

American POWs Experience in the Korea War

Lesson plan developed by Bryce Mittelstadt, Wyoming History Teacher

Lesson Overview:

Students will explore the personal experiences of American soldiers who were prisoners of war (POWs) during the Korean War. Using first-hand oral histories from the Library of Congress Veterans History Project, students will analyze the psychological, physical, and emotional impact of captivity. The lesson will culminate in a reflective discussion to help students connect individual stories to the broader human cost of war.

Wyoming State Social Studies Standards:

SS12.4.4: Describe the historical interactions between and among individuals, groups, and/or institutions (e.g., family, neighborhood, political, economic, religious, social, cultural, and workplace) and their impact on significant historical events.

SS12.4.5: Using primary and secondary sources, apply historical research methods to interpret and evaluate important historical events from multiple perspectives.

SS12.6.1: Analyze, evaluate, and/or synthesize multiple sources of information in diverse formats and media in order to address a question or solve a problem.

Learning Objectives:

- Students will identify and explain the experiences of American POWs during the Korean War.
- Students will evaluate the emotional, psychological, and physical effects of being a POW.
- Students will interpret primary sources (oral histories) to understand a perspective of war.

Materials:

- Headphones and device



- Guided Activity Notes
- Reading Material:
 - o A Barrier to Armistice
- Access to the following oral history interviews:
 - o Jose Mares - POW in Korea
 - o Donald M. Griffith - POW in Korea
 - o Donald R. Peppard - POW in Korea

Activity and Discussion: (5 minutes)

Introduction:

1. Pose the question: “What might it be like to endure war not on a battlefield, but in captivity?”
2. Define:
 - a. Prisoner of War (POW)

*At this time in the lesson, it is an opportunity for students to be given little information about the experience of POWs and allow for the oral histories to be their source.

Independent Listening & Analysis (30 minutes)

1. Distribute the POW handout with guiding questions:
 - o What details does the speaker give about their capture and imprisonment?
 - o What were the most difficult challenges they describe (physical, emotional, mental)?
 - o How did they maintain hope, morale, or survival?
 - o What lessons can be drawn from their experience?
2. Assign each student one of the three oral history interviews. They should listen/watch independently using headphones and take detailed notes on their handout.
3. Optional extension: Encourage students to explore a second interview for comparison if time permits.



Conclusion (20 minutes)

1. Ask students to write a brief (one-paragraph) reflection responding to this prompt:
“After hearing firsthand accounts of American POWs in the Korean War, how has your understanding of the costs of war changed?”
2. End with a class discussion:
 - Why is it important to preserve and study veterans' oral histories?
 - How might these stories impact public memory or policy?

Compilation of Sources

- Jose Mares - POW in Korea
<https://www.loc.gov/item/afc2001001.06059/>
- Donald M. Griffith - POW in Korea
<https://www.loc.gov/collections/veterans-history-project-collection/serving-our-voices/diverse-experiences-in-service/prisoners-of-war/pows-in-in-korea-or-vietnam/item/afc2001001.04925/>
- Donald R. Peppard - POW in Korea
<https://www.loc.gov/collections/veterans-history-project-collection/serving-our-voices/diverse-experiences-in-service/prisoners-of-war/pows-in-in-korea-or-vietnam/item/afc2001001.02936/>



American POWs Experience in the Korea War**Name:** _____**Date:** _____**Class:** _____**Directions:**

Today you will explore a first-person account from a U.S. military veteran who was a **Prisoner of War (POW)** during the Korean War. You'll learn about their background, their military service, their time in captivity, and their reflections on war and survival. Use this worksheet to take detailed notes while listening to their oral history.

You will use this information for group discussion and a class reflection.

Interview Information**Veteran's Name:** _____**What was this person's background before the war?**

(Where were they from? What was their life like before joining the military?)

How did they come to serve in the Korean War?

(Were they drafted or did they enlist? What motivated them to serve?)

What was their role or job in the military?

(Include branch, rank, unit, duties, or special training if mentioned.)

What do they remember about arriving in Korea or their first experiences in the war zone?



POW Experience

Describe how and where they were captured.

(Who was involved? What were the circumstances?)

Describe the physical conditions of captivity.

(Food, shelter, treatment, illness, injuries, etc.)

What emotional or psychological effects did they describe?

(How did they cope with fear, isolation, or trauma?)

Did they mention relationships with other POWs or captors?

(Were there friendships, leadership, or abuse?)

How did they survive?

(Did they describe mental strategies, faith, humor, or other ways of keeping hope?)

What happened when they were released or escaped?

(What was that moment like for them?)



Personal Reflection (Write a paragraph to the following questions)

In what ways has your understanding of war or military service changed? What emotions or questions are you left with after learning about this veteran's story?
