

Unit 3

From the Civil War through Vietnam: Prisoner of War Accounts

GRADES 6-12

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The major objective in war is to remove the ability of the enemy to wage war, whether through intimidation, inflicting casualties or by capture and incarceration. In ancient times prisoners of war became slaves. Rome utilized slaves as a labor force, which helped build the Empire's roads and buildings. Much later with the rise of the modern nation state and a philosophy, which facilitated improved human rights, the treatment of prisoners changed for the better.

During the American Revolution and the Civil War, captured soldiers were held for a short time and then upon taking an oath, soldiers promised not to engage in further warfare; they were paroled and returned to their communities. Flag of Truce ships plied the Chesapeake River exchanging prisoners between the North and the South. This policy was imperfect and when increasingly more paroled soldiers returned to the ranks, especially during the Civil War, prisoners were no longer released on either side. Thus, both the North and the South resorted to the use of ever-larger prisons. Federal authorities held Confederate officers, for example, at Johnson Island in Lake Erie; enlisted men were held at Forts Delaware, Monroe, McHenry, Elmira, Morton, etc. The Confederacy held Union prisoners at Libby Prison in Richmond, Virginia, as well as Salisbury and Andersonville. Federal troop trains also shipped Confederate prisoners from the Eastern Theater to the Midwest for incarceration in Cincinnati, Chicago and Indianapolis. Similarly, the Confederates removed Federal prisoners from the Richmond area and shipped them into the Deep South.

During World War II, American forces shipped German and Italian prisoners of war back to the United States on empty troop carrier ships. These alien prisoners were housed across the country at facilities such as Camp Shelby in Mississippi and Ft. Drum in New York where they worked on farms and near local communities replacing the male labor population, which was now serving overseas. The American military observed the Geneva Convention regarding positive treatment of prisoners, providing adequate housing, food, and recreation. When German POWs for example wrote home, they would write positive letters about their treatment. By treating prisoners humanely, it was hoped that American POWs would be treated similarly. During WWII in the Pacific and later during the Vietnam War, American POWs found much different treatment than what we meted out to our Japanese or Viet Cong prisoners.

PROCESS

Experiences for prisoners of war, whether during the American Civil War, during World War II or the Vietnam War, are in many ways similar. Have students read excerpts from these different wars – what do these prisoners have in common? What is different? Why is this the case?

OUTCOMES

Students will gain an appreciation for the hardships endured by incarcerated soldiers and civilians during wartime. They will also see how prisoners find ways to cope and try to survive.

The American Civil War

Private Byron E. Bates, Company C, Eighth New York Heavy Artillery at Salisbury Prison, 1865

Union soldier Byron Bates was captured at Reams Station, Virginia in August of 1864 and imprisoned by the Confederates at the infamous Salisbury Prison in North Carolina. Read the introduction and two letters about Bates (pages 24-27, I).

Language Arts & Drama

- Read Backus' letter about Bates aloud (page 25). This letter lends itself also to a dramatic reading – either in the role of Backus or as the father of Byron Bates. *What information did Backus include in the letter? What did he try to share with the family? Why was this letter especially difficult for Backus to write? Was Backus an eyewitness to Bates' death? What are Backus's prospects for the future? What does he want from Mr. Bates?*
- The next letter is also based on second-hand information. After reading this letter (pages 26-27), discuss how Lenora's account compares with the first. Do a dramatic reading of this letter either as Lenora penned it or how her relatives might have responded to it when they read it. *What was her style of writing like? Compare the use of vocabulary in this to Backus' letter. Was this a difficult letter for her to write? If so, how does the reader know this?*

Social Studies

- While reading the introduction and the first letter, find the clues (location of letter writer, prison, etc.) that will give the reader a means of researching the historical details surrounding this soldier's death. Other questions can be asked: *How soon after this letter was written did the Civil War end? Research Salisbury Prison. What details can be found about Salisbury? How does this prison compare to the other infamous one at Andersonville? How many other soldiers died at this prison? What was the primary cause of death?*
- *What specific details does Lenora write about in the letter to the Bates family? Who is her source? Why is her account useful to historians?*
- Using the websites, www.ancestry.com, "New York and the Civil War" [http://www.morrisville.edu/library/local_history/sites/], and "New York in the Civil War" [<http://www.rootsweb.com/~nycivilw/>] locate enlistment information about Nathan Backus and Byron Bates. Another useful resource is the Civil War Soldier & Sailor Index [<http://www.itd.nps.gov/cwss/soldiers.htm>]. *When did they enlist? Why did they become so well acquainted? How long were they both supposed to serve?*

Additional Activity:

Complete census research on these two families. This may be done online, in a genealogy library, or at a regional National Archives site.

