

# World War II interviewer: 'Every day is Memorial Day'

**Bob Abate**

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It was the news the whole world was waiting for, and when word crackled over the radio in his south Bronx apartment 70 years ago, "my mother and father started laughing and crying at the same time," Bob Abate remembered with a chuckle.

"'The war is over,' they were saying. 'The war is over.' I didn't know what it meant, but I knew it was something special," the now 73-year Abate said of the end of World War II. "It's one of my most vivid childhood memories."

In the months that followed, Abate saw family friends and neighbors come home from the service. Hospital visits to a family friend

recovering from war wounds made a deep impression on him, as did encounters with a neighbor who lost both legs in combat "but never complained one bit.

"By the time I was 6 or 7," Abate said, "I'd decided that there was nothing more heroic than serving your country."

Memorial Day: Parades and remembrances

And those who served should be remembered, said the longtime Yonkers resident, who is retired from a career in sales and marketing.

"They saved the world," Abate said, the respect and awe evident in his voice. "That's all you need to say. We must never forget them, or what they did. That's why every day is Memorial Day to me. There's no such thing as a good war, but this one had to be fought, and it had to be won."

A Navy veteran who attended the U.S. Naval Academy, Abate has spent much of the past 20 years interviewing dozens of Lower Hudson Valley residents who fought in World War II, collecting their oral histories on more than 200 hours of tape recordings and hundreds of pages of transcripts.



Robert Abate of Yonkers holds a box of audio tapesBuy Photo  
Robert Abate of Yonkers holds a box of audio tapes containing interviews he's conducted with more than 100 combat veterans of World War II. (Photo: Joe Larese/The Journal News)  
He's compiled 35 of the more than 100 interviews into a book: "Ordinary Heroes -- In Their Own Words -- The Stories of World War II Combat Veterans from Pearl Harbor to D-Day to Tokyo Bay."

That he hasn't found a publisher is of little consequence to Abate, whose enthusiasm for what seems to be more of a calling than a hobby remains undiminished.

"I don't interview these guys because I want to publish a book," he said. "I interview them because they're heroes, and I love talking to them. Outside of spending time with my family, there's nobody I'd rather spend time with than a World War II veteran. It just makes me feel good."

He started seeking out combat veterans after reading a special section on the 50th anniversary of the end of WWII published by The Journal News in 1995.

"I called every veteran I could find, just to thank them," he said. "Some were very surprised and said that no one had ever thanked them before. Most had never talked about their war experiences, even with their families. I've been doing this ever since."

He's made good friends along the way and over the years has helped some of the veterans get high school diplomas they'd never received, arranged a ceremony for one to receive his unit citation from his local congresswoman, and helped a former Navy frogman obtain the swim fins he used during battles in the Pacific.

"His commitment to these veterans is very impressive," said Roger Keppel of Cold Spring, a Vietnam veteran who met Abate several years ago through a veterans group at the VA Hospital in Montrose. "I know that he tries to be as helpful as he can and really gets involved with them. And the interviews he's compiling are important. This is historical stuff, and some day, some library or museum will be very fortunate to have them."

In April, thanks to Abate's efforts, a ceremony was held to present 100-year-old Army veteran Bill Moyer with an honorary New Rochelle High School diploma. Abate had interviewed Moyer years ago and maintains regular contact with him.

"He's the miracle man," Moyer said of his friend. "I never thought I'd get a diploma, and I wouldn't have if it weren't for Bob. It means a lot to me."

World War II veterans are dying at a rate of more than 1,000 per day, and Abate has attended his share of funerals for men he's interviewed.

One he misses a great deal was Ray Hyman of Mahopac, the former frogman whose swimming fins he helped retrieve. Hyman fought at Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima, Okinawa and other Pacific islands and opened up to Abate during his interview.

"We were all young kids," Hyman told Abate. "We were more afraid of showing our fear. I was glad we swam in the ocean because nobody could see my wet pants."

He also shared a diary with Abate. Entries about making reconnaissance swims in February 1945 vividly describe the feelings of a 19-year-old fighting a war, far from home.

- "Today I died a million times. We hit Iwo Jima. The lieutenant was killed. It was a nightmare. I never saw so much machine gun fire... It was the most horrible day I ever saw."
- "It was a living hell. Dead men were spread all over the beach. In the water. Everywhere you looked. Dead Marines... This slaughter made Tarawa look like a Sunday picnic."
- "I was swimming close to a sunken freighter blocking the beach when the ocean erupted. I rolled over a few times and woke up on the beach. Someone pulled me out. A mortar almost got me. Not hurt bad. Call me lucky."

Abate said that Hyman, who died in 2001, had something in common with all of the veterans he's interviewed: modesty.

"They all insist that they're not heroes, that they didn't do anything special, that they just did their jobs," Abate said. "They all say that the only true heroes are those who were killed and never made it home. Obviously, I disagree."

On Memorial Day, and every day, he said, "we should thank our veterans. Shake their hands. Buy them lunch. Ask them about their experiences. You'll be glad you did. Show them that we appreciate what they did for us. That we care. And that we'll remember."