



# VIETNAM

A Resource-rich Teaching Unit on the Vietnam War, 1964–1975

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## AUTHOR'S REFLECTION

January, 2003

Like most people over the age of fifty, Vietnam—the war America fought from 1964 to 1973—still fascinates me, even more now in the early years of the 21st century than it did in the 1960s when as a teacher I lived through it. Some things grow on you and this war seems to do that to me. I really can't explain it fully. I was busy back then, jump-starting my career, trying to carve out my personal classroom niche, and helping to raise two daughters. The daily headlines and the somber nightly news was almost a turn-off, and to be honest I was past the draft age in 1965. So, until the Viet Cong either blew up our local pier or the NVA waded up on the sands of Huntington Beach, I was content to ignore the unfolding tragedy of this strange, unpopular war in Asia.

Fast-forward to the 1980s when new textbooks showcased a separate chapter on Vietnam and every workshop seemed to highlight, "How to teach the war in Vietnam." Within a few years, Vietnam became one of my favorite units and my students responded to my usually unorthodox strategies to maximize their interest. Vietnam as a subject didn't even fade out or go away when I retired from full-time teaching in 1999. Then, what seemed like a conspiracy to get me to write this unit, recent events, some personal, propelled me toward my fate. The first was in the spring of 2001 as I contemplated the heavy workload of taking on a new project for INTERACT. While attending my church service, our liturgist began with a dedication to two fellow soldiers who died during the Tet Offensive some 33 years before. Through his testimony, I was given a clear illustration of the tenacious grip of that war on our psyche.

About the same time, former senator, Bob Kerrey, made headlines when he admitted to "wasting" a village and killing 15 civilians in Vietnam while leading a search and destroy mission in 1969. For several days, Kerrey's raid thirty-two years before dominated the news, and media talk shows dissected every aspect of the story. Again, Americans—including me—refocused their attention on our role in the Vietnam War. On the heels of the Kerrey revelations came one more Vietnam connection: an airplane carrying relatives of U.S. soldiers missing in action (MIAs) during the Vietnam War crashed off the coast of Vietnam. With only a scintilla of evidence that any of the 2,300 men unaccounted for could possibly be alive after surviving in the jungles or as captives in a North Vietnamese prison camp, the hopeful passengers on this flight all died, creating headlines once more, reminding us that unresolved issues from the war are still very much alive.

## AUTHOR'S REFLECTION

As if the above events weren't enough to convince me to write VIETNAM, three last and unconnected episodes helped me make the decision.

Within months of each other, I saw a man walking at the beach wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with "I'm proud to be a Vietnam Vet."

And I read closely with fascination the unfolding story of one university professor—a Pulitzer-prize winning historian—facing charges he had embellished his Vietnam record by bragging to his classes that he was a combat officer in the war. The compelling evidence to the contrary (although he has been mum in rebutting the charges) has for many cast doubt on his integrity as a teacher and writer, as well as generating hundreds of editorials and media "pieces" on combat in Vietnam.

For me the last connection or reminder of the war was shockingly exposed in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001. When hijacked American commercial jets flew into the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon, historians and journalists drew lengthy and appropriate parallels not only to Pearl Harbor, but to the Tet Offensive and the Gulf of Tonkin Incident in the war in Vietnam as well.

In short, Vietnam refuses to go away. It has a grip on our memories, so strong that it is embedded deep in our nation's consciousness over 25 years after the fall of Saigon.

Although the Vietnam War is familiar ground to us "geezer" who lived through it, the conflicts and the divisive issues it caused are ancient history to our students. So, VIETNAM was created to help teachers, putting into your hands hopefully stimulating, clever, and thoughtfully provocative lessons with which to instruct students. As one writer expressed, "Explaining the Vietnam War is like using chopsticks to pursue the last grain of rice in a complex Asian dish." Not impossible, but difficult.

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SOCIAL STUDIES CONTENTS

The Vietnam War (1964–1975) was the longest and most unpopular war in United States history. The controversial war impacted all aspects of life in the United States—political, economic, social, and cultural. VIETNAM includes activities certain to involve, fascinate, and educate your students as it brings the era to life. Your classroom will reflect civilian and military attitudes and experiences. Each lesson includes objectives, procedures, and materials. Within the lessons and activities your students will experience the following:

**Knowledge**

- Reading essays and participating in activities to clarify, demystify, inspire, educate, unify, and entertain
- Understanding the issues, personalities, and events which surround and permeate the era of the war in Vietnam
- Learning, understanding, and using a distinct and vivid glossary of language used by military personnel during the war
- Exploring political factors and controversies surrounding military strategies and decisions on the conduct of the war
- Understanding contributions made by “Hawks” and “Doves”
- Becoming familiar with different viewpoints about the war and express these opinions in a variety of assessment strategies

