



WAR MEMORIAL CENTER EDUCATION PROGRAM

Grades 9-12

Title/theme

Above and Beyond: Gary G. Wetzel, Medal of Honor Recipient

This lesson explores the six core values of the Medal of Honor (courage, commitment, citizenship, sacrifice, integrity, and patriotism) through the story of Gary G. Wetzel and his battlefield heroism, for which he earned the Medal of Honor, the U.S. military's highest award for valor.

Length

2 class periods

Modification, if used in conjunction with veteran interviews or QnA session:

Review Worksheet 2: How to Talk to Veterans. Ask students to think about other interviews they've conducted and whether they were successful or not and why. Students should think about interviews they've seen, in person or online, and identify qualities in a good interviewer and those of a bad interviewer. Discuss questions that are respectful and those that are inappropriate. Ask students how insensitive questions can affect others, whether or not they are veterans. Ask students to think about a time they were asked an inappropriate question and how they responded.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this class, students will be able to:

- Evaluate and analyze a set of various sources to reconstruct a critical experience of a historical actor;
- Understand the significance of the Medal of Honor and six core values that it represents;
- Analyze a Medal of Honor citation;
- Explore historical and current meanings and implications of what it means to serve;
- Examine the notion of sacrifice in the context of military service;
- Understand how an individual story can be used to illustrate and explain historical events and processes that affected a large number of historical actors;
- Determine how events of global and national importance (Vietnam War) connect with local (Wisconsin) history;
- Understand selected outcomes of the Vietnam War and what impact they had on the lives of those who served and their families.

Wisconsin Standards for Grades 9-12

Content Area: History (Hist)

Wisconsin history era: 1954 - 1975 Civil Rights, the Later Cold War, and the Vietnam War Era

US history era: 1945 - 1980 Post-War Economic and Population Growth, Suburbanization, the Cold War, and Civil Rights

- Standard SS.Hist1: Wisconsin students will use historical evidence for determining cause and effect.
 - Hist1.b: Effect:
 - SS.Hist1.b.h Evaluate multiple events from different perspectives using primary and secondary sources and analyze intended and unintended effects from both long- and short-term perspectives. Evaluate how different groups and individuals contributed to the effect.
- Standard SS.Hist2: Wisconsin students will analyze, recognize, and evaluate patterns of continuity and change over time and contextualization of historical events.
 - Hist2.a: Patterns stay the same over a period of time
 - SS.Hist2.a.h Evaluate a variety of primary and secondary sources to apply knowledge of major eras, enduring themes, turning points, and historical influences to analyze the patterns of continuity in the community, the state, the United States, and the world.
 - Hist2.c: Contextualization
 - SS.Hist2.c.h Evaluate how the historical context influenced the process or nature of the continuity or change that took place.
- Standard SS.Hist3: Wisconsin students will connect past events, people, and ideas to the present; use different perspectives to draw conclusions; and suggest current implications.
 - Hist3.a: Connections:
 - SS.Hist3.a.h Analyze significant historical periods and their relationship to present issues and events.
- Standard SS.Hist4: Wisconsin students will evaluate a variety of primary and secondary sources to interpret the historical context, intended audience, purpose, or author's point of view (Historical Methodology).
 - Hist4.b: Intended audience
 - SS.Hist4.b.h Analyze how the intended audience influences a primary or secondary source.
 - Hist4.c: Purpose:
 - SS.Hist4.c.h Analyze the intended purpose of a specific primary or secondary source.
 - Hist4.d: Point of view (POV):
 - SS.Hist4.d.h Analyze how the POV of the author can influence the content and intent of a primary or secondary source and identify whose voices may be left out.

Content Area: Social Studies Inquiry Practices and Processes (Inq)

- Standard SS.Inq3: Wisconsin students will develop claims using evidence to support reasoning.
 - Inq3.a: Develop claims to answer an inquiry question
 - SS.Inq3.a.h Develop a defensible claim to provide focus for an inquiry that is based upon the analysis of sources.
 - Inq3.c: Elaborate how evidence supports a claim
 - SS.Inq3.c.h Analyze the extent to which evidence supports or does not support a claim, and if it does not, modify the claim appropriately.
- Standard SS.Inq4: Wisconsin students will communicate and critique conclusions.
 - Inq4.a: Communicate conclusions

- SS.Inq4.a.h Communicate conclusions while taking into consideration that audiences from diverse backgrounds (e.g., gender, class, proximity to the event or issue) may interpret the information in different ways).
 - Standard SS.Inq5: Wisconsin students will be civically engaged.
 - Inq5.a: Civic engagement
 - SS.Inq5.a.h Explore opportunities, informed by the knowledge and methods of the social sciences, for personal or collaborative civic engagement with community, school, state, tribal, national, and/or global implications.

