

AMERICAN CIVIC HOLIDAY RESOURCES

VETERANS DAY

Teaching about Veterans Day

Veterans Day, originally known as Armistice Day, began as a commemoration of the armistice signed to end the fighting between the Allies and Germany in World War I. The armistice was signed in 1918 on the 11th day of November, the 11th month of the year, at 11AM. In 1919, President Wilson made an official proclamation that November 11th would be commemorated as Armistice Day. Wilson stated:

To us in America, the reflections of Armistice Day will be filled with solemn pride in the heroism of those who died in the country's service and with gratitude for the victory, both because of the thing from which it has freed us and because of the opportunity it has given America to show her sympathy with peace and justice in the councils of the nations...¹

Wilson intended the day to be filled with military parades to honor veterans and a moment of silence at 11AM. In 1938, Armistice Day became a legal holiday designed to honor World War I veterans. Since Armistice Day was designed only to honor World War I veterans, after World War II the Veterans Administration began pushing to change the name of the day. In 1954, amidst the Korean War, Congress officially changed the name of the legal holiday to Veterans Day, to honor US Veterans of all wars.

1. Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs, "History of Veterans Day," Go to VA.gov, March 20, 2006, <https://www.va.gov/opa/vetsday/vetdayhistory.asp>.

Teaching about Veterans Day (con't)

Since the end of the Vietnam War, the US has not used the Selective Service System, or military draft, to secure soldiers needed for battle. Recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been fought by an all-volunteer force. As a result, many people in the US today are less aware of the experience soldiers face on the battlefield. Many soldiers return home from war, and struggle to reintegrate into a society that is not personally aware of why they want to war and the challenges they faced while at war.

At Civic Spirit, we encourage educators to use primary sources to guide students in exploring complex ideas¹. To help students understand the challenges of soldiers upon returning home from battle, Civic Spirit has gathered statements from soldiers in their own words describing their experiences as Veterans.

Below are some quotations you may wish to share with students from Veterans of the Vietnam War and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Excerpt 1: Ed Hark, US Marines, on lessons from his experience in the Vietnam War:

One thing I would like to go on the record saying for those guys who served with me over there is that the hardest part we had was coming back. I had a tough five or six 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 ok. 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 today is that you may not agree with the war or the politics, but you got to support the guys who are doing it. These guys and 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 disagree. They are sworn to their duty and they are going to do it, so I wish that we would honor the Veteran, if not the war."²

2. "Voices of Veterans." Accessed October 12, 2022. <https://txgloeducation.com/military-history/files/voices-of-veterans-vietnam-war-oral-history-lesson-plan-1.pdf>.

Excerpt 2: James Wilbanks, US Army, on returning from the Vietnam War:

[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...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.³

Excerpt 3: Anonymous soldier on returning from Iraq or Afghanistan:

You come home, and you've got your wife, who you don't outrank, and she doesn't outrank you, so how do you work that? And then you've got your kids; your mind says you outrank them, but there's not a rank structure. They're not your troops. You know, you don't come in and bang the trash can at them and pull drill sergeant stuff on them. You can't...Now you come in and they almost don't need you, it seems...you're not even necessary, you're extraneous...How do I become dad instead of sergeant? How do I become the husband again who listens and is concerned, instead of the combatant who has a mission, achieves his mission, and that makes him a good person?⁴

3. "Voices of Veterans." Accessed October 12, 2022. <https://txgloeducation.com/military-history/files/voices-of-veterans-vietnam-war-oral-history-lesson-plan-1.pdf>.

4. Marian Eide and Michael Gibber, *After Combat* (Potomac Books, 2018), 194-195.

Excerpt 4: Anonymous soldier on returning from Iraq or Afghanistan:

“If you didn’t die, we don’t know what to do with you now. If you gave your life, oh we know what to do: we make a statue in your honor and you live forever and gave everything.” But it’s, “You came back; now what good are you? We don’t need your ability to kill people. We don’t need your ability to withstand struggles. We don’t need your ability to face fear, danger and adversity.” Nobody needs me to jump out of a helicopter for them. I’m really good at it... So what is my purpose? And that’s true, I think, of a lot of vets... They stay in for twenty years, because the only people who think they’re valuable any more is the military. You’re valuable to the military because you can contribute strategies. But what we need is a way to show veterans, “What you did over there can still be valuable now in the real world.”⁵

Excerpt 5: Anonymous soldier on returning from Iraq or Afghanistan:

I couldn’t engage with other people. I mean, after you’ve been through an experience like that, it’s not just, “Oh gee, they don’t understand.” I remember when I first got off the plane. The next day... I was wearing civilian gear, and drove myself to an outdoor mall, and I remember just being really dazed and confused. I really felt like I could not connect... I couldn’t believe that thirty-six hours prior to that I was in a war. And I still feel that way, you know, five years out. So, I guess coming back is not just being able to reengage with your old life. I haven’t been the same since I’ve been back. Even though I am me. I’m just very different.⁶

5. Marian Eide and Michael Gibber, *After Combat* (Potomac Books, 2018), 197.

6. Marian Eide and Michael Gibber, *After Combat* (Potomac Books, 2018), 203.

Excerpt 6: Anonymous soldier on returning from Iraq or Afghanistan:

The hardest part about coming home was coming home different than when I left. Physically, I did great, but mentally and emotionally, I was just distraught..I was one of the first amputees where my hand was amputated, so there was this expectation on me to be a poster boy, so to speak, to succeed in whatever I did. So what I did was push down in my mind that I wasn't ok. I didn't really deal with the injury in the way that I should have. That was probably the biggest part of my recovery, realizing that I'm not going to get it back, and that it's ok. I left with two hands and pretty good self-esteem, self-confidence, self-image. And came back with none of that. I struggled with, "How can people love someone that's injured like me? How could people meet me, when I can't..." That was probably the hardest part: accepting that people genuinely cared for me." ⁷

Here are some possible guiding questions for discussing these interview excerpts:

Based on these excerpts, what are some common struggles veterans face when returning from war to their civilian lives in the United States?

Did the experiences of Vietnam War veterans in the 1960s and 70s and veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in the 2000s feel more similar or different from each other? Compare the texts to each other in answering this question.

Extended Discussion Questions:

How can we honor the complex experiences of veterans and their service in an authentic way with our students?

How can we create a deeper connection to veterans' experiences for our students?