

The background is a dark, textured composition. In the center, a hand is shown holding a military helmet. To the right of the helmet, a pair of white dog tags hangs from a chain. On the left side, a blue pen is visible. The overall aesthetic is somber and evocative of military themes.

# Capturing COURAGE

on Camera

Larry R. Cappetto

"A filmmakers race against time."

# Capturing Courage On Camera®

*(A filmmakers race against time to capture their stories)*

## Introduction —

*H*istory is best learned from those who were there.

Over the past twenty-five years, countless individuals have approached me with the sentiment that I possess the best job imaginable. As an oral historian, I have had the unique privilege of traveling over a million air miles across the globe, dedicated to the monumental task of compiling and assembling one of the most extensive oral histories ever documented and recorded of Americans at war, titled "*Lest They Be Forgotten.*" This initiative captures the voices and experiences of Americans at war, preserving their stories for future generations. Through this journey, I've had the profound honor of connecting with countless veterans, each sharing their personal narratives and enriching the tapestry of history with their invaluable contributions, ensuring that their voices are preserved for future generations. This work serves not only as a tribute to their sacrifices but also as an enduring legacy, ensuring their bravery and experiences are never forgotten. It's both a privilege and a responsibility that reminds me daily of the sacrifices made by our servicemen and women.

Embarking on a journey as a documentary filmmaker has been both an immersive and enlightening experience. Behind the lens, I've been privileged to capture and narrate the untold stories of individuals and communities whose lives are woven into the fabric of American and world history. Each project takes me deeper into the heart of significant events and diverse cultures, with the mission of preserving these narratives for future generations. My role extends beyond storytelling; it's about creating a visual archive that educates and inspires our youth, fostering a greater understanding and appreciation for our rich history and human experiences that shape our world. With each documentary, I aim to bridge the past with the present, ensuring that these powerful stories are not only remembered but cherished and learned from.

These veterans serve as my eyes and ears to a doorway of the past, offering vivid recollections of their youthful days spent in the throes of battle. At just 18 or 19 years old, they found themselves landing on hostile beaches amid enemy fire during World War II, the cacophony of combat surrounding them. They endured the brutal cold of the Chosin Reservoir in Korea, where temperatures plummeted, testing their resilience and spirit. Their narratives transport me to the dense jungles and Central Highlands of Vietnam, where they leapt from UH-1 Huey helicopters into a world alive with both danger and camaraderie. Each story, a firsthand account from those who were there, paints a living picture of courage and sacrifice, bringing history to life with their indelible experiences.

*Capturing Courage On Camera* is a poignant collection that delves into the remarkable stories of veterans whose bravery has shaped history. Among the highlights is the tale of Master Gunnery Sergeant Keith Arnold Renstrom, a World War II veteran of the United States Marine Corps, who fought valiantly in the Battle of Iwo Jima in 1945. His unwavering courage is immortalized through vivid accounts and powerful images. The collection also features the gripping experiences of Sergeant Robert Edward Grass, a Korean War veteran, who bravely faced the harsh challenges of the Chosin Reservoir Battle in 1950 as part of the United States Marine Corps. Furthermore, the enduring spirit of Sergeant Carl Duane Griggs from the United States Army shines through his service with the 5th Special Forces (Green Berets) during the Vietnam War in 1966. Each story captured in this collection paints a vivid portrait of resilience and heroism, offering an intimate glimpse into the lives of those who dared to face the unimaginable in defense of freedom.

*If we don't learn from our history, we are doomed to repeat it,* is a phrase which resonates deeply within those who have lived through pivotal moments in time, particularly veterans whose tales often remain untold. Many veterans carry with them experiences that are both profound and harrowing, yet reticent to share. Understanding the importance of their stories, I have dedicated

myself to creating a non-threatening environment where they feel safe enough to open up. By honing the fine art of listening, I have become adept at not only hearing their words but also truly understanding their emotions and experiences. This empathetic approach has allowed many veterans to sense my genuine care and willingness to listen, encouraging them to share their histories. Through their narratives, we gain invaluable insights into the past, hopefully fostering a wiser, more informed future.

I am not captivated by the blood and guts of war; rather, I am drawn to the personal narratives that unfold beyond the battlefield. Imagine the myriad of stories I have encountered—stories not only of combat, but of resilience and transformation. My interest lies in understanding how these individuals went to war, returned home, and navigated the daunting transition back into civilian life. The phrase "*Once a warrior, wired for life*" encapsulates the permanent impact of war on these veterans. Their experiences abroad indelibly altered them, leaving many Vietnam Veterans to continue fighting their own battles at home. These stories reveal the enduring struggles and triumphs as they strive to find peace in a world that has moved on, yet one in which they continually seek to reconcile their past with their present.

I thank God I have had the opportunity and honor of serving Him and my country through the lens of my camera. My journey has allowed me to capture the poignant stories of veterans, offering them a platform to heal from the emotional scars of war. This has been a liberating and therapeutic experience not just for them, but for me as well. I take immense pride in my veterans, over 1,000 of them, and I'm not ashamed to say I love them. However, my ranks are growing thin, and my work has become bittersweet as I experience the loss of hundreds of my veterans. Each loss feels like losing a member of my family, and it hurts deeply, yet the honor of capturing their stories remains a profound calling.

One of my YouTube viewers perfectly captured my emotions when I lose one of my veterans, describing it as a profound sense of loss and a heavy heart, akin to losing a cherished friend who has been an integral part of my journey.

*“Reflecting on the weight of your experiences, I’ve often thought about the challenges you face knowing so many, only to feel the personal sting of their passing. It is indeed an honorable burden you carry, holding their memories and stories close to your heart. Your ability to honor them by sharing their narratives ensures that their legacies endure, touching lives now and in the times to come. It’s perfectly acceptable, and even healing, to find moments of warmth and joy amidst the sorrow, allowing smiles to shine through the tears, my friend.”*

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Larry Cappetto, Omaha Beach,  
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