

## *Teacher's Companion to*

# Wisconsin Vietnam War Stories:

## Our Veterans Remember

Each generation shares a common, defining experience that distinguishes it from its predecessor. For the children of the World War II generation, the Vietnam War became that pivotal event. Since March 1965, when the first U.S. ground troops landed at Da Nang, Americans have struggled to come to terms with Vietnam, and the scars of the war still remain on the national psyche. The war brought massive changes in the ways Americans viewed themselves, their government, and the world. As the nation divided between prewar “hawks” and antiwar “doves,” it tore apart the social fabric and accelerated social and cultural change. The war intensified generational conflict and alienated many citizens from their government, laying the groundwork for a cynical rejection of authority.

In recent years, Americans, regardless of their views on the conflict, have been able to disassociate the war from the warrior and have recognized the burden borne by many veterans. The expressions of support for returning American hostages from Iran (1981), for Gulf War veterans (1991), and from the ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, to the building of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., have focused positive attention on Vietnam veterans. At last Americans are ready to come to terms with this controversial war.

*Wisconsin Vietnam War Stories: Our Veterans Remember* shares 40 first-hand accounts of Wisconsin veterans' experiences in the Vietnam War. As the companion book to the Wisconsin Public Television documentary of the same name, this volume expands on stories told in the film with raw and compelling oral histories featuring a diverse collection of voices. Told in a roughly chronological order, each chapter begins with a detailed historical introduction. The chapters focus on U.S. involvement prior to the war; naval exploration of Vietnam's waterways; Army and Marine ground combat with the Vietcong; the Tet Offensive; battles at Hamburger Hill, Khe Sanh, and Hue; medical units evacuating the wounded; firefights on besieged firebases; the POW experience; and life after Vietnam.

Chronicling the physical and spiritual endurance of these soldiers through the horrors of war and its aftermath, this collection gives veterans the voice they did not have when they returned home amidst antiwar protests. Several veterans have been members of support groups started through the Veterans Administration and other veterans groups in recent years, counseling one another through the experiences of PTSD, survivor's guilt, and the ongoing effects of war wounds and exposure to Agent Orange.

Together, the interviews, historical overviews, and maps in this volume offer students an opportunity to develop critical thinking skills through the analysis of primary and secondary sources. By incorporating *Wisconsin Vietnam War Stories* in their lessons, teachers can help students explore the meaning of this important episode in our nation's history and provide a venue for intergenerational conversations about that difficult time. After reading and reflecting on the words of young men and women just out of high school, students will better understand the choices made in past and will be better prepared for those facing them today.

### *Questions for Sample Chapters*

Students should read the introduction and interview portions of Chapter 13: Firebases for questions 1 and 2, and Chapter 14: Secret War for questions 3 and 4.

1. Have students read the chapter on Firebases with veterans George Banda and Charlie Lieb. Lead a class discussion about the different perspectives these men had, depending on their rank and duties during attacks on Firebase Henderson and Firebase Ripcord. Ask students to compare George Banda's experience as medic in a unit of ground soldiers with Charlie Lieb's as a ranking officer close to those who made decisions that affected the outcome. Ask students to put themselves in these men's shoes. Given the choice, which role would they choose and why? To extend this activity, have students compare the role of soldiers in the Marines (chapters 3 and 5), Navy (chapters 2 and 9), and Army: how did the Vietnam experience differ from branch to branch, or rank to rank? Which branch would they have chosen?

2. Have students read the chapter on the Secret War with veterans Nhia Thong “Charles” Lor and Steven Schofield, making sure students read the chapter introduction to get historical context. What role did Steven Schofield play in Nhia Thong’s immigration story? Using the internet, see if students can locate similar stories—was Nhia Thong’s friendship with U.S. military personnel unusual? Next, have students consider the war from Nhia Thong’s perspective. What would it be like to fight a war so young, or to be forced to leave your home country because of war? Write two journal entries: one from Nhia Thong during the war, and one after he and his family resettle in the United States. Additionally, you might use the teaching guides from the Wisconsin Historical Society’s Turning Points Website (1975-1990: Accommodating New Immigrants and The Hmong Struggle) to consider more deeply the Hmong experience during and after the war. (*Websites are listed below.*)

3. Two veterans in the book, Fredric Flom and Don Heiliger, spent several years as prisoners of war before being released in the early months of 1973. Have students research the experiences of POWs, both during the conflict and after returning to the United States. Ask students to imagine what it would be like to lose six and a half years of their lives. Have them generate a list of people, things, and events that they would miss the most. Next, have them discuss what it would be like to return home amidst antiwar protest (also see the Epilogue: The Road Home). As an alternate activity, have students enact the role of a POW, writing a diary recounting their experiences.

