

Michigan Today

. . . Fall 1999

PROF. DONALD BROWN HELPS STUDENTS DISCOVER THEIR FAMILIES' HISTORY

Why Grandpa Went to WAR

By Katie Williams

Do you know what happened on August 6, 1945?" Prof. [Donald R. Brown](#) asked me.

"I, well, I'm an English major, and I haven't really had a history class since high school." I'd been sitting in his office for about half an hour, and Professor Brown had been firing questions about World War II at me the entire time. Of course, I knew nothing.

"Come on," he said, smiling, his voice sharp with playful daring, "this is an easy one."

"Um, well," I tugged on my sleeve and called up the memory of my weasel-like high school world history teacher with a gentle comb-over. I didn't remember him teaching about World War II, so I tried to make a good guess. "Was that the bombing of Hiroshima?"

"Yes." Professor Brown sat back and nodded, like he'd confirmed something about me.

The truth was, I was the one who had confirmed something about me. Professor Brown had been telling me about his experience as a soldier in World War II, an experience that must still quiver with pain, and I knew nothing about the war. What's more, I didn't even know if my own grandfather had fought in it. There was this huge war not so long ago that had irrevocably changed millions of peoples' lives indirectly affected my own life, and all I knew about it was what I'd seen in [Schindler's List](#).

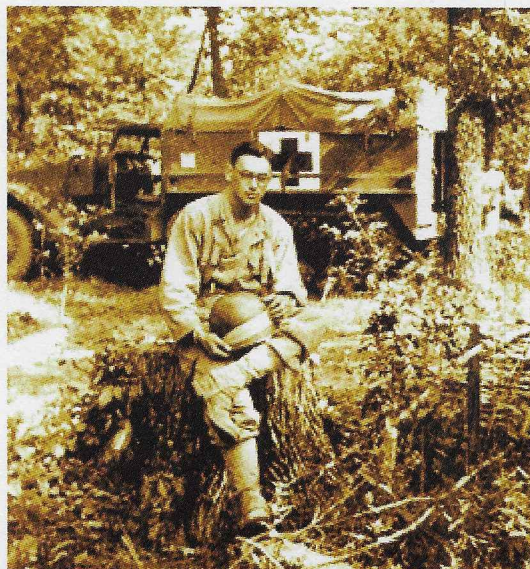


Photo courtesy Donald R. Brown

Brown as a teen-age soldier in World War II.

I thought of my own grandpa, with his sweet disposition and countless bad (I mean, really bad) jokes, who had attended birthday parties and Christmas celebrations for my entire life, and I didn't even know if he'd been a soldier in World II. It was a problem.

My incompetence, of course, was exactly what Professor Brown was talking about, exactly why he'd decided, even though he has retired, to teach a freshman seminar, "Why Grandpa Went to War."

Professor Brown is long on anecdotes and opinions and, of course, experiences. He is a professor emeritus in the [Department of Psychology](#) who came out of retirement to teach 20 freshmen each year about World War II. The seminar, which was filled to its limit last winter and will be taught again this winter term, has an agenda; Brown uses videos, guest speakers, as well as the students own grandparents, to "make history come alive."

The class works a little differently from most. Research isn't done by wandering through library stacks but by listening to the stories of the people who really lived during World War II and reading a number of histories and memoirs. Brown also invites a series of guest speakers from the area. A retired University faculty member talks about volunteering to fight in the Spanish Civil War. Another scholar recalls his childhood in Ethiopia, watching his parents and grandparents try to fend off Mussolini's army with only spears clenched in their fists.

The course begins with the political events and national tensions following World War I. Brown wants his students to understand that WWI was "an unnecessary war that people stumbled into; World War II came about because World War I was never properly resolved." He teaches them how resentment between countries can build, how overlooked skirmishes and small takeovers can soon become a national emergency in which innocent people die in droves. When asked if he thinks a war like World War II could happen again, he nods and says emphatically, "Yes. It could happen again."

