Grades: High School
Subject: U.S. History, African American History, Tennessee History, World History and Geography
Time Required: 2 50-minute class periods
Author: Teaching with Primary Sources—MTSU

OVERVIEW

The United States entered the Second World War in 1941 after the bombing of Pearl Harbor by Japanese forces on December 7th. In doing so, the United States became one of more than thirty countries who participated in the largest and most lethal war in global history. Total military and civilian deaths during the war, which began in 1939 with the invasion of Poland by Germany, are estimated between 72 to 80 million people. By the time the war concluded with the surrender of the Japanese in 1945, the world had been irrevocably changed.

Due to the global nature of the war, many young men and women found themselves fighting on the frontline miles away from home. These soldiers experienced firsthand the horrors of mass modern warfare, and many of them never returned home. Through their stories we find tales of heroism, struggle, sadness, and humanity that allow us to better understand what it was like to live and fight in one of the deadliest wars in modern history.

SPECIAL NOTE

This lesson plan includes two options for procedure based on the amount of class time and student research that a teacher wants to dedicate to this lesson.

TEACHING WITH PRIMARY SOURCES—MTSU

Lesson Plan: Oral Histories and Historical Memory: The Experiences of Soldiers in the Second World War

INVESTIGATIVE QUESTION

What were the experiences of the men and women who served in World War II and how can oral histories by useful in uncovering those experiences?

UNDERSTANDING GOAL

Students will analyze veteran oral histories taken from the Library of Congress’ Veterans History Project to understand the complexities involved in looking at oral histories and the experiences of soldiers in World War II.

OBJECTIVES

Students will read or watch oral history material for historical content and knowledge. Students will also analyze oral history materials for perspective and accuracy. Finally, students will explore historical memory and the ways in which the subjects recount their experiences.
**Curriculum Standards**

*U.S. History*

U.S.51: Identify the roles and sacrifices of individual American soldiers, as well as the unique contributions of special fighting forces such as the Tuskegee Airman, the 442nd Regimental Combat team, the 101st Airborne, and the Navajo Code Talkers.

*African American History*

AAH.36: Identify the contributions of African Americans who served in the military, and compare their experiences to other Americans who served in World War II.

*Tennessee History*

TN.53: Describe Tennessee’s contributions during World War I and World War II, including: the conversion of factories to wartime production, the importance of Oak Ridge, and the influence of Tennesseans (i.e., Cornelia Fort, Cordell Hull, and Alvin C. York).

*World History and Geography*

W.53: Describe the cultural, economic, geographic, and political effects of World War II, including casualties of the war (military and civilian).

*English*

Writing: Text Types and Protocol 11-12.W.TTP.2

Write informative/explanatory texts to analyze and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection and organization of content.

Key Ideas and Details 11-12.RL.KID.1

Analyze what a text says explicitly and draw inferences; support an interpretation of a text by citing and synthesizing relevant textual evidence from multiple sources.

**Resources and Materials**

*Resources*

Jesse A. Beazley, Private First Class, Army Veteran (Transcript)

Robert M. Alexander, Sergeant, Army Air Forces/Corps Veteran (Transcript)

Ruth Lillian Anderson Aitken, First Lieutenant, Army Nurse Corps Veteran (Transcript)

Mary Margaret Bradley Amick, Civilian (A Real Life Rosie the Riveter)

Aldo Freda, Private First Class (Prisoner of War)

Alice Evamae Ewing Phillips, Sergeant (Women’s Army Corps)

*Materials*

H.I.P.P.O. Graphic Organizer

Main Questions to Ask Your Oral History Graphic Organizer

Printed Transcripts - pages 10-15

Searching the Veterans History Project Handout
## DAY ONE

**Step 1** Before diving into this lesson plan, it may be helpful to cover some materials about World War II if you have not already done so. History.com provides a [series](#) on WWII causes, timelines, and history that may be useful for establishing contextual knowledge.

**Special Note** In addition to the following activity, the teacher also has the option to use this [lesson idea](#) from the TPS November 2018 Newsletter titled “The Soldier’s Experience.” Students analyze a selection of five oral histories and then write a letter from the perspective of their soldier to a family member back home. The letter should reflect how they think the soldier’s experiences would have shaped their thoughts on their time in the service, the war, and their role in WWII.

**Step 2** Begin the class by asking what they know, what they think they know, and what they want to know about the experiences of those that served in World War II. Have them explain what has informed their answers. Then ask them what they know, what they think they know, and what they want to know about oral histories.