- Locate the U.S. 1860 Census records for New York. Look for information about both of these families. Nathan Backus resided in Barre, Orleans County and Byron Bates was from Albion, Orleans County. For each family find out more about the size of the family, other siblings, profession of head of the household, wealth, etc. Once the families have been located, go back ten years to 1850. What information can be found here in addition to what is known in 1860? If time permits, look for the 1870 census records. *Can any of the same family members be found? What did Nathan Backus do after the war? Are the parents of either man still living or not?*

World War II

Private Frank Cooney, 90th Infantry Division in France in 1944

Frank Cooney survived the Day-Day landings, but was captured later that summer by the Germans in northern France. He was eventually rescued from Stalag 7A (Moosberg) by American forces in April 1945.

Read all of Cooney's oral account (pages 222-226, II).

Social Studies

- Locate a map of Germany. Have students trace a possible route for the prisoners captured in France. (Frankfort to Munich). If the map has enough detail, locate the town of Moosberg where Cooney was held.
- Have students locate more information on German prison camps, especially those that held airmen. Create a spreadsheet activity which helps students visualize the numbers of prisoners held at the different camps, the dates camps were established, and any other important demographic information.

Optional selected reading: see J. Frank Diggs and J. Diggs, *Americans Behind the Barbed Wire: World War II--Inside a German POW Camp* (I Books, 2003.)

Civilian Phil Reed: Prisoner in Santo Thomás, Manila, Philippine Islands

William Philip Reed was a civilian working in the Philippine Islands. When the islands were surrendered to the Japanese Imperial Army in 1942, American civilians, along with Army Nurses were incarcerated until their liberation in 1945.

Read his account in *Words of War* (page 123, I). Begin with a map study of WWII as it affected the entire globe and then more specifically the Pacific. (See *America's Story* – Geography Activities, pages 113-114 and a map of the Philippines:

<http://users.powernet.co.uk/mkmarina/philippines/philippines.html>).

- Read together from page 122 to the top of 125. *What was the biggest concern of Lester and Quindaro? Why was it important to them to determine Phil's location?*
- Locate Zambolas province on the Philippines map. Also find Manila, Santo Thomás or Santo Thomás University. Locate Luzon, and Leyte Bay. Find and describe other outstanding geographic features that brother-in-law Lester Groth and sister Quindaro Groth might find and use to make a mental map of where Phil was.
- Next, read together pages 125-126. Discuss these questions: What were living conditions like at Santo Thomás Internment camp? What do you think were the long-term effects? What risk to national security did people like Phil Reed present to the Japanese in the Philippines? What rights as a citizen was Reed denied? (To help answer these questions, you might also visit the web site: <http://www.edrington.com/santotomas.htm>). Pay special attention to the pictures of the "camp".

- Comparing & Contrasting: The teacher should give some background information about another group who was held in internment camps during WWII. Introduce the plight of Japanese Americans. Visit the website: <http://education.nebrwesleyan.edu/eisenhower/partsites/northeastpage/safarik/internmentpage.html> and <http://www.pbs.org/childofcamp/resources/camps.html> Compare the pictures and reports on these websites to the images and letters from Santo Thomás.

Culminating Assignment:

Develop a “timeline” for the Reed family after Phil’s release. What was likely to happen to him, his career, and his family? Now do the same for one of the families who were removed to Japanese American internment camps. Discuss the difficulties each family might have had. *What did they have in common? What role and responsibility did the United States government have in both?*

The Vietnam War

Lieutenant Michael T. Burns, U.S. Air Force Fighter Pilot at the “Hanoi Hilton” 1972-1973

Michael Burns tells a detailed story about his year as a POW in North Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Surviving his crash landing with his co-pilot was remarkable in itself, but his lengthy summary of what transpired during the time of his imprisonment is even more remarkable.