As the class focus moves from the loose ends of WWI to the beginning of WWII, Brown speaks to his students not of the battle summaries and death counts found in text books, but of his own experience as an 18-year-old soldier fighting for the United States. He told part of that story to me.

Brown shipped out for training after only one year at Harvard. He soon sneaked away from base and caught his first glimpse of his wife of 55 years, a sorority girl at Indiana University. He talked about going to battle. He pointed to a statement of gratitude on the wall, for it was his



Photo by Donald R. Brown

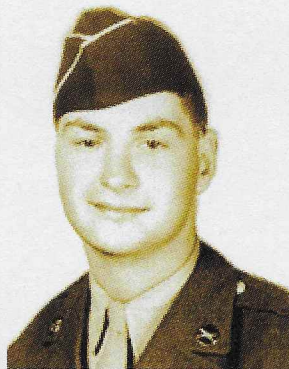
Brown took this photo when he and fellow U.S. Army troops liberated the Dachau concentration camp

troop that liberated the concentration camp, Dachau. But what was most striking about Brown's story was the undercurrent of urgency to his voice. I felt that he wanted so much for me to understand just how lonely and scary it was to be fighting a war at 18, and how strongly he hoped that that would never happen to anyone again.

Through his class about wars and infantry, Brown builds a type of army of his own. Halfway through the term at spring break, he deploys 20 freshmen, armed with the desire to find their own grandparents' truths. Their objective: an interview and paper based on conversations with an older relative about his or her experience during World War II, writing a personal account of what it was like "when grandpa went to war."

The results are amazing. Brown had the final papers stacked carefully in a cardboard box; most were 20 pages long, some spanned to 30 and 40. All had carefully crafted cover sheets or title pages. Many of them had pictures and graphics. Many had family photos taken from home of grandparents and grandchildren together.

The reason the students spend so much effort on this project is that they realize "they didn't really know their grandparents other than as nice old people who give them presents," Brown says. "Then they talk with and discover that, one, their grandpas were a bunch of 18-year-olds, and then, what they did was go fight a war, which they can't imagine themselves doing. They see grandpa as a person and can empathize, because he's [talking about being] 18 years old."



Jenni Glenn learned that her grandfather, Martin Breslau of Philadelphia, was 19 when he fought in the Battle of the Bulge. He was imprisoned by the Germans and held until the end of the war.

Photo courtesy Jenni Glenn

Brown's students echo his words, talking about the emotional and personal impact the interviews with their grandparents had on them. Sophomore political science major Steven Lezell of Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, recalls that "focusing on questions dealing with the War and the Depression eliminated the stereotypical 'When I was your age...' talk and opened the door to a room filled with stories, experiences, loves and tragedies. My grandfather and I have been closer ever since. Each day we see one another, I am reminded of his struggles and his accomplishments. Each day I admire him just a little bit more."



History major Jenni Glenn '02 of Midland, Michigan, had a similar experience. "I begged Professor Brown to let me into the class after it filled up because my grandfather has been ill on and off again for the past two years. I thought that this could be one of my last chances to hear about his

experiences. It changed my relationship with my grandfather during the last six months, which I'm especially grateful for since my grandfather had a stroke two weeks ago. That was just another reminder for me that I don't know how much longer we will be able to spend together. Thanks to Professor Brown, I know however long that is, it will be quality time."

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I was on the phone with my mother two nights ago, and I asked her if Grandpa had fought in World War II. "Well, I don't know," she said. "He was in the service and he's 83, but I don't know if he fought."

It isn't often that a class becomes more than facts to be learned. It isn't often that a class talks about 18-year-olds marching off to kill and being killed. It isn't often that a class faces up to the pictures of Dachau's slaughter, pictures so complete that all words become understatement. It isn't often that a class causes grandfathers to cry and grandchildren to listen. And it isn't very long before this class stops being a class and starts being a very, very important experience.

"Never forget" is the watch cry of those who braved the concentration camps, and this class is part of that, part of that remembering and learning and healing.

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