**Step 3** Individually assign each student with one of the three veteran handouts featured at the end of this lesson plan (beginning on page 10). Additionally, pass out the “[Main Questions to Ask Your Oral History](#)” graphic organizer to each student.

**Step 4** Have your students read through the excerpts and biographical information, filling out the graphic organizer as they go and paying particular attention to the historical knowledge that the oral history provides. Inform your students that these notes will be crucial for their final project in this lesson plan.

**Step 5** Now that your students have worked through their veterans with an eye towards historical knowledge, now have them read through or review their sources again, this time focusing on perspective and accuracy. The H.I.P.P.O. [worksheet](#) on our website provides a good template to guide their analysis.

**Step 6** Once your students have completed both graphic organizers, bring them together at the end of the class and have them report out about their veterans. Since many students share the same veteran, each student is likely to bring their own perspectives and readings of the history to the discussion.

**Step 7** At the conclusion of the discussion, inform each student to hold onto their graphic organizers as it will form the basis of their research paper at the end of the lesson plan.
**PROCEDURE: B**

**DAY ONE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Make sure that each of your students has access to a desktop, tablet, or some other device that can access the <a href="https://www.veteranshistoryproject.org">Veterans History Project</a> website. Give each of your students a copy of the “Main Questions to Ask Your Oral History” and the “Searching the Veterans History Project” guide.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3</td>
<td>Instruct your students to search for a veteran on the Veterans History Project website and go through the materials included in their digital content, filling out the graphic organizer and paying particular attention to the historical knowledge that the oral history provides. It may be helpful at this point to provide them multiple graphic organizers as the digital content frequently features videos, manuscripts, transcripts, photos, and other materials. Our <a href="https://www.veteranshistoryproject.org/tools-for-teachers">Tools for Teachers</a> link on our website provides different types of graphic organizers for these different materials, and they may be more appropriate for analyzing a photograph than the “Main Questions to Ask Your Oral History” graphic organizer. It may also be helpful to set some parameters for which veteran the student selects, such as one that has a transcript and photographs or one that has manuscripts and artifacts. We have included three more oral histories (Mary Margaret Bradley Amick, Aldo Freda, Alice Evamae Ewing Phillips) that teachers may assign to their students rather than having them search for their own veterans.</td>
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Day Two

| Special Note | For this day’s activity, the students will focus less on the historical knowledge and accuracy of the oral histories and instead explore the issue of historical memory. In short, historical memory is the way in which people remember the past and relate broader themes of history to their everyday lives. This necessarily means that people remember things in different ways; for example, one person may remember the assassination of John F. Kennedy because they were washing clothes with other members of their family when they heard the news, while others may remember the same assassination because they were walking to work in the rain and stopped inside a store to dry off and heard it there. Regardless of how they remembered this event, their memory is not the narrative (national memory) found in textbooks but instead related to events in their personal lives.

For those wanting more background knowledge on historical memory, this [video](#) by The Choices Program at Brown University summarizes the different types of historical memory. Additionally, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* published by Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen provides an in depth study on historical memory in America.

| Step 1 | Begin the class by posing the following question to your students: What is historical memory? |
| Step 2 | After giving your students a few minutes to write down their responses, have them report out. It will be helpful to record their responses on the board to get a feel for what the class thinks it might mean.

| Step 3 | Show your students the video by The Choices Program mentioned in the Special Notes above. Encourage your students to take notes on the video. Upon completing the video, ask your students how they would revise their definition of historical memory. It may also be helpful at this point to model a couple of examples of historical memory to reinforce what they have learned about it so far.

A good way to do this would be for the teacher to model a memory of their own for the students. For example, the teacher could talk about what they remember about 9/11 and have students break down the teacher’s memory. Was the memory done in the context of family relations, i.e. did the teacher remember the event because they were with a friend at lunch or at school teaching when it happened? What can you infer about what the teacher values based on this memory? Could this be different from how your parents remembered the event? If so, how? What does this tell us about the way that people remember historical events?

After this modeling, the teacher can then call on students to provide an example from their or their families’ life. |
### Step 4
After modeling it a few times, have your students go back to their oral history notes and materials completed on Day One. Have your students write a reflective paper using their notes on their particular veteran and knowledge of historical memory to answer the following investigative question: What was the experience of (insert veteran name here) in World War II and how is their oral history useful in uncovering that experience?

Encourage your students to address the following topics:

1) What new historical knowledge did you gain?

2) How did they recount their experiences based on what you learned about historical memory (i.e. what did they remember, how did they remember it, what can that say about the way they remember things)?

3) Was their oral history useful in uncovering that experience? Why or why not? Do you think oral histories are valuable tools for the historic process? Why or why not?

