is a constant refrain in the interviews. But concurrently, the women in the interviews position themselves adjacent to what most would agree is important historically significant events" (2009, p. 26).

I asked Marcia what she thought about this finding. Did she notice women diminishing their service? Here's what she had to say:

Until recently, women have not been allowed in combat. And combat is the most revered part of service. So women tend to put down their contributions because they weren't allowed on the battlefield. That's all changing but in the film, LaShonna served in Iraq she helped build Humvees and armor them. But she still felt she really hadn't contributed that much. And when she saw a benefits officer, she said she didn't deserve benefits that people like Sue who lost her legs in Afghanistan were the one's who really needed the benefits. And the counselor said, "Everyone's equal. Your service is equal to everyone else [*sic*] and you deserve your benefits." And so I think women historically do put themselves down and that has to change because every contribution is a lot if you serve you serve and it doesn't matter if you're on the battlefield or in an office, you served."

Marcia also taught me that people don't tell their stories because they're never asked to share. I think this is particularly true of female military-service personnel past and present. I hope that by sharing my inquiry into the role of the camera in oral history interviewing of women veterans, that you'll be inspired to either ask women to share their stories. Or, you'll explore the oral history interviews available online at the Library of Congress Veterans History Project (<http://www.loc.gov/vets/>) and The Betty Carter Women Veterans Historical Project (<http://library.uncg.edu/dp/wv/>).

References

- DeVault, M. L. & Gross, G. (2012). *Feminist qualitative interviewing: experience, talk, and knowledge*. In S. N. Hesse-Biber (Ed.), *The handbook of feminist research: Theory and praxis*, (2nd ed., pp. 206-236). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Ryan, K. M. (2009). 'I didn't do anything important': A pragmatist analysis of the oral history interview." *The Oral History Review*, 36(1), 25–44.
- Selfe, C. L., & Hawisher, G. E. (2012). *Exceeding the bounds of the interview: feminism, mediation, narrative and conversations about digital literacy*. In L. Nickoson & M. Sheridan (Eds.), *Writing studies research in practice: Methods and methodologies*, (pp. 36–50). Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Stotter, P. (Producer), & Rock, M. (Director). (2011). *Service: When women come marching home* [Motion picture]. USA.

Author

MARIANA GROHOWSKI is a doctoral candidate in Rhetoric and Writing at Bowling Green State University. Her dissertation research explores the multimodal literate practices female veterans use for personal and collective advocacy. She is the vice president for the nonprofit organization Military Experience and the Arts and has taught courses in Intermediate and First-Year Writing.