**Skills**

- Reading and following directions to meet objectives
- Making decisions to accomplish personal and group goals
- Identifying multiple perspectives and issues, then engaging in decision-making activities to simulate historic experiences
- Organizing and directing individual and group work activities
- Analyzing data, then preparing and orally presenting information (often role playing) as an individual and/or part of a group
- Reading for understanding and writing to reflect knowledge and comprehension
- Creating, designing, composing, interviewing, and drawing to reflect knowledge and understanding of key unit concepts

**Attitudes**

- Realizing that war is brutal, inglorious, and uncompromising
- Appreciating the efforts of the common foot soldiers in Vietnam and their difficulties when fighting this unique war
- Appreciating the efforts of an evolving and vocal antiwar movement in bringing an end to an unpopular war
- Realizing that some who took part in the conduct of the war were intentionally deceitful in implementing decisions
- Appreciating the efforts of a formidable enemy bent on independence
- Appreciating the dynamics and accomplishments of successful group interaction and cooperation
- Understanding that hard work usually produces better results
- Gaining satisfaction and empathy from effective role playing

PURPOSE



**OVERVIEW****OVERVIEW****A Comprehensive Resource**

VIETNAM is a comprehensive resource on the causes, conduct, and legacy of the Vietnam War. Use the entire unit as presented or adapt to fit your own teaching objectives.

- Utilize the activities and competitive challenges to conduct a traditional simulation.
- Choose among the numerous activities to augment or extend your existing instructional unit on Vietnam.
- Use all or most of the resources to form the foundation of a new and creative unit on Vietnam.
- Independently use selected lessons, essays, and/or activities.

**A Comprehensive Program...or Your Own Unit**

The author wrote VIETNAM with the intention that the teacher uses each and every part of it. This certainly would give students a thorough understanding of the causes, course, and legacies of the Vietnam War. Yet, other factors may limit your time available for this historical era. If this is the case, use VIETNAM to develop your own instructional program. Pull out topics, essays, and activities to enhance your Vietnam War unit already in place.

**Writing Across the Curriculum**

Throughout VIETNAM, take advantage of the embedded writing activities to reinforce student learning and enhance student understanding of events, people, and issues.

**Readability Level**

The essays in VIETNAM are written at a grade 7 or above reading level. Adjust your instruction to meet the needs of your students. The variety of artistic and kinesthetic activities within the unit enables teachers to adapt their instruction to meet the needs of students of a wide variety of reading levels and academic aptitudes.

**Special Needs Students**

Like all INTERACT units, VIETNAM provides differentiated instruction through its various learning opportunities. Students learn and experience the knowledge, skills, and attitudes through all domains of language (reading, writing, speaking, and listening). The academic, craft, and kinesthetic activities appeal to a variety of learning styles and aptitudes. Adjust the choice of activities to best fit your students and encourage their strengths.



## Background Essays

Including the Student Guide essay, VIETNAM includes readings of different length for each lesson. These readings include detailed information from a variety of sources, and provide background information for related activities. It is recommended that the essays be read aloud in class. Alternatively, allow time in class for students to read silently, with periodic checks for understanding. Collect the papers for use with the next class. Assigning the reading as homework would require much duplication. Whatever the case, lead class discussions to ensure student understanding following all readings.

## Activities

The many creative academic tasks and activities offer a variety of experiences to enliven your classroom and enrich your students' understanding of the Vietnam War and the era in which it occurred. Most activities focus on the common soldier's perspective of the war.

## Unit Summary

Study the following VIETNAM lesson summaries. When you are familiar with its substance and variety, you will be better able to incorporate VIETNAM into your teaching schedule.

### Lesson 1: Overview

Assess your students' prior knowledge of Vietnam.

- The pretest/posttest indicates what students already know (this may be utilized in part or whole as a final test).
- Complete a map of Vietnam, locating key landforms, cities, and neighboring countries.

### Lesson 2: Storyboard

Reinforce your students' overview of the scope and sequence of the war from Lesson 1.

- Create and complete a 10–event storyboard of illustrations (but no words) based on the Student Guide reading.

### Lesson 3: Cartooning

Seldom do students get a chance to draw cartoons in class as part of an assignment. In this lesson they do.

- Read descriptions of editorial cartoons from the early 1960s. Students visualize the pictures, then draw cartoons depicting key figures, concepts, and elements of how and why the U.S. got involved in Vietnam.



