

VOICES OF VETERANS



Voices of Veterans

Vietnam War Oral History Lesson Plan

Drawing from oral history interviews with Danny Garrett,
Ed Hark, Ray Castaneda, and Ken Wallingford

Suggested Grade

High School
TEKS HIS 8(E)(F)

Caution: Some of the full-length VOV oral history interviews might contain adult content or offensive language. Teacher discretion is advised.

Time Required: 1-2 class periods depending on amount of discussion time (plus lesson extension assignment)

Guiding Questions

What is oral history? What can we learn from oral histories that we cannot learn from written sources? How might oral histories be less useful than the written record?

What do the oral histories of Vietnam veterans tell us about the military tactics and conditions of this conflict? Over time, how did these challenges make it more difficult for the U.S. to remain in Vietnam?

In what ways might the experiences of Vietnam veterans have differed from those who served in earlier, or later, conflicts? In what ways might their experiences be similar?

Objectives

Understand some of the contributions and limitations of oral histories as a primary source; and

Have a deeper understanding of military operations and conditions faced by veterans in the Vietnam War.

Needed for the Activity

- Oral history excerpts sheet
- Lesson plan activity worksheet
- Pencil or pen

Activity Instructions

- Distribute the oral history excerpts and activity worksheet to students
- Initiate oral history warm up exercise (see below)
- Model the first excerpt and note-taking activity. After each excerpt is read, provide time for the students, in small groups, to discuss and write their observations on the notes part of the activity worksheet.
- After all observations have been recorded lead the students in a class discussion of the activity questions.

Warm Up Activity (No more than 10 minutes)

- Ask the students to share their impressions of what combat and ground conditions might have been like in the Vietnam War. Their answers might be derived from movies they have seen or games they have played. Discuss the following as a class:
 - Where do their impressions of the Vietnam War come from?
 - How accurate do they think movies and games are when it comes to depicting what it was like for the average soldier on the ground or in the air?
 - Have adults talked to them about their memories of the war? Their views of it? Their personal experiences? If so, did what they share with you affect the way you thought about the war?
 - Familiarize the students with the concept that while the documentary record for the Vietnam War is vast, we also know a lot from recorded oral histories of veterans who fought in the war, and that these first-person recollections are what we call oral history.

Lesson Extension

Students put together a project on a Vietnam-related topic that utilizes oral history content. The project can take a variety of forms depending on teacher approval and the skills and interests of the student. Some potential examples:

- Short graphic novella
- Podcast
- Journal entries or series of letters from the perspective of a military service member in Vietnam
- An original oral history interview with a Vietnam Era veteran
- A compare/contrast exercise between the tactics and conditions of the Vietnam War and a later/earlier war
- An essay answering a prompt of the teacher's choosing
- Designing a local Vietnam War memorial or monument

Potential Vietnam War Discussion / Project Topics

Mobilization and deployment (the draft, voluntary enlistment, multiple tours)

Combat conditions, battles, MIAs and POWs

Media coverage of the war

Training (Basic, Advanced, & Specialist)

Relationship between U.S. forces and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN)

Vietnamization and the withdrawal of American forces

Impressions of Vietnam (arrival, day-to-day, interaction with civilians, weather, environment, etc.)

Military tactics and their advantages/disadvantages (e.g. “search and destroy”, guerilla warfare, the role of aircraft and air support, booby traps)

Mental and physical health post-war (PTSD, wartime injuries, effects of Agent Orange)

Down time/R&R, USO events

Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, Escalation

The Silent Majority/Anti-war sentiment and protests

Accidents/wounds/illness, medical treatments and protocols, Mobile Army Surgical Hospital (MASH) units

Tet Offensive

The Vietnam War Memorial in Washington D.C.

