Activity: The Life of a Soldier: Understanding World War I Through Personal Perspective

Guiding question:
What impact did World War I have on the American way of life?

DEVELOPED BY KATIE GULLEDGE LEVINTHAL
Grade Level(s): 6-8, 9-12
Subject(s): Social Studies
Overview
Using the method of narrative inquiry, this lesson provides a voice for the personal experience of soldiers in World War I (WWI). Students will take on the role of a documentary film-maker and develop a pitch to get funding for a film on the life of a private in the U.S. Army using a short biography and historic photographs as sources.

Historical Context
The United States watched the conflict rage through Europe between the Allies: Britain, France, Italy, and Russia, and the Central Powers: Germany, Austria-Hungary, Ottoman Empire, and Bulgaria from a distance until the sinking of the RMS Lusitania compelled America to declare war against Germany in April of 1917. This decision would change the role America would play on the global stage away from its former isolationist stance towards the superpower it would be by the end of the twentieth century.

Military service in WWI was a life changing experience for thousands of American soldiers. For many of the young men who traveled across the Atlantic Ocean to the battlefields of Europe, it was their first time away from the United States or even their hometown or family. Most of the soldiers had no prior military experience and they received only a short period of training before facing the enemy. Once the soldiers arrived in France, where the majority of American troops were sent, they were confronted with sleeping in rough conditions, eating rations, marching for miles across unfamiliar terrain, and the terrors of the battlefield.

Objectives
At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be able to

- Use WWI era primary source documents as the basis for informed perspectives on the historical period
- Demonstrate knowledge of an individual soldier’s experience in WWI that is both

“I believe that stories are powerful teaching tools. They help us relate, compare, persuade, and even understand ourselves. Growing up, I spent many years listening to stories about my great-grandfather and his experience as a soldier in WWI. By uncovering and retelling his experience, I began to understand the complexity of “the Great War.” Through this lesson, students will participate in narrative inquiry through the use of primary sources. They will re-create their own story as a way of understanding WWI.”
—Katie Gulledge Levinthal
personal and historically contextualized

- Write a persuasive pitch for a documentary film that highlights an individual soldier within a narrative that has historical authenticity

## Standards Connections

### Connections to Common Core

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.2** Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2** Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.7** Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

### Connections to C3 Framework

**D2.His.1.6-8.** Analyze connections among events and developments in broader historical contexts.

**D4.3.6-8.** Present adaptations of arguments and explanations on topics of interest to others to reach audiences and venues outside the classroom using print and oral technologies (e.g., posters, essays, letters, debates, speeches, reports, and maps) and digital technologies (e.g., Internet, social media, and digital documentary).

### Documents Used ★ indicates an ABMC source

#### Primary Sources

Photo 1. A French airship patrols for U-boats over a convoy headed into Brest, France in 1918. Image courtesy of Navy History and Heritage Command.

Photo 2. 80th Division marching through St. Juvin, France. 1918. National Archives and Records Administration.
Photo 3. American wounded in a bombed-out church near the Argonne Forest. National Archives and Records Administration.


**Secondary Sources**

Life of a Soldier Narrative

**Materials**

- Photo Analysis Worksheet
- Historic photographs
- Life of a Soldier Narrative
- Documentary Film Worksheet
- Documentary Film Pitch Handout

**Lesson Preparation**

- Print out or make available electronically the Life of a Soldier Narrative
- Print out or make available electronically the historic photographs
- Make one copy of the following for each student:
  - Photo Analysis Worksheet
  - Documentary Film Worksheet
  - Documentary Film Pitch Handout
- Make sure all technology is working

**Procedure**

**Activity One: Analyzing Photographs (20 minutes)**

- Pass out copies of the Photo Analysis Worksheet and the historic photographs (if not available digitally).
- Have students analyze each photograph and fill in their responses on the Photo Analysis Worksheet.
Activity Two: Pitch for documentary movie (45 minutes)

- Read the Life of a Soldier Narrative together as a class.
  - **Teacher Tip:** It may be necessary to check for understanding throughout the narrative. You may want to read the Historical Context section to the class or make it available for students to read individually.
- Instruct students to complete the Documentary Film Worksheet
- Students should write a 200-word paragraph on the Documentary Film Pitch Handout using the information from the Life of a Soldier Narrative and the Photo Analysis Worksheet to formulate their pitch for a documentary film. It should contain a synopsis of the basic story line and a statement of why the subject matter is significant.