*The **Student Guide** is essentially an overview essay on the Vietnam War. There is enough detail to provide an historical outline and scope and whet students' interest for further study and involvement.*

*Statistics of troop strength, number of combatants, number and percentage of casualties, etc., appear throughout the lessons.*

*The information comes from many government and military sources, and numbers do not always agree. Every effort has been made to be as accurate as possible when inserting these statistics, but there are slight discrepancies in some totals, and some information is not readily available.*

*Discrepancies are indicative of general confusion about all wars and this war in particular. We did not alter any statistics (to make all numbers agree) because it is impossible to know which source is most accurate.*



*Even stick figure “artists” can produce respectable work in this rather simple but creative task.*

## LESSON 10 TEACHING DIRECTIONS

### Lesson 10: POWs AND MIAs

#### Objectives

- Understand the inhumane treatment of United States soldiers imprisoned by the North Vietnamese
- Learn and use the tapping code developed by POWs to enable them to communicate

#### Materials

- AMERICANS IN CAPTIVITY: POWs and MIAs (1–2) — *class set*
- HANOI HILTON PRISON CODE — *class set*

#### Set Up Directions

1. Your regular classroom configuration is adequate for this lesson.
2. If necessary move desks together for students to work on their code communications.

#### Motivator

Students tend to be fascinated with stories of POWs. Increase that fascination with this motivator.

1. Mark off two 2' x 6' rectangles on the floor of your classroom, three feet apart.
2. Have two students lie down in these “cells.” As they do, relate these facts about American POWs in the Hanoi Hilton:  
“In mostly solitary confinement, prisoners of war (POWs) were subjected to unbelievable torture treatment. At times they were confined to cells as small as 2' x 6'. Many were prisoners for between five and seven years. During that time they were starved, beaten, and half-suffocated with soaked towels. They were often tied to or put into irons as they sat on stools for 20 days. They were forced to lie in their own excrement.

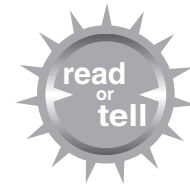
Their diet consisted of pumpkin soup, rice and boiled rat. Often the North Vietnamese hid sharp wire or razor blades in their food. Prisoners suffered bouts of dysentery, depression, and fevers from wounds and vicious beatings. Allowed to bathe only every 2–3 weeks and with only a wooden bucket as a toilet, POWs were reduced to an animal level.



*One Day*



*Individuals*



## LESSON 10 TEACHING DIRECTIONS

The inmates at the infamous Hoa Lo (nicknamed the *Hanoi Hilton*) Prison tried to stay sane by playing mind games. Some worked at solving complex math problems. John McCain would review history books he had read. Prisoners also ‘wrote’ fantasy novels in their minds, or memorized and recited the names of all 355 prisoners in Hoa Lo.

Guards at the prison ignored the Geneva Convention that protects prisoners of war from mistreatment. Interrogators tried to get the prisoners to admit to war crimes. They also tried to force the prisoners to relate more than their name, rank, serial number and date of birth.

Some POWs had breaking points. Most endured the inhumane conditions and survived until they were released in January 1973.”

### Procedure

1. Distribute AMERICANS IN CAPTIVITY: POWs and MIAs (1–2). Have students read it or listen as you and/or other students read it.
  - a. Reinforce the distinctions between MIA, KIA, and WIA (*missing*, *killed*, and *wounded* in action).
  - b. Technically, POWs were MIAs until the enemy notified the U.S. government that they were in prison.
2. Now that the motivator and short essay have heightened interest and enlightened students about POWs, distribute HANOI HILTON PRISON CODE.
3. Explain how the tapping communication system worked as these intelligent men desperately sought social connections.
  - a. Since POWs rarely saw each other and were often cells apart, this tapping (or whistling, or coughing) code actually worked pretty well.
  - b. Of interest too: Skilled “tappers” often left out vowels in a kind of shorthand language.
  - c. Acknowledgement of a message was a simple two taps (tick, tick).
  - d. Code tapping was not easy. Some messages made little sense.

## HANOI HILTON PRISON CODE

A code: a prearranged set of words, sounds, or symbols used to send secret messages.

American prisoners were isolated in tiny cells in the *Hanoi Hilton*. They were able to “talk” to each other using a code they devised. They miraculously disseminated the code to each other. They tapped on their cell walls, whistled, or coughed out in numbers to parallel letters on this chart. Some social contact allowed them to endure incredible hardships during captivity.

This is the code used by the inmates at Hoa Lo Prison.

	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>H</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>J (K)</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>L</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>O</b>	<b>P</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Q</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>S</b>	<b>T</b>	<b>U</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>V</b>	<b>W</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>Z</b>

### Using the Code

1. Locate the letter on the grid. **Use the side number then the top number to tap out the code** for that letter. (For example, the letter “M” is 3 taps...a pause...followed by 2 taps.)
2. Experienced tappers often left out vowels.
3. Acknowledge receiving the message by making two taps.

**Exercise 1** Practice your code-sending skills by writing out this brief sentence. Good Luck!

**I’m sick with a fever.**

Begin: 2–4, 3–2, etc.

Pauses have to be in the right places.

**Exercise 2** Compose and write out a message to a fellow prisoner using the code chart. If necessary, use your own paper. Good Luck!

Message to be put in code:

Numbers to be tapped, whistled or coughed:

Have fun...but understand the historical context and the chart’s original purpose.