



Voices of Veterans

Vietnam War Oral History Lesson Plan

Drawing from oral history interviews with Ken Wallingford,
Ed Hark, Danny Garrett, and James Willbanks

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 their own and others' views of the war, both at the time and in the years that followed? What are the rights, obligations, and challenges of being an American citizen during wartime?

In what ways might the experiences of Vietnam veterans have differed from those who served in earlier, or later, conflicts? What experiences might all soldiers from all wars share in common?

Objectives

By the end of the lesson students should

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

Have a deeper understanding of the divisive nature of the Vietnam War, the effects it had and continues to have on veterans, and the diversity of veteran viewpoints about what is expected of Americans in wartime.

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 how many of them have family or friends currently serving in the military or have family members who are veterans.
- Ask them to share their impressions of how the U.S. views and treats its veterans today, or what comes to mind when they think of military veterans more generally. Encourage them to think of as many things as they can, whether positive or negative. Their answers might be wide ranging and could include some of the following: the phrase “Thank you for your service,” veteran-focused charities and organizations, social media posts and online videos of returning veterans from Iraq or Afghanistan, personal anecdotes, high rates of veteran homelessness, mental health and drug addiction issues, veteran suicide rates, PTSD, physical injuries and rehabilitation, Veterans/Memorial Days, expressions of gratitude, anger at wars they consider unjustified, etc. Then discuss the following as a class:
 - What factors might make it difficult for a returning veteran to talk about their military service?
- 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

After completing the lesson students should read the additional extension excerpts provided (Lesson Extension Excerpts 1 and 2). Drawing from these and the class lesson excerpts, have them write a response paper that compares/contrasts the views expressed by the veterans while answering the following question:

What are the rights, obligations, and challenges of being an American citizen during wartime—for a civilian or a soldier—especially during an unpopular war?

Students should be instructed to explore issues such as free speech (especially critical speech), the arguments for and against a drafted army as opposed to an all-volunteer army, and how duty can or should be defined. Optional: Ask students to share their own points of view on these issues and to what extent their views do or do not align with the views expressed in the oral history excerpts.

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.
- After the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and the escalation of troops and bombing that began to intensify in the late 1960s, American support for the war fell. It was fueled by higher American and Vietnamese casualty rates, unprecedented media coverage that brought “the first televised war” into people's homes via war correspondents, protests on college campuses and growing hostility to the draft, and outspoken critics of the war ranging from leaders of the civil rights movement, anti-war groups such as Vietnam Veterans Against the War, and high-profile activists such as Jane Fonda, who traveled to Hanoi in 1972 as the guest of the North Vietnamese. In contrast, President Nixon dubbed the millions of Americans who disapproved of anti-war sentiment as the Silent Majority. This polarizing of American public opinion added another layer of difficulty to how veterans processed their military service during and after the war.
- 1.8 million American men were drafted into the Vietnam conflict between 1964 and 1973. Most of the United States' major wars have been fought with a combination of drafted and enlisted men, including the Civil War, World War I, World War II, and the Korean War. Compulsory military service, or conscription, is not unique to the United States and is a practice that many nations throughout history have used. Conscription—and the refusal of some men to comply—has often been a divisive issue during war, with issues raised over its unfair application in society or whether or not the war is justified. Refusal to comply usually resulted in incarceration or financial penalties. Young men today are required to register for selective service after they turn 18.

FIRSTHAND ORAL HISTORY QUESTIONS

As you read the firsthand excerpts of each Vietnam War veteran, write down your observations on the activity worksheet. Be prepared to discuss as a class after all excerpts are finished.

Excerpt 1: Ken Wallingford

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

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




Wallingford Interview

U.S. Army, Prisoner of War

“Then [the Viet Cong would] come around and unlock the cages and then this guy walked in with a little transistor radio, standing there looking at [the propaganda radio broadcast] ‘The Voice of Vietnam,’ straight from Hanoi, non-biased of course. And [the radio was] talking about how they were annihilating all the South Vietnamese [soldiers], they’re doing some damage to the Americans, and after a while, I’m thinking to myself, if you guys are killing all us good guys, this war ought to be over with. And again, distortion, fabrication and stuff like that. And they had an interview with [the actress and activist] Jane Fonda that they played over and over and over again for 30 days... Jane Fonda was up there for probably a week, and of course it was all orchestrated. Took her where she wanted for the photos and the [famous] one behind the [anti-aircraft] gun turret and so forth, and I can remember hearing her, her closing statement was ‘I go to bed crying every night thinking of the damage we’ve done to these poor, innocent [Vietnamese] people.’ And I said you communist wench. You stupid—I mean how can our country allow someone, I don’t care who it is, to go into the enemy’s camp and make anti-America statements? She never once left Hanoi to come to Cambodia, to go to any other [prisoner of war] camps, and some of the Americans that were held up there that refused to meet with her were beaten. Ramsey Clark, Lyndon Johnson’s [Attorney General also] went up there... And maybe that’s one of the strengths about our country. You can go to the enemy’s camp and do the kind of things these people did. And Jane Fonda, even though she has ‘apologized,’ she really hasn’t apologized, and to this day, you can forgive but you don’t forget. I don’t care if you’re young, naïve, whatever, you just don’t do that. But [Americans] did and they will [again] in future engagements.”