Content Area: Behavioral Sciences (BH)

- Standard SS.BH3: Wisconsin students will assess the role that human behavior and cultures play in the development of social endeavors (Anthropology)
 - BH3.a: Social interactions
 - SS.BH3.a.h Analyze the means by and extent to which groups and institutions can influence people, events, and cultures in both historical and contemporary settings.

National Common Core Standards (History/Social Studies)

Grades 9-10 / 11-12

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1 / CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2 / CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.3 / CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.3

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.8 / CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.8

Materials

- Document 1: Selection of photos from the private collection of Gary G. Wetzel, all images courtesy of Gary G. Wetzel
- Document 2: Gary G. Wetzel’s Medal of Honor Citation, Congressional Medal of Honor Society, <https://www.cmohs.org/recipients/gary-g-wetzel>
- Document 3: “Gary Wetzel: 50th Anniversary Medal of Honor Commemoration,” Video by the War Memorial Center (7’01”), November 19, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/warmemorialcenter/videos/116236159328465/?redirect=false>

Background information

Gary G. Wetzel was born on September 29, 1947, in South Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He joined the United States Army in 1965, when he was only 18. According to his own account of his youth, Wetzel chose to enlist because he felt he could make a contribution as a member of the U.S. Army.

Wetzel volunteered to serve two tours in Vietnam, where he was a member of a helicopter crew. According to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, the Vietnam War was often referred to as “the helicopter war” and being “a helicopter pilot or crew member was among the most dangerous jobs in the war.” Out of nearly 12,000 helicopters that the U.S. Army used in

Vietnam, more than 5,000 were destroyed.¹ Wetzel's experience in Vietnam confirms the extreme risk, to which helicopter crews were exposed. He survived five helicopter crashes — and through his actions in the aftermath of the final crash, a typical 22-year-old from Wisconsin was transformed into a war hero.

On January 8, 1968, the helicopter of U.S. Army Private First Class Wetzel, who at the time was a door gunner for the 173rd Assault Helicopter Company, was shot down. During the ensuing fight, Wetzel's left arm was badly damaged and would later have to be amputated. He suffered additional serious injuries to his right arm, chest, and left leg. Despite the life-threatening injuries, PFC Wetzel continued fighting and helped hold off the enemy until his men could be rescued. His heroic actions were credited with saving numerous lives. On November 19, 1968, Wetzel was awarded the Medal of Honor by President Lyndon Johnson for his actions in a White House ceremony.

This lesson explores Gary G. Wetzel's story within the framework of the six core values that the Medal of Honor represents: courage, commitment, citizenship, sacrifice, integrity, and patriotism. Students will examine how Wetzel's actions in Vietnam embody the core values of the Medal of Honor as well as reflect on a tension between acknowledging the heroism of servicemen and servicewomen and recognizing the brutality and violence of war.

Terms

Vietnam War

Medal of Honor

Valor

Gallantry

Six Core Values of the Medal of Honor

Activity 1 (opening activity)

- Distribute Sheet 1 to each student. Introduce the Medal of Honor. Explain that it is the United States' highest military award. Project the design of the medal on a screen. We recommend an excellent interactive tool on the official website of the Medal of Honor, which explains the symbolism of each of the medal's three variations: <https://www.cmohs.org/medal/design>.
- As students examine the design of the medal, point out that the Medal of Honor is the United States' highest award "for military valor in action." Explain what valor means (the term appears on two out of three variations of the medal), stressing the idea of the "strength of mind or spirit" (Merriam Webster defines valor as: "Strength of mind or spirit that enables a person to encounter danger with firmness; personal bravery"). Ask students to reflect on what that means. How is "strength of mind or spirit" different from physical strength? Can someone who is physically weak or ill or injured demonstrate valor in his or her behavior?
- Explain that in addition to recognizing valor, the Medal of Honor stands for six core values (included in Sheet 1): courage, commitment, citizenship, sacrifice, integrity, and patriotism. All these six core values together are encapsulated in the notion of valor. Write down these six terms on a board. Students complete Part I of Sheet 1, in which they define the six core values and provide examples of behaviors that would exemplify each of them. Encourage

¹ Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, "Featured Topics: Helicopters," <https://www.vvmf.org/topics/Helicopters/#:~:text=Overall%2C%20the%20U.S.%20military%20used,dangerous%20jobs%20in%20the%20war.>

students to provide examples that will consider different life experiences and illustrate how individuals demonstrate these values every day, not