If time needs to be limited, have students only read the section of the account beginning with “Captivity” (pages 308-315, II), otherwise the whole account is useful.

Social Studies

- Do some preparatory work prior to reading this account. Students should be prepared with a good background on the Vietnam War, the period in which the United States was involved and how our mission escalated. What was meant by the term “Rolling Thunder”? When was this type of operation started and why? What types of places were being flown and on what types of missions? Look at a map of Southeast Asia – track the route Burns flew from Ubon, Thailand to Hanoi.
- Have students create a poster including the important ‘who’s who’ of the Vietnam War or important events (such as General Westmoreland, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, President Lyndon Johnson, Ho Chi Minh, the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, Agent Orange, the Ho Chi Minh Trail, etc.). The chart may also include a timeline of significant dates.
- Have students research how the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong developed underground “cities” or tunnels for communication, prisons, etc. *Why was this necessary? How did this practice affect American tactics?*
- After reading Burns’ account of his imprisonment, ask the students to discuss factors that may have led to his survival. *What mental or physical activities did he use in order to stay sane? What was the Code? Who else was in his proximity in the prison? Why was the prison named the “Hanoi Hilton”?*

Additional Activities:

- Locate newspaper accounts from the Vietnam era. Read about the truce in 1973
- Do a web search for Ho Chi Minh (one especially good site is: <http://www.time.com/time/time100/leaders/profile/hochiminh.html>)
- Locate other stories of Americans imprisoned by the North Vietnamese (Senator John McCain, for example).
- Compare and contrast the imprisonment experiences of Cooney and Burns.
- Research the history of the Bataan Death March in the Philippines. Other topics for research projects include learning more about the “Ghost Soldiers”. Read Hampton Sides’ book, *Ghost Soldiers: The Epic Account of World War II’s Greatest Rescue Mission*. This has been recently made into a movie, “The Great Raid” about the rescue by US Rangers of Cabanatuan prisoners.
- For comments about concentration camps see accounts by Major John C. Carvey (page 173, II), Sgt. Eugene Leitem (pages 230-234, II), and Holocaust survivor, and Frank Grunwald (pages 234-248, II).
- See movie *The Fog of War* with Robert McNamara and utilize the supporting educator materials.
- Do a newspaper article search for more contemporary events: the Abu Ghraib Prison scandal in Iraq and the incarceration and treatment of foreign prisoners at the American base at Guantanamo Bay. What is the “justification” or argument for such treatment? Can this change in treatment be explained?
- Complete a comparative chart showing treatment of German prisoners in POW camps in the United States versus those for the Allies run by the Germans in Europe and/or for the Japanese in the Pacific. *What was the rationale for providing quality care for German POWs? Compare and contrast Japanese treatment of POWs – why was there such a significant difference?*
- Study the treatment of Japanese-Americans in relocation camps during WWII. Two recommended reading sources include: Yoshiko Uchida's *Desert Exile* or Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James Houston's *Farewell to Manzanar*. *What was the rationale for incarcerating Japanese-Americans? How was this an inconsistent policy, since this was not done in Hawaii?* [FYI: Many Nissei (American-born Japanese) joined the 442nd Infantry Regiment, for example and this unit became the most highly decorated unit of WWII.]
- Study the treatment of Italian POWs in America. For detailed on-line material about foreign German & Italian POWs from WWI and WWII in Utah, go to the following site: <http://www.gentracer.com/utahpow.html> (Sept. 2005). Another interesting site relates to Italians at Camp Atterbury in Indiana: “Miscellaneous Letters Concerning Italian POWs at Camp Atterbury.” This site includes confidential military documents regarding the handling of Italian prisoners. Go to: <http://www.indianamilitary.org/ATTERBURYPOW/ItalianInfo/ItalianCorrespondence.htm> During WWII more than 51,000 Italian soldiers were brought to the United States as Prisoners of War. The history of this experience is portrayed in *Prisoners in Paradise*, “a charming and poignant documentary special, that traces the previously untold story of these young men, their romances and friendships with American women, and their significant but unrecognized - contribution to the Allied war effort.” For more information, go to this website: <http://www.italianpow.com/filmsummary.html>

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