

How one student's
thesis has attracted
millions of readers

by *David McKay Wilson*

Citizen Historian



and helped bring
together families
affected by World

War II

Jason McDonald (above), author of the World War II Multimedia Database, stands on the deck of the U.S.S. Intrepid. The aircraft carrier, which was commissioned in 1943 and served in World War II, is the home of the Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum. In June, McDonald delivered a talk, "Researching World War II Iconic Photography Online," as part of the museum's Focus on History lecture series. Through his research and writing, McDonald has related stories of the people and events depicted in hundreds of the most iconic photos of the war. *Photo by Chris Taggart*

JASON MCDONALD

was just a boy when he read *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, William Shirer's monumental study of Nazi Germany. While he was too young to fully comprehend the scope and brutality of World War II, the experience presaged McDonald's fascination with the conflict that engaged armies around the globe for so many bloody years.

Today, the World War II Multimedia Database—which McDonald created as his senior thesis at Fordham School of Professional and Continuing Studies, where he earned a B.A. in history in 2001—has blossomed into a website that attracts 1.3 million viewers a year. It includes essays, video footage from climactic battles and a treasure trove of iconic photographs from the National Archives that McDonald has captioned with painstaking precision.

"I've been staring at some of these pictures since I was a kid," said McDonald, 42, who teaches computer literacy to fifth- and sixth-graders at Packer Collegiate Institute in Brooklyn. "Finding out the stories behind the pictures makes for a very interesting time."

The site, worldwar2database.com, has added important details to the historical record, but it also has helped bring together families whose loved ones fought and died in the war. Sue Johnson of North Dakota, whose uncle Gerald Block survived the Bataan Death March only to die when a Japanese freighter carrying almost 1,800 prisoners-of-war was sunk by an American torpedo, finally learned about Block's war experiences through McDonald.

"We knew of our uncle on paper," Johnson said. "He was tucked away in a box. Through Jason, we got to meet the man who knew my uncle as a friend and soldier. I never thought this would ever happen. What Jason does is magical."

Like blogging journalists who publish their work outside of traditional news outlets, McDonald is part of growing community of citizen historians who disseminate their work online, without a book deal or a seat in the halls of academe. For Michael Marmé, Ph.D., assistant professor of history at Fordham, McDonald's work harkens back to the 19th century, when most historians had day jobs as diplomats or clergymen.

"Jason is very much in the tradition of the high-level popularizer who makes his research accessible and reaches as broad an audience as he can," Marmé said. "He is very meticulous to make sure he gets all his facts straight."

McDonald also found a way to fund his research. Advertising revenue he receives through Google's AdSense program covers some of the site's production costs. "The traffic got to be so high I had to rent my own Web server," McDonald said. "I couldn't afford it without the Google ads."

The site's traffic is driven by the world's continued captivation with World War II, a conflict that involved combat on six continents and, scholars estimate, killed as many as 72 million people. Visitors to the site include the ever-dwindling community of living veterans and their families. McDonald said the database records its heaviest traffic in April and May, when high school students across the United States study World War II. His gallery of photographs with detailed captions provide the kind of primary documents history students use to deepen their understanding of the war.

McDonald conceived the project in 2000 while considering what element of the war he'd tackle in his undergraduate thesis at Fordham. At the time, he was running the media lab and television studio at the United Nations International School.

"The idea of the website really clicked with me," said McDonald, who supported his 250-page thesis with 2,000 annotated photographs. He graduated from Fordham *summa cum laude* and went on to earn a master's degree in media studies at the City College of New York in 2009.

Edward Bristow, Ph.D., professor of history at Fordham, served as McDonald's mentor during the website's creation. He is not surprised the site has become a widely used resource in the past decade.

"His success shows how dedicated and imaginative history graduates can make an important contribution, follow their passion and achieve success, all without entering the conventional academic realm," Bristow said. "This should be an inspiration to all history majors."

McDonald's personal connection to the conflict comes through his grandfather, Woodrow Wilson Brown, who served as a U.S. Marine Corps medic in the Pacific battle of Guadalcanal in 1942. McDonald recalls curling up in a chair as a child to read—and reread—his grandfather's gripping, unpublished memoir of the battle, including the time his grandfather was recovering from malaria and lay helpless in a hospital bed as 2,000-pound Japanese shells rained down on the island.

At McDonald's home in Manhattan's Stuyvesant Town, where he lives with his wife, Terry Meyers, and 4-year-old son, Ronan, his bookcases brim with books about

“Jason is incredible. He can find a needle in a haystack.”

the war, categorized by the European or Pacific theaters. And his computer holds hundreds of digitized pictures from the National Archives, which he captions with the soldiers' names and weaponry, the sites where the photos were taken and the planes or boats on which the subjects were photographed. It was McDonald's research on a rare photograph of the Bataan Death March that brought Sue Johnson together with the Alabama man who remembers her uncle well.

The grainy photo, which was taken by a member of the Japanese press and later captured by the U.S. Army, did not identify any of the prisoners of war. Through an



This photo, taken in 1942 and released by the U.S. Army in 1945, after it was captured from the Japanese military, shows U.S. and Filipino prisoners of war at the start of the Bataan Death March. U.S. Col. Glenn Frazier (third from left, in black pants) credits his fellow POW Gerald Block with helping him survive the ordeal. And he credits Jason McDonald with helping him connect with the family of his former comrade, who did not survive the war.

online search, McDonald read about U.S. Army Col. Glenn Frazier, who'd been featured in the 2007 Ken Burns documentary, *The War*. It turned out Frazier was one of the prisoners in the picture. And he could identify the man marching right behind him with a towel around his neck. It was Gerald Block, the man Frazier credited with saving his life during one of the war's grimmest episodes, in which an estimated 75,000 American and Filipino prisoners were subjected to a brutal 60-mile journey by foot, with little food or water. When Frazier fell ill, Block brought him water. And when Frazier couldn't drink, Block put the damp towel to his comrade's lips.

Frazier, who survived the war and now lives in Daphne, Ala., had been looking for Block's family for more than six decades.

To help him, McDonald searched the 1930 U.S. Census to see if Block had siblings who might be alive. He learned that Block's brother, Norbert, had died, but Norbert's wife was still living. And through an online search McDonald discovered that the family held an annual memorial service in Block's honor at their local church.

McDonald wrote to the pastor of the church, who then contacted Johnson.

"When I heard from the minister," Johnson said, "I was jumping for joy."

In June, she traveled to Pittsburgh to meet Frazier and his wife, Terri, at a reunion of the Descendants of American Defenders of Bataan and Corregidor.

"Jason is incredible," said Terri Frazier. "He can find a needle in a haystack."

Johnson, meanwhile, spoke at length with Frazier, learning about her uncle's heroism and devotion to his fellow soldier. McDonald then put Johnson in touch with U.S. Sen. Kent Conrad, who moved quickly to obtain for the family the war medals that Block earned but never lived to receive.

The positive feedback McDonald has received regarding his research has spurred him to return to graduate school. He is applying for admission to Fordham's doctoral program in history and hopes to return to the classroom in fall 2012, while continuing to teach at Packer.

In the meantime, he is deep into his next mystery—the whereabouts of a secret cache of photographs reportedly buried in a jar on Bataan that McDonald has been told the U.S. Army may possess. It's another needle in the World War II haystack that he's determined to find.

"I'm looking for something that may or may not exist," he said. "Who knows? If I run into a roadblock, I'll just keep plugging. It's a question of perseverance and keeping a very open mind."

—David McKay Wilson is a frequent contributor to this magazine.