Lesson Notes for the Educator

Some potential topics to explore with the students in the group discussions:

- Throughout history, written records (newspapers, government documents, letters, private journals, autobiographies, maps, etc.) have disproportionately been created by those with power and wealth. As valuable as they are as historical sources, they provide only a limited window into what majorities of people thought and did in the past. Oral histories provide a democratizing balance by letting ordinary people speak for themselves. It also allows historians to learn about details of the past that no one at the time saw a need to commit to paper. Like documents, however, they have their limits: memories can be distorted versions of the truth, filled with inaccuracies or bias. People can withhold vital information because they are not comfortable sharing details, or the right questions were never asked. And one person’s experience or interpretation is not necessarily representative or the only viewpoint on the subject.
- The Vietnam conflict was a twenty-year civil war that involved multiple nations (of which the United States was one). In addition to recognizing the plurality of nations affected by the conflict, students should also be primed to understand that the Vietnamese people, both soldiers and civilians, were not a monolithic group. The differences between the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), the Viet Cong, and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN, or South Vietnamese Army) should be explored so students appreciate the complexity of the conflict.
- An understanding of the progression of the war—especially escalation—must include an awareness of the military challenges facing the United States as it became more committed to defeating the North Vietnamese Army. The U.S. had a variety of advantages, such as air and naval dominance, superior logistics and supply chains, and advanced bombing capabilities. But they were also hampered by difficult environmental conditions and unfamiliar terrain, declining public support back home, problems locating (and sometimes identifying) enemy combatants, and enemy forces adept at guerilla warfare and willing to tolerate high casualties (when the U.S. preferred to fight a conventional and limited war).
- The defoliant and herbicide known as Agent Orange helped U.S. forces use their superior air power to bomb the trails and supply lines used by the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army. However, in exchange it caused widespread ecological destruction and subjected American military personnel, enemy combatants, and civilians to toxic chemicals which had the potential to cause long-term harm.
- The taking of prisoners of war (POWs) has been a feature of warfare for millennia. In many wars POWs have been kept in terrible conditions and poorly treated, even tortured. During the Vietnam conflict, however, U.S. prisoners of war were also held and exploited for propaganda purposes and as bargaining chips to achieve desired political outcomes.

FIRSTHAND ORAL HISTORY (EXCERPTS)

Excerpt 1: Danny Garrett

Voices of Veterans Oral History Interview (November 19, 2019)

 Recorded Interview (46:09): voicesofveterans.org/oral-history/garrett



Garrett Interview

November 19, 2019

Danny Garrett (U.S. Army): “After being trained, I was a forward observer that was attached to Alpha company. We were in a . . . fortunately, we were in an AO, an area of operation that was settled agricultural. It wasn’t the jungle, it wasn’t the beaches, it wasn’t the rivers and the mountains. It was just in a little river valley where there were a lot of villages, and a lot of rice patties, and wood lines, and rivers and streams. But it was heavily VC sympathetic. They tried to subdue it. That’s what Lieutenant Calley’s experience was all about. But they never did. [Note: Garrett is referring to Lt. William Calley, the only convicted participant in the 1968 massacre of Vietnamese civilians at My Lai committed by American soldiers]. I was attached to an infantry company that got up in the morning very early, ate, geared up, and moved out and we spent about six hours in the morning and early afternoon walking around the countryside “patrolling”—that’s in quotes. What we were really doing was trying to get somebody to engage us, to get some local VC to engage us so that we can engage them and hopefully engage them long enough to surround them and drop our [artillery] on them and clean up. . . . What little engagement we did run into was essentially small arms fire, occasional rocket propelled grenade, or booby traps, which were made from our unexploded ordnance. That is what we did. We just walked around trying to start a fight and engage the enemy and win that fight. The enemy was reluctant to do so because of our superior fire power. When we did engage it was a hit and run on their part. . . . [The Viet Cong] were guerillas. They weren’t regular army. They were quite brave and very determined, and I highly respected them. We did, however, manage to engage early on a battalion of North Vietnamese Army [NVA] regulars, and these were regular soldiers just like us, highly trained, highly disciplined and because they were fighting a civil war in their country. . . . very, very dedicated to winning that war, which they eventually did. Those, the NVA that I engaged were every bit as professional, dedicated, and brave as our forces were. Highly respected the North Vietnamese. I think every American did. . . . What I remember most [about combat] was engaging with this North Vietnamese battalion and we essentially got surrounded by them and had to call airstrikes on our position to keep from being overrun. . . . We were under attack all night long, and of course, we had superior fire power, but . . . that advantage of superior fire power is really only effective in daylight hours. It used to be said that the Americans controlled the day and the North Vietnamese controlled the night, which is pretty much true. We were under attack all night long and we were able to successfully defend ourselves the next morning. An overwhelming force came in to outflank the enemy. . . . push him back and when that happened helicopters were called in to extract us.”

