



THE WAR

A KEN BURNS FILM



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Combat and War: Exploring Attitudes and Experiences

Subjects:

American History, Civics, Language Arts

The sheer terror of knowing that the next one is going to have your name on it, when that goes on and on and on... you get a strange feeling in which you seem to become detached and you just think, well maybe this will end and maybe it won't and maybe we'll all be blown up and maybe we won't... but who cares. And you learn to sort of live with it. It is just a matter of fate. You will either survive if the Lord is willing or you will not. So there's really nothing you can do. And you just take it.

— Sidney Phillips, THE WAR

Background:

The experience of combat is perhaps the ultimate test for human beings. No other human activity creates such heightened emotions. No other human activity is so potentially final in its results. Humans have an often paradoxical relationship with combat and war; sometimes it is revered and other times despised. We use its euphemisms in describing athletic events (check out the headlines on any sports page). We see it glorified in our literature and condemned in our political speeches. In this activity, students will explore the testimonies of several different people who experienced combat, some of whom suffered physical or psychological injuries in the process.

Activity 1: Feelings about War

Combat and killing are intense and indelible experiences that can remain with the individual many years after. Show the first and second segments of the clip “Combat and War” containing personal accounts of combat from two people featured in THE WAR, Daniel Inouye, who served with the 442nd Regimental Combat Team and fought in Italy and France, and Quentin Aanenson, a P-47 Thunderbolt pilot who flew 75 combat missions in Europe beginning on D-Day and continuing through the fall of 1944.

GO TO CLIPS

(http://www.pbs.org/thewar/search_details.php?id=5384&type=3)
(http://www.pbs.org/thewar/search_details.php?id=5378&type=3)

Now, have students meet in small groups to discuss the following:

- How do Daniel Inouye’s and Quentin Aanenson’s recollections reflect similar sentiments? How do they differ?
- Soldiers are taught to think of the enemy as inhuman, but when they come close to the enemy that assumption is sometimes challenged. How did these two men view the enemy? How does the experience of battle differ on the ground and in the sky?
- In its simplest terms, war means killing people. To win a war, one army has to kill more soldiers than the army it is facing. However, we are brought up in a civilized society that condemns killing. How do we expect soldiers to balance these notions? How can they, as Aanenson states, go out and do their jobs “again and again and again?”

Activity 2: Battle

Combat is one of the most traumatic events an individual can endure. Only those who have actually experienced battle can fully comprehend its effect on the body and psyche.

Show the third segment of the clip “Combat and War” with personal accounts from two men featured in the series, Bill Lansford and Pete Arias, describing what goes through the minds of those in combat. Afterward, have students meet in small groups to discuss the following:

GO TO CLIP

(http://www.pbs.org/thewar/search_details.php?id=5379&type=3)

- What are each man’s thoughts as they land on Iwo Jima? Describe the intensity of what is going on around them.
- How do the men draw on their previous combat experiences?
- Do you feel either man believes the individual has much control over his fate when engaged in battle? Explain your answer. What about the fate of those around them?
- How does combat create a bond among those who have experienced it?
- What is a hero? Do we expect soldiers to be heroes? Why do you think many soldiers don’t consider themselves heroes when they perform what seem to us to be incredibly heroic tasks?

- What aspects of combat are common to all wars, and what experiences might differ in different wars? Think about battles during the Civil War, World War II and more recent wars. How has combat changed? Was there more to fear in battle then or now?

We tend to call it the real war. The rest of it's just the show biz war. The real war involves getting down there and killing people. And being killed yourself or just barely escaping it. It gives you attitudes about life and death that are unobtainable anywhere else.

— Paul Fussell, THE WAR

Activity 3: The Eyes of Combat

In this activity, students have an opportunity to place themselves in the position of being about to go into combat. Read aloud the following description of Eugene Sledge, a private in the United States Marine Corps, who saw action in the Pacific.

Twenty-year-old Eugene B. Sledge was the grandson of Confederate officers. Bookish and frail as a child, he had been taught to fish and hunt by his physician father and was a freshman at the Marion Military Institute, studying to become an officer, when he decided to sign on as a private in the Marines, instead. He told his anxious parents that if he waited for graduation he might not get a chance at combat. Not long after Sledge got to the Pacific he began keeping an unauthorized journal, slipping tiny sheets of notes between the pages of the small New Testament he carried so that no one else would know what he was doing. Years later, those uncensored notes would form the basis of a harrowing memoir of his experiences in the Pacific (entitled *With the Old Breed*).

Now have students imagine they are about to enter into combat and have taken a moment to write down some of their thoughts. They should describe the circumstance that brought them to this point and provide information on any military objective. Students may place the event in any time in history, but the majority of their writing should be an expression of their own emotions and personal thoughts. After students have completed their work, have those who want to share their accounts with the class. This activity can be expanded into a visual presentation on poster board or electronic media (PowerPoint, Web page or video).

It was hard to sleep that night (before the invasion). I thought of home, my parents, my friends — and whether I would do my duty, be wounded or disabled, or be killed. I concluded that it was impossible for me to be killed, because God loved me. Then I told myself that God loved us all and that many would die or

be ruined physically or mentally or both in the days following. My heart pounded and I broke out in a cold sweat. Finally, I called myself a damned coward and eventually fell asleep saying the Lord's prayer to myself.

— Eugene Sledge, United States Marine Corps

Visit the “Search and Explore” (http://www.pbs.org/thewar/search_home.htm) section of THE WAR web site for more information about combat during World War II.

Standards

Language Arts, Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McRel) at (<http://www.mcrel.org>)

Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process

- Uses strategies to address different audiences
- Writes expository compositions; synthesizes information from different sources
- Writes fictional, biographical, autobiographical and observational narrative compositions
- Writes descriptive compositions; reflects on personal experience
- Writes in response to literature; analyzes and interprets

Standard 2: Uses stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing

- Uses precise and descriptive language
- Develops effective paragraphs in logical sequence; uses supporting details
- Varies sentence structures
- Uses a variety of transitional devices
- Develops personal styles and voice.

Thinking and Reasoning

Benchmark 4: Identifies the qualitative and quantitative traits that can be used to order and classify items.

- Identifies the qualitative traits that can be used to order and classify items
- Identifies traits other than frequency and obvious importance that can be used to order and classify items

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