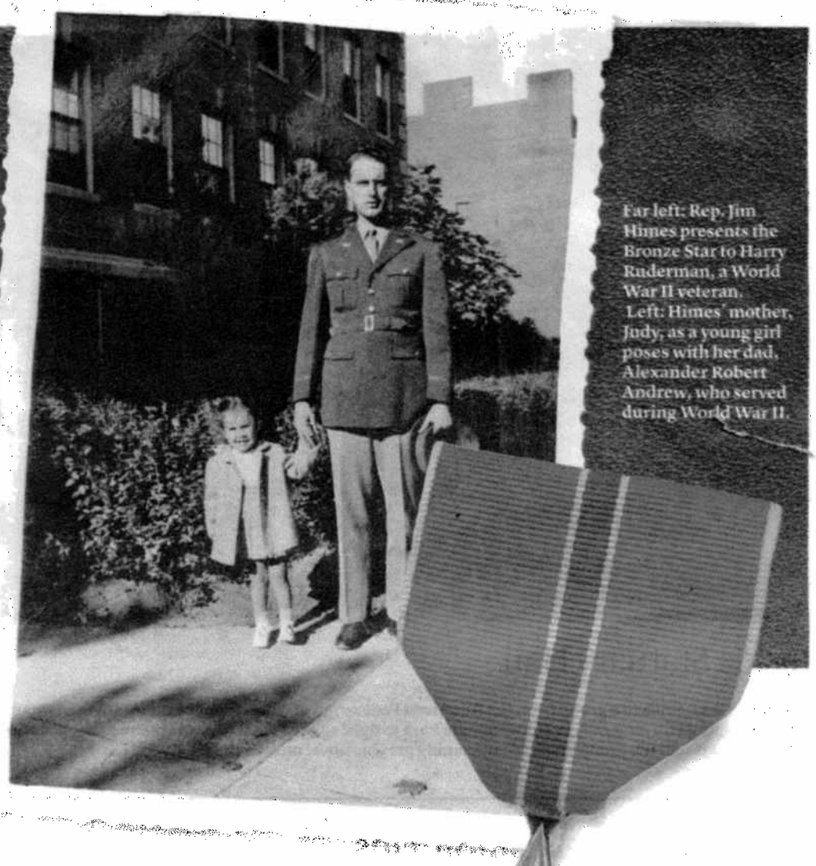
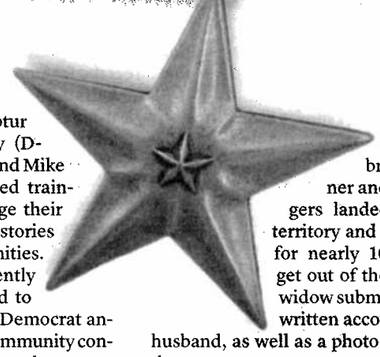
Around the Hill

rollcall.com/ath | News and personalities in the Capitol community

Courtesy Office of Rep. Jim Himes



Far left: Rep. Jim Himes presents the Bronze Star to Harry Ruderman, a World War II veteran. Left: Himes' mother, Judy, as a young girl poses with her dad, Alexander Robert Andrew, who served during World War II.



Project Collects Veterans' Stories

By Jessica Estepa

Korea. Vietnam. Afghanistan. Iraq.

The places where America has fought its wars repeat as you scroll down the page of the Library of Congress' Veterans History Project.

Click. William S. Allen: served in the Army from 1939 to 1946.

In a video interview, Allen shares his account of becoming a prisoner of war in the Pacific during World War II.

Click. John Kline: Vietnam veteran and now a Republican House Member from Minnesota.

Kline talks about how he swapped assignments with a friend, an enlisted Marine who had already been to Vietnam and wasn't eager to return.

"I hadn't been, so I figured it was my turn," Kline said.

On and on the stories flow in the Veterans History Project, from video interviews to photographs that veterans took during their service.

The project aims to gather firsthand accounts of veterans from World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Persian Gulf War and the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts.

Rep. Ron Kind (D-Wis.) wrote the legislation funding the VHP in October 2000, after he informally interviewed his own family members and learned about their experiences. Congress unanimously passed the bill.

Nearly 11 years later, the project has become the largest oral history program in the world, with more than 73,000 individual collections, said Monica Mohindra, the project's head of program coordination and communication.

"This creates a body of knowledge and an archive of wartime memories of America's veterans," Veterans History Project Director Bob Patrick said. "That's why Congress set up the project. It tells of the human experience of war and serves as a resource for research and a source of inspiration for others."

The project also benefits veterans' family members and friends, who may not know the stories of their husbands or neighbors, Patrick said.

"I can't begin to tell you how many times a veteran is telling a story with his wife sitting next to him and she says, 'You never told me that,'" he said.

Over the years, several Members of Congress have contributed to the VHP. In the past year, more than 60 Congressional offices have found ways to participate in the project.

For instance, House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-Va.) established an award to recognize and interview veterans in his district.

Sen. Dick Lugar (R-Ind.) and Rep. Joe Donnelly (D-Ind.) accepted the donation of interviews from a group of 60 WWII vets from Elkhart, Ind.

Sen. Mike Johanns (R-Neb.), former Rep. Debbie Halvorson (D-Ill.), Del. Gregorio Sablan (D-Northern Mariana Islands) and Reps. Marcy Kaptur (D-Ohio), Jerry McNerney (D-Calif.), Jim Moran (D-Va.) and Mike Thompson (D-Calif.) hosted training workshops to encourage their constituents to record the stories of veterans in their communities.

Rep. Jim Himes recently joined the endeavor to add to the VHP. The Connecticut Democrat announced his efforts to get community contributions to the VHP last month.

"There is no better way to honor and give thanks to our war veterans than to have their personal experiences recorded as part of the permanent historical record of this nation," said a letter sent out by Himes' district office. "Whether you're a veteran with a story to share or a friend or family member, I hope you will collaborate with me to create a collection of memories to present to the Library of Congress."

For Himes, the decision was personal. His grandfather served in World War II, helping develop the modern radar system while stationed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge.

"We all forget that there are two wars going on right now," he said. "I felt an obligation to do some aggressive outreach."

Though it has only been a few weeks, the response from Himes' district has produced some compelling stories.

Robert Wagner of Norwalk served in the Air Force during WWII. He flew a glider during the invasion of Burma. After the glider's towline broke, Wagner and his passengers landed in enemy territory and then walked for nearly 100 miles to get out of the jungle. His widow submitted a handwritten account from her husband, as well as a photo of him from the war.

Another account came from Raymond Finlay of New Canaan. Finlay served in the Army Corps of Engineers in WWII, receiving a Silver Star, Bronze Star, Soldier's Medal and Purple Heart for his service in the European theater. His sons sent the descriptions of Finlay's acts.

To qualify for the project, the accounts need to be told by the veteran, whether it's through a recorded interview, a collection of photographs or a written letter. But while a lot of people aren't vets, they probably know one of the 17 million people who can become a part of the VHP, Patrick said.

"We encourage anyone to sit down and record a story," he said. "Whenever people ask what they can do, we say, 'Who's the veteran in your life?' That's the starting point."

The Veterans History Project will host two events next week in conjunction with its featured topic, "Chaplains: On a Divine Mission." More information on the panels and the project can be found at loc.gov/vets.