### Step 5
This paper can be completed either in class or as a homework assignment. For those teachers that chose to have their students choose their own veterans, it may helpful for you to have a list of those veterans to make sure that your student is on the right track. Additionally, you can lengthen the paper based on the needs of your class or partner with your English teacher to tie into cross-curricular requirements.

Additionally, depending on how comfortable your students are with this material, additional scaffolding may be required to ensure that your students understand both historical memory and how to dissect oral histories.

### Extension
For those wanting to go further with the idea of historical memory in their classroom, please see the our lesson plan on [Interpreting Civil War Battlefields](#). Additionally, because the Veterans History Project spans from World War I onward, this lesson plan can easily be adapted to different time periods and different conflicts.
**QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR ORAL HISTORY**

Date: ___________________________  Name: ________________________________

Class: ___________________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUESTION</th>
<th>SAMPLE QUESTIONS</th>
<th>YOUR THOUGHTS</th>
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</table>
| **WHO** | Who is in the interview?  
What is their biographical information? | | |
| **WHAT** | What is the interviewee saying?  
What are some specific topics covered in the interview? | | |
| **WHEN** | When are the events discussed by the interviewee taking place?  
When was the interview conducted? | | |
| **WHERE** | Where are the events described by the interviewee happening? | | |
| **WHY** | Why is this oral history important?  
How is their story important to understanding this time period? | | |
SEARCHING THE VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT

The Veterans History Project is an invaluable resource for discovering and accessing the oral histories of the men and women who served our country from World War I to the Iraq War. However, as with many such databases, the vast amount of information present in this selection can make it hard to know where to start! This guide then will model a search to help you explore this collection.

1) Begin by accessing the website at the following URL: https://www.loc.gov/vets/

2) Now that you are the home page, you will want to click on the Search the Veterans Collections tab.

3) You will now notice that there are many search filters, including conflicts, era, branch of service, gender, prisoner of war, digitized collection, type of material, type of photograph, and type of manuscript.
4) Check all the qualifiers that apply to your search. For example, this search is looking at African American males who served in World War II in the Navy. We are interested in those whose collection is digitized and we are specifically looking for videos.

5) With the search results back, we selected LeRoy Brown by clicking on his Digitized Collection tab.

6) This will bring up details on his unit, service, and rank, amongst other things. Additionally, the box on the right will show the materials in his collection. Simply click the Complete Interview link to watch his oral history!
A combat rifleman with the Second Infantry Division, Jesse Beazley was part of the invasion force that took Omaha Beach on June 6th, 1944—D-Day. His transport boat was blown up far from shore and he was thrown into the water; he was forced to discard all his gear except his rifle and gas mask to keep from drowning as he swam in, German bullets hitting the water only inches away. Somehow he survived that day, and the next, and on through the next year—320 days of which were spent in direct contact with the enemy—through the five major European campaigns, all of the way to the end of the war in Europe, though combat infantrymen rarely lasted that long. His division was then selected to be part of the invasion of Japan, but before they could be sent, the atomic bombs were dropped and the war was ended. He was discharged December 28th, 1945.
“This is Jesse A. Beazley. I'm a World War II veteran. I was a combat rifleman in the infantry. And this is now January 13, 2004. I'm 80 years old now, I'll be 81 next month, on February 22. I thought I'd put a few things on here to have as a record for people that might be interested in years to come about war and what it's like. I'll tell it like it is…

…we went into the -- went into the little boats and started in. And I couldn't see anything because I was hunched down in the boat as we went in, but I do remember seeing the looks on the faces of the young men, most of them was 18, 19 years old, we had kidded in life like soldiers do, but all at once it got complete silence, and young men looked like old men. You could see their lips moving; we were praying, all of us was praying. I was praying. I didn't know whether I'd get hit and lose my legs or my sight or I'd get killed quick, or I'd make it. And I thought of my home, and my mom, and my dog, and my friends, and then I wondered how in the world this come me to be here in this situation, a young man, realizing that probably I didn't have much chance to live because I knew what was ahead of us there…

…I made it to the obstacles there, and I was tired and give out because I had a lot of clothes on. Well, these clothes that I had on was impregnated with a chemical in case the Germans gassed us, it would be protection. I had on long underwear, and then I had on O.D. pants, which is a wool dress pants, and then over top of the dress pants I had the regular fatigue pants, and I had, of course, the field jacket on top of that, and all of that, and they was treated with these chemicals that made them real heavy, and you know how clothes are when they get wet and heavy, it's hard for you to swim. And I was give out, and I hung onto an obstacle there in the water, a metal obstacle, and the bullets was whizzing by me. I could feel the heat, they was so close to my face. I could feel the heat from the bullets. They were splattering all around me, but luckily none hit me, and after I kind of rested a while, I made it in to the beach, and I would run a while and then I'd have to fall because I was give out, and finally got into behind the -- as well as I remember, it was kind of a hill there, and I got in a rise there on the ground on the beach, and I got in behind that, and most of that then to me is a nightmare…