### **Map Activity**

Assign or ask for student volunteers to make a large classroom map of Vietnam during the years of the war, using the maps from the book as models. Encourage students to use different types of graphic tools to make the map: from traditional paper and ink, to computer-designed images that can be printed out and posted or projected during class sessions. To add a research component to this activity, have students research maps of the Ho Chi Minh trail using the internet and other resources. Some resources put the trail inside Vietnam’s borders; others place it in Cambodia. Have students investigate and discuss reasons for this, and work together to create a map that reflects both versions.

### **Extended Projects**

- Have groups prepare an exhibit (virtual or traditional) about the lives of those who served in Vietnam. Students should consider the experiences of women as well as men, enlisted men, officers, nurses, helicopter pilots, and others. (See for example Chapter 12: The Price, which covers the experiences of a helicopter medic and a woman soldier who worked in a communications center on a major base). Alternately, students could look at political views, drug culture, daily tasks, food, Vietnamese traditions, or music and entertainment. If students have studied a preceding twentieth-century war, have them design similar exhibits and invite other classrooms to view their “museum.”
- Have students explore the role of the media during Vietnam as compared to the current conflict in Iraq. What information was available on a daily or weekly basis? How has new technology like the internet changed how we “view” the war? Students may consider television, magazine, and newspaper coverage of the wars as well as interview veterans of both wars, family members, and citizens of their community for this assignment.
- Have students read a magazine article or textbook chapter (for example, have students read pages relating to the Vietnam War in Joy Hakim’s *The History of US* series, volume ten, *All the People*, the chapter introductions from *Wisconsin Vietnam War Stories*, or, for an in-depth overview, Marilyn Young’s *The Vietnam Wars*) presenting an overview of the Vietnam War. In small groups have students compare and assess these introductions, constructing a list of similarities and differences. How does Hakim’s account compare to Jennifer Miller’s? How much does a historian’s way of conveying history change our perspective of a historical situation?
- Have students research the differences between the Vietnam War and World War II, a war fought by many fathers of Vietnam veterans. Specifically, students can look at differences in combat strategies, media coverage, U.S. reason for involvement, public opinion. Focus students on the way that the differences affect relationships between parent and child upon return from Vietnam.

- Have students work in groups to prepare an exhibit illustrating civilian life during the 1960s and early 1970s. Students may want to research the student demonstrations on various college campuses to include in their exhibit or include experiences of individuals in their community that had a family member who served in the war. Students may want to consider elements of daily life: work, political environment, or popular culture (i.e. television, film, music, fashion, books). Students may want to research popular magazines of the era, newspapers, or conduct interviews with individuals who remember the Vietnam Era.
- A recommended documentary, *The War at Home*, takes an in-depth look at political unrest on the University of Wisconsin campus during the Vietnam War. Have students develop a panel discussion and a debate regarding student antiwar protests. Ask students: were antiwar protesters justified in their dissent or were they wrong? Do you think by protesting they jeopardized U.S. soldiers' lives?
- Using materials provided on the Veterans Administration website (or elsewhere on the LZ Lambeau website), or following the example of the D.C. Everest High School oral history project (website below), have students conduct and write up oral interviews with Vietnam Veterans, preparing them as if they are to be published.

### Web Sites

<http://www.clemson.edu/caah/history/FacultyPages/EdMoise/bibliography.html><http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/amex/vietnam/index.html>

<http://www.wisconsinstories.org/>

<http://www.dce.k12.wi.us/srhigh/socialstudies/histday/>

<http://www.shsw.wisc.edu>

Teaching Guide: 1975-1990: Accommodating New Immigrants:

<http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/teachers/search.asp?id=87>

Teaching Guide: Hmong Struggle: <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/teachers/search.asp?id=89>

### Books

Appy, Christian. *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered From All Sides*. New York: Penguin, 2003. An excellently researched, highly accessible oral history of the war that includes stories from 350 veterans.

Marshall, Kathryn. *In the Combat Zone: An Oral History of American Women in Vietnam, 1966-1975*. Boston: Brown, 1987. Twenty personal narratives of women, who experienced the Vietnam War as nurses, Red Cross workers, and journalists.

Mullen, Peg. *Unfriendly Fire: A Mother's Memoir*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995. 156 pp. The autobiographical account of an Iowa farm wife's search for the truth behind the death of her eldest son due to "friendly fire."

Stevens, Michael, ed. *Voices of the Wisconsin Past: Voices from Vietnam*. Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 1996. A collection of letters from Wisconsin soldiers on the ground during the war, excellent for its use of primary sources.

Young, Marilyn. *The Vietnam Wars: 1945-1990*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1991. 448 pp. A history of the war from a well-regarded scholar.

### Videos

*Vietnam: A Television History*. The American Experience documentary series. WGBH, Boston.

*The War at Home*. Produced and directed by Glenn Silber and Barry Alexander Brown. MPI Home Video. 1986.

*Born on the Fourth of July*. Directed by Oliver Stone. Panavision. 1989. Based on the book of the same title by Ron Kovic.

*Wisconsin Vietnam War Stories: Our Veterans Remember*. Wisconsin War Stories. Wisconsin Public Television, Madison, 2010.