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SD Department of Veterans Affairs  
Secretary Zimmerman July 2018 Column

**Find the key, unlock the message**

This past year we set out on a mission to find and recognize all of South Dakota's living World War II Veterans. We called it Operation Whirlwind. When we started on this venture there were over 2,200 living World War II Veterans in South Dakota. Six months later, this is not the case. The reality is in a few years there won't be any living World War II Veterans and many of their stories will not have been shared.

Documenting veteran's stories is a way to archive our history, but it is also a great way to develop an appreciation for their experiences. It shows how far we've come and how far we have yet to go.

Veterans memories are of great value to family and friends. Some veterans freely discuss their service. However, many are not comfortable discussing their past. It is important for us to document their stories for future generations. There is nothing better than hearing first-hand what it was like to be there – the visuals, sounds, the smells, the fears, the feelings, the delay in communication. Our World War II, Vietnam and Korean Veterans didn't have Instagram, Facebook, Skype, FaceTime or Twitter. They may have gone months without communication from their families.

The past few years I have had the opportunity to be a part of the Korean War Legacy Foundation and the Korean War Digital History Project. Their goal is to preserve stories and pictures from Korean War heroes, creating a permanent legacy for future generations. Their program instructs social studies teachers on collecting and preserving veteran's stories.

Unlocking the chest of wars and veteran's experiences can be very rewarding. If the key can be found and the chest opened, the stories will flow and history will be documented for future generations.

It is key for all of us to let veterans tell their stories. Listen, listen and listen. Our education and awareness of their stories is a key to their healing and an opportunity for us to hear first-hand the issues and struggles they faced.

As Americans celebrate Independence Day, flags will be raised, parades will stroll through the streets, patriotic music will be played and hopefully our heroes will share their war stories for us to welcome, appreciate, and treasure.

Larry Zimmerman, Secretary