Excerpt 2: Ed Hark

Voices of Veterans Oral History Interview (September 25, 2009)

 Recorded Interview (1:16:05): voicesofveterans.org/oral-history/hark



Hark Interview

September 25, 2009

Ed Hark (U.S. Marines): “We were a front-lined, rifle platoon. We were in the bush 20 days out of 30, probably 25 out of 30, and it wasn’t unusual for us to be out three weeks or four weeks at a time. When you’re getting about two hours of sleep a night and it’s not very restful sleep, when you’re eating in most cases one C-ration a day, as opposed to three, when you’re living under a lot of stress, probably the major casualties that we saw were either from snipers or from booby traps. The biggest battle that I was ever in in an all-out gunfight was the last one I was in. Most of them were very quick firefights that didn’t last very long. They’d hit you when they want to hit you at night. They’d hit you one side, they’d ambush a platoon, they’d ambush a squad, they would do what they had to do and then they would disappear into the night. It was just bad moments and it made for I guess hypersensitivity. It takes something out of you I guess, and that’s where you get that sort of numbness...”

Excerpt 3: Ray Castaneda

Voices of Veterans Oral History Interview (July 23, 2018)

 Recorded Interview (59:52): voicesofveterans.org/oral-history/castaneda1



Castaneda Interview

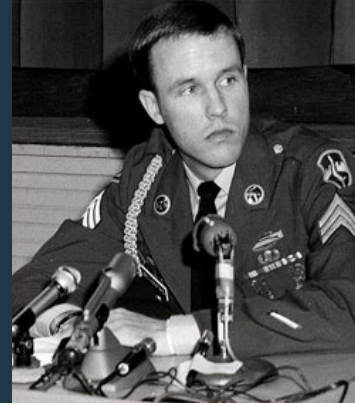
July 23, 2018

Ray Castaneda (U.S. Army): “...Anger starts coming in because it’s so hot, 116 degrees, 118...I mean, you talk about hot. I went from 195 pounds to 130 [pounds] in about seven months...I dropped some weight. I aged a lot. I knew [the American military was] using Agent Orange. Agent Orange is a chemical they used like Round Up weed killer. They used Agent Orange in Vietnam to kill the foliage so they could see the NVAs that were coming through the trails because with the jungle they couldn’t see nothing from the air, so they would spray that stuff and every leaf on the tree would be gone by morning. So it was pretty strong stuff. Supposed to be something like five hundred times stronger than Round Up full strength. And they told us it was not harmful to us. But we drank the water from the rivers, we slept on the ground. You [were] always in Agent Orange. Always. I’m [now] classified 100% [disabled]. The [Veterans Administration] sends me a little bit of money. My body’s breaking down.”

Excerpt 4: Ken Wallingford

Voices of Veterans Oral History Interview (August 14, 2009)

 Recorded Interview (1:02:21): voicesofveterans.org/oral-history/wallingford



Wallingford Interview

August 14, 2009

Ken Wallingford (U.S. Army): "...a few minutes later I heard these little thumping sounds coming in on our compound, mortar rounds, which intensified artillery rounds later on, and...probably about three hours later, we kind of intercepted enough radio transmission to figure out that we had been hit or were being attacked by three divisions of North Vietnamese soldiers and each division has 10,000 [men]. So you got five Americans, 200 South Vietnamese [allied soldiers] [against] 30,000 NVA and Viet Cong soldiers. So we called in the Air Force for air support. They provided support 24/7 for about two and a half days just trying to keep the guys off of us...