…this is some of the things that I just wanted to put on record so it will be put down what war is and what you're sending your young people into when you send them into it, and this is -- this is some of the things that I think needs to be told…

I think the American people needs to know what war is. They don't know. They don't really know. Only the ones that's lost sons, and they don't know what they went through with, they don't know all the suffering they put up with. I'll try -- that's the reason I'm putting this on here, in the hope that it will be a help to somebody.”
“When I was back in the Air Force, my first post of duty after induction in Richmond, Virginia, was on the bus ride to Fort Meade, Maryland. And in Fort Meade, Maryland, as a young Army recruit, I was served food by German prisoners of war and Italian prisoners of war. We -- I was inducted with a group of young college fellows from Washington, D.C., Harlem University, Morgan State University, and my school, Virginia Union University in Richmond, Virginia. We caught a German prisoner of war spitting in our food one morning, so we took appropriate action. We did almost the same thing as the people have done to the prisoners in Iraq. It's a fact of life. War is destruction, war is cruel, war is mean, and you just lose all of your civilian attitudes and everything when you see things differently.

From Fort Meade, Maryland, I was put on a train with about 200 other black soldiers and we were sent to Sheppard Field, Texas. On our way to Sheppard Field, Texas, we passed through Charleston, West Virginia. When we got in the station there, the ladies of the Confederate were outside the station passing out magazines, fruit, and cakes and cookies to white soldiers, ignored the black troops.

Fortunately, we had a commander who was black but looked like a white man. He said, Fellows, don't have a riot here, let's not mess up on our first day in the Army, sit there in your seats being quiet, I'll go outside and I'll take care of everything. And our good commander, Paul Cooke, former president of Miner's -- former president of Miner's College and later president of Federal City College, Washington, D.C., with his blond hair and blue eyes, went outside and collected fruit and magazines and newspapers for us, candy, cookies, and brought them to us. Avoid a riot, avoid our having been court-martialed, and my having spend many years in Leavenworth. So we avoid that crisis...
ROBERT M. ALEXANDER (2 OF 2)

...Just before we got to Luzon, a major Philippine island, largest one there, thank God, it was cloudy one morning about 10 a.m. and we got this call on the deck, All hands, and, Now hear this, now hear this, all hands on deck. So we went up on deck and -- bring you at least -- we were told to carry our life jackets with us and we put on our life jackets, and our commander spaced us all the way around the decks of the ship, because the observation tower had seen two floating Japanese mine hooked together and they were coming across the path that this ship was moving, where the ship was at.

The captain said, Everybody don't move, stand in the same place so we don't tilt the ship and I'm going to make some maneuvers. And he made two circles away from those Japanese mines. So that was my second time I had avoided death in the Army. They -- they -- good pilot, a good -- good captain, a good -- good skipper. And so he saved about 4,000 troops from hitting those mines, and those mines passed the ship and kept on down toward Australia. Anyway, in the Philippines, the Japanese had surrendered in the last big battle of Walled City, called Intramuros.

[on segregation in the Army]...another thing, they were given more privileges. I had to wear used uniforms. They had clean new stuff. I had one OD jacket -- that's an army draft shirt -- that had bullet holes in it that came here from Europe. And -- but, you know, recruit -- recruit, I do what they gave me.

My father told me -- well, probably when I left home, he said, Bob, I been in service. There are only three answers. They are -- he was in World War I. He said, They are -- and my grandpa told me when I was on the farm. They're yes, sir, no, sir, and no excuse, sir. And I remembered that and went through that mess. Don't -- don't get beyond yes, sir, no, sir, no -- no excuse, sir. You're in the military...

...But I remember what my father told me: Do what you have to do in the Army, hurry up and get out, and when you get out, go back to school so you can help dismantle this Jim Crow system. And I carried out my parents' wishes. One of my cases integrated all private day schools in America. It's called Fairfax-Brewster. And the other case integrated all of the facilities and housing subdivisions. We had a black doctor who paid monthly association dues for the homeowners to play on the tennis court and he had -- the kids could play on the playground. But he couldn't muddy the waters. He couldn't swim in the pool. So he went to the Supreme Court and he won that case. So -- so it's -- we're into this larger scope of getting ahead and doing things and -- that's where we are."
This interview is of Ruth Anderson Aitken, born April 25th, 1920. She served in World War II in the Army Nurse Corps, reaching the rank of First Lieutenant. It is being recorded in Rockford, Illinois, on July 7th, 2008. My name is Kathryn Aitken Rasch, Ruth's daughter. Court reporter Terrie Wasiczewski is also present. This interview is being conducted for the Veterans History Project at the Library of Congress.