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

U.S. Marines

“One thing I would like to go on the record saying for those guys that served with me over there is that the hardest part we had was coming back. I had a tough 5 or 6 years during the terrible times that our country was torn apart. It wasn’t a very popular thing to be a Vietnam vet, and we all had a tough time, we really did. But that’s okay. We moved on. But I guess if I would leave one message for those who weren’t there that you could remember for those who are doing it for us today is you may not agree with the war or the politics, but you got to support the guys who are doing it. The guys and the gals who are doing it have taken an oath of allegiance to do what they are doing. They don’t have a choice each day of saying I agree or I disagree. They are sworn to their duty and they are going to do it, so I wish that we would really honor the veteran if not the war.”

Excerpt 3: James Willbanks

Voices of Veterans Oral History Interview (March 13, 2020)

 Recorded Interview (37:01): voicesofVeterans.org/oral-history/willbanks



Willbanks Interview

U.S. Army

“[By the time I came back], for most Americans the Vietnam War was over. It was sort of like, ‘Who cares?’ If anything, it was total ambivalence, which was jarring in its own right. I just spent an emotional and eventful year and it was like nobody really cared one way or another...It is what it is. I’ve come to grips with it...Americans should understand when they send soldiers off to the war what they’re asking them to do, and maybe more importantly, what they’re asking their families to do. I was always struck during the Vietnam War how soldiers were treated. My sort of response at least in my mind was, ‘Well, you’re the people that sent me there in the first place.’ I went and did my duty. It’s a very complex issue, I think. I think if I wanted Americans to learn something it is that when you send someone off to war you need to understand what that really means.”

Excerpt 4: Danny Garrett

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

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



Garrett Interview

U.S. Army

"I flew around while I was in training in the United States. I flew from duty station to duty station in my uniform. I was never bothered by anybody. I never saw any servicemen bothered by anybody. When I left Travis Air Force Base in my uniform and flew back to Houston, [I] didn't encounter any protesters, nobody spit on me, nobody called me a baby killer, nobody did anything. I've heard all those stories and I don't doubt that they're true...[If] somebody's telling a story, I'm inclined to believe them, but I never experienced any of that. I never saw any of that. That's not to say it didn't happen. It just didn't happen to me...like I said, I never ran into demonstrators at airports, I was never spit on or anything like that by the civilian population. However, I did look into joining the American Legion in the mid-'70s and I really encountered hostility there from the [other] veterans...They were mostly World War II Veterans and that of course was a completely different kind of war. It was an existential war and Vietnam was a war of choice. The World War II veterans really didn't like us very much and they tended to view us as long-haired, dope-smoking, peace sign wearing hippies, and I left that meeting at the American Legion quite shocked at the attitude I encountered. Like I said, I never encountered any hostility from civilians, but I certainly did from the American Legion. That discouraged me. I didn't even look into the [Veterans of Foreign Wars]. This was well before the Vietnam War Memorial was established in the early to mid-'80s and we were kind of welcomed back then. But in the '70s, we were ignored. We were sort of pariahs to the World War II veterans..."

I ...recognized that I was having issues with my experiences and I needed to join or talk to other veterans because, essentially speaking, combat veterans only discuss their experiences with other combat veterans because nobody else, despite their best intentions, really understands and I was desperate to do that so I joined...the Texas Association of Vietnam Veterans...I found a lot of solace there and some healing...I also got counseling from the Texas Veterans Center and although I'm no longer getting individual counseling, I still attend a group session for Vietnam veterans...If we get along, I always seek out other Vietnam veterans. Most combat veterans, they generally won't talk about the war with anybody but another combat veteran, because only combat veterans really understand. I mean, no matter how hard other people try, if you haven't gone through that kind of experience, it's kind of...No matter how much you want to, it's just such an extreme situation and experience that you really can't [understand] unless you were there. A friend of mine once compared it to... what he called a crucible experience where you are put in a crucible and are broken down to your constituent elements by the experience, and you have to put them all back together. You never retrieve all the pieces again. He compared it to other crucible experiences like prison, or chronic or terminal illnesses, you know, where the situation is just so extreme and exotic that unless you went through it, you just can't really understand. This is why most combat veterans won't talk about it except to other combat veterans. They have a particularly hard time with family and friends..."

End of Class Reflection Questions

As a class, discuss the Vietnam War veterans' experiences and reflections on their wartime service. In particular:

1. What challenges did Vietnam veterans face towards the end of their service and in the years that followed?
2. In what ways were the men's experiences or viewpoints similar? In what ways were they different?
3. What experience or detail stood out to you and why?
4. 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?
5. In what ways might the experiences of Vietnam veterans have differed from those who served in earlier, or later, conflicts? What experiences might all soldiers from all wars share in common?

ACTIVITY WORKSHEET

After you listen to or read each excerpt, write down your observations to the following.

	Major / important details	What does the narrator have to say about how others viewed the service of Vietnam War veterans?	Unfamiliar words, phrases, or acronyms	What stood out to you and why?
Ken Wallingford				
Ed Hark				
Danny Garrett				
James Willbanks				