...On the third morning – now we'd gone without food, sleep, or water. I was monitoring the radio in our position from the headquarters and so forth, so you knew kind of what was going on, and so on the third day of that battle driving Russian tanks, [the enemy] came through the perimeter, and overran the camp... My game plan was to go find a secure position and hide and try and escape and evade—E&E—that night. Well I thought I found a secure position between two buildings. We put a wall of sandbags in front of us to kind of conceal our location, and no sooner had I got that last sandbag in place, a big explosion went off. And the next thing I felt like half my head had been blown away. I felt hot, burning shrapnel on different parts of my body, and I literally saw my whole life flash before me... I got on the radio and I can remember telling the commander of the air strikes, I said you put everything you got all over us. Get these guys out of here. Because the last thing I wanted to have happen was to be taken prisoner... we didn't want any [American] helicopters land and rescue because it was just too hot an area. And so we didn't want to take that risk. So we went into this other secure place, had a door on it, we had a couple of ARVN rangers, and rangers they wear different uniforms and so they're usually identified as being kind of the best of the best if you will, and so we got on the radio that night and the battery started going dead and it was night fall and so forth. We basically didn't have any more communication with the air support. And the next morning [the enemy] came back in because they knew there were still guys in there...So they just systematically went through the compound...the [South Vietnamese ARVN] rangers started stripping down out of their uniforms...I mean the Viet Cong and the NVA was right there with guns pointed at us, and they took three or four, if I remember correctly, of the ARVN rangers around the side and shot 'em...

...[After leaving the camp and] walking, they made us stop at one bunker. In fact it's this picture here - there's a big bomb crater that's in front of us and so they made us stop and pose [for photographs] with our heads down and our hands tied up, and the caption read 'Look, we've caught the American imperialist,' as they called us...I don't know how many, but it seemed like a bunch, a lot of the NVA and Viet Cong just kind of popped up behind trees with cameras, just started taking pictures. And so probably for the next 10 hours, we walked, we didn't know where we were going. We knew we were gonna go out of Vietnam [and into Cambodia], and about halfway along that walk, the guy that was with me and Carlson had to help me because I just couldn't walk any further."

End of Class Reflection Questions

Lead the students in a group discussion and ask them to reflect on the Vietnam War veterans' experiences by sharing the observations on their activity worksheet. In particular:

1. How would you describe the ground and combat conditions these veterans found themselves in?
2. What operational advantages, and disadvantages, did the American military, North Vietnamese Army (NVA), and Viet Cong each have? What tactics did each side use to try to exploit the weaknesses of their opponent(s) or maximize their own advantages?
3. In what ways did American aircraft play a critical role in the war?
4. In what ways did terrain and environment play a critical role in the war?
5. What experience or detail stood out to you and why?
6. In what ways did the veterans' experiences compare to their previous impressions of the Vietnam War?

ACTIVITY WORKSHEET

VOICES OF VETERANS

| | Danny Garrett | Ed Hark | Ray Castaneda | Ken Wallingford |
|---|---------------|---------|---------------|-----------------|
| Three major / important details | | | | |
| Unfamiliar words, phrases, or acronyms | | | | |
| How would you describe the narrator's conditions? | | | | |
| In what ways did American aircraft play a critical role? | | | | |
| In what ways did terrain and / or environment play a critical role? | | | | |
| What stood out to you and why? | | | | |

Using examples from the excerpts, what are some of the military advantages and disadvantages each group had? Advantages might include the ability to take certain actions that your opponent cannot, or access to certain resources or equipment, or specific information or skills that your opponent does not have. Think about the ways that groups who did not have a certain advantage tried to compensate for that weakness and overcome it.

| | Advantages | Disadvantages |
|-----------------------------|------------|---------------|
| U.S. Military | | |
| Viet Cong (VC) | | |
| North Vietnamese Army (NVA) | | |