Assessment

- Assess students using the Life of a Soldier Rubric.

Methods for Extension

- Students can create a video trailer for their documentary film that previews the content.

Adaptations

- Teachers may have students work in groups to complete the photo analysis and pitch paragraph.
Life of a Soldier Narrative

Will McGuirt was an ordinary man who had an extraordinary experience as an American soldier in World War I. He was born on September 18, 1894 in rural North Carolina. McGuirt went to church every Sunday with his family, worked on their farm, and went to the local one-room school until the fifth grade, the highest grade the school offered. It is likely that he would have lived a lifetime within a fifty-mile radius of his hometown, but McGuirt’s life changed forever when the United States declared war on Germany in April 1917 and joined the Allies: Britain, France, Italy, and Russia. McGuirt was called to serve in the U.S. Army and was soon on a ship to France with many other young men from his community, off to see places and things that he had never known existed.

McGuirt was a member of the 81st Division, 161st Infantry Brigade, 322nd Infantry Regiment, Company J. Known as the “Wildcat” Division, it was mostly comprised of individuals from North Carolina, South Carolina, and Florida. The men adopted a wildcat silhouette as a shoulder patch, one of the first shoulder insignia worn by troops in the American Expeditionary Forces.

The division began the twelve-day trip from New York to England on July 30, 1918. For McGuirt and the other local boys, this was their first time on a boat and, when the troops landed in England, it was the first time they had been to another country. From England they proceeded to France, where most American troops would serve. They received several weeks of training before the division began to move to the vicinity of Bruyères in the Vosges region of France.

On September 19 the 81st Division was sent to the St. Dié sector of the Vosges Mountain region. There, as part of the French Seventh Army, the division held what was considered a quiet front, although it fought off German trench raids and endured artillery bombardments. This area was important to the Germans because it protected the strategic iron ore centers of Metz and Briey. While serving in the St. Dié sector, the division suffered 116 casualties. The battle was the first large Allied offensive of the year against a carefully prepared German trench system. The clean cut victory of the Americans at St. Mihiel was a turning point in the war. On October 31, the 81st Division moved to the vicinity of Verdun for the purpose of participating in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive of the American First Army.

The 81st Division’s infantry regiments attacked German lines on the morning of November 9. From the outset, the division encountered heavy machine gun and artillery fire; heavy fog and smoke hindered visibility. When, on the night of November 10, “Wildcat” Division commanders received no official confirmation of rumors that an armistice might be signed the next day, they planned a dawn attack on the main German trench line. The division attacked enemy trench positions north of Bois de Manheulles, slowly advancing through heavy fog and shell and machine gun fire. At 10:30 a.m., they began to fight their way through the barbed wire entanglements along the German main trench line where some Americans entered German trenches and many were either killed or pinned
down under enemy fire. At 11:00 a.m., the firing abruptly stopped when the Armistice of November 11, 1918 ended hostilities. During the short time the 81st Division was in combat, 248 soldiers were killed and 856 wounded.

Following the armistice, the 81st Division marched 175 kilometers to a rest area. It took a great effort to get all of the American troops back to the United States and after the war, McGuirt’s division remained in France for more than five months. The soldiers grew accustomed to life with the French villagers. The Allied Expeditionary Forces set up schools for soldiers to attend and the YMCA helped establish different forms of entertainment including sports teams, a theatre group, and even a “Wildcat” newspaper.

