

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

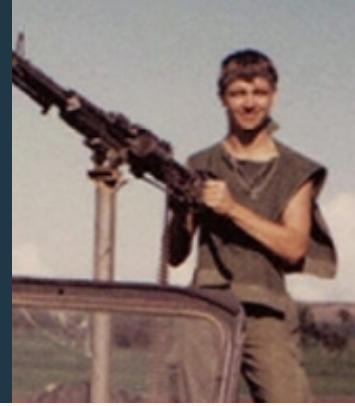
U.S. Army

“[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 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?