Hello, I’m Paula Johnson, the project director and co-curator of the “On the Water” exhibition. This activity involves listening to portions of recorded interviews with people who served their country during World War II. Although none of them was in the military, these men and women worked in shipyards or aboard merchant ships, carrying supplies, machinery, and ammunition to troops fighting in other parts of the world. As you will learn when you hear their stories, they faced untold dangers and risked their lives to carry out their jobs.

These recorded stories are what we call oral histories—a person’s narrative in his or her own words—about their experiences and lives. At the National Museum of American History we record and videotape interviews with many Americans because to make sure their voices and experiences are heard. Official documents of history such as military records, newspaper articles, and government papers only tell part of the story of an event, community, or place. By recording the stories of real people—and preserving those recordings for the benefit of future generations—a more inclusive, diverse, and personal picture emerges about the events of history.

Before we record or videotape someone’s story, we prepare by reading as much background material as possible. We usually speak with the individual several days ahead of time to get a sense of the person’s storytelling style and to review the topics we’ll be discussing. It’s important to find a quiet space to conduct the interview; you don’t want phones ringing or dogs barking or even the refrigerator humming. Find a place where the speaker feels comfortable. Although I always come prepared with a list of questions and topics, the interview usually takes on a more conversational tone. It’s important to really listen as the stories unfold; ask follow-up questions and indicate by your attention and body language your respect for the speaker’s effort.

So, please get ready to focus your attention and listen carefully to the voices and memories of these people who are sharing stories with us.