When McGuirt and his unit were finally given orders to leave, many were saddened as they left the new friends they had made in France. They were not only leaving behind the local people they had come to know, but they were also leaving behind many fellow soldiers that had not survived the war.

McGuirt returned home to North Carolina after being released from the Army on June 25, 1919. He married Ona Mae Griffin, a young woman from his community. He and his brothers played music, mostly country music and hymns, on Saturday nights at a country store. People would gather, visit, and share news.

Some of the young men who had fought in the war realized there might be new opportunities in addition to life on the family farm. Cotton mills were springing up in North Carolina and in nearby Fort Mill, South Carolina. Employment at the mill included a house and was a good job for men like McGuirt who had mechanical aptitude and could learn to fix looms and other equipment in the mill. Ona later said that she cried the night before they left their country town, where she and Will grew up and where everyone they knew also lived. But Will had ambition after he returned from the war. He knew there were other opportunities for him besides farming.

Will McGuirt died on January 23, 1983. There are only three things listed on his gravestone: his name, the years of his life, and that he was a soldier in World War I.
## Photo Analysis Worksheet

**Directions:** Examine each source and fill out the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source: Title, Creator, Date (if applicable)</th>
<th>Select three details, facts, or concepts you notice about the source</th>
<th>What does the source reveal about the experience of American soldiers in WWI?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Photo Analysis Worksheet cont.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source: Title, Creator, Date (if applicable)</th>
<th>Select three details, facts, or concepts you notice about the source</th>
<th>What does the source reveal about the experience of American soldiers in WWI?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6.</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Directions: You are a documentary filmmaker hoping to make a film on soldiers in World War I. Your first step is to create a pitch to people who might want to invest in your film. Select one source from the historic photographs that you analyzed to highlight in your pitch and explain why you chose it.

Title for documentary:

What source do you plan to highlight in your pitch to hook your audience?

Why did you choose this source?

What story does it tell about the experience of Will McGuirt during World War I?
Documentary Film Pitch Handout

Write a paragraph or paragraphs of 200-words to relay the basic story that you want to convey in your film.
# Life of a Soldier Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advanced</th>
<th>Proficient</th>
<th>Basic</th>
<th>Emerging</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organization</strong></td>
<td>Documentary film pitch includes a clear introduction sentence, well-organized body sentences, and a conclusion sentence.</td>
<td>Documentary film pitch includes an introduction sentence, body sentences, and a conclusion sentence.</td>
<td>Documentary film pitch is missing one of the following: an introduction sentence, body sentences, and/or a conclusion sentence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Historical Evidence</strong></td>
<td>Documentary film pitch successfully integrates at least four identifiable references from the Will McGuirt Narrative.</td>
<td>Documentary film pitch successfully integrates at least three identifiable references from the Will McGuirt Narrative.</td>
<td>Documentary film pitch successfully integrates at least two identifiable references from the Will McGuirt Narrative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Accuracy</strong></td>
<td>Documentary film pitch engages with relevant historical facts without error.</td>
<td>Documentary film pitch engages with relevant historical facts with minor errors.</td>
<td>Documentary film pitch engages with relevant historical facts with several significant errors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conventions</strong></td>
<td>Clear control of grammar, mechanics, spelling, usage, and sentence formulation.</td>
<td>Adequate control of grammar, mechanics, spelling, usage, and sentence formulation.</td>
<td>Limited control of grammar, mechanics, spelling, usage, and sentence formulation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A French airship patrols for U-boats over a convoy headed into Brest, France, 1918.

Navy History and Heritage Command
80th Division marching through St. Juvin, France, 1918.
National Archives and Records Administration
American wounded in a bombed out church near the Argonne Forest, 1918.
National Archives and Records Administration
American troops celebrating the news of the Armistice, 1918.

Washington, D.C: Pictorial Bureau, 1920
French couple shaking hands with American soldiers, 1918.
U.S. Army
Will McGuirt’s grave marker in North Carolina.

Photo by Katie Gulledge Levinthal