“...My mother was Jenny Johnson and she had worked in the family store; but at the time of my -- of meeting my father, she was working at a rooming house where he was -- had a room. My father was John Elof Anderson. He was an immigrant from Sweden. When he reached Ellis Island, he was told he should go by his middle name because there were too many John Andersons coming over from Sweden. My father was a furniture-maker. He made furniture for the Union Furniture Company and he did a lot of work in our home after they were married... My mother was the last -- with the last pregnancy my mother had a cesarean section. And when my father went to the hospital to bring her home, she threw an embolism and died when I was seven years old; so she and my brother that was born at that time were buried together... I had always wanted to be a nurse. All my dolls had bandages and broken legs and arms; and my aunt had also wanted to be a nurse, so she encouraged it. When I was 14 after the Depression, my father had just gotten a job again. He died of an illness that was only ten days, but my aunt stayed with me and she and I lived together. When I was -- I graduated from Rockford High School in 1937. At the time I would have liked to started nurse's training, but I had to be 18. So I went to work at Burson Knitting Company in the office there. Their slack season was the summer. So the following spring when I was 18, I was laid off, everyone in the office. Only the older employees were kept. Then my aunt encouraged me that I should go in nurse's training, but I had -- at 25 cents an hour, my wages at the knitting company, I hadn't saved enough to go in nurse's training; but my aunt said I should cash in the little life insurance policy I had. And from that I got either 90- or $100 and it paid my tuition fee at Saint Anthony Hospital and I entered nurse's training there in August of 1938. I loved nurse's training. I had two roommates from Michigan who became my friends and we were friends the rest of our lives. I was fortunate to be able to get a job at the hospital, even when I was in training at the laboratory, and became acquainted with a laboratory doctor there. When I graduated from nurse's training, he asked me if I would like to start a blood bank...
and I decided, yes, that would be something different; and I started the blood bank with Dr. Matthews at Saint Anthony Hospital. By this time World War II was on all our minds. The sisters at the hospital were originally from Germany and they were sending care packages to relatives and friends in Germany; and so we heard a lot about things that were going on over there, which we didn't understand at the time. Some of my classmates joined the Army immediately and came back with wonderful tales, of course. Also friends that we were with, their brothers and the fellows we were dating, were being called into the service. And the bug gradually bit my two roommates and I, and a recruiter came out from Chicago and we decided we would sign up. So we enlisted at Camp Grant in Rockford. We went through a whole day of examination and answering a lot of questions and signing a lot of papers. Then went home thinking we had all gotten in. But I got a phone call saying I had not made it because I was five pounds underweight. They wouldn't take anyone at my weight. But they said if I came out and signed a release paper that I would accept responsibility for this, they would accept that. So I got on a bus and went out and signed the papers and three of us waited for orders. It didn't take very long and we got orders to go together to Percy Jones Hospital in Battle Creek, Michigan…

...We were told there was a patient here with gas gangrene. And the doctors were sure we had never seen any in civilian life, so they wanted us all to take time to go over and see this patient. They were going to operate on his shoulder. I can still hear the awful sound of that scalpel -- scalpel opening that shoulder. I'm sorry to say the patient died the next day. Now I know that they even have decompression oxygen chambers for this type of injury in the wars today, but we had nothing for them. We had to work part-time in the triage tent. There was usually a doctor there, but sometimes they were so busy we had to accept the responsibility of deciding who would stay at our hospital because they could go back on duty, who would stay at our hospital because they were too bad to transport immediately, and then another tent where the men were not going to make it. They were hard decisions. And when you went into the triage tent, you can't imagine the looks on their faces when they saw a white woman. They could not believe that there were nurses there during the battle...

Well, I think you learn the strength of the human spirit is much stronger than you think. You're stronger than you think you are. You can do things that you never thought you could do. You see things that we'll never forget the rest of your life. It makes life more valuable. But when I first started working again, I had a hard time because our wounded men never complained. Our men that were recuperating were just so glad to be alive. And the patients I had worried about a wrinkled sheet or some other frivolous thing, and it took me a while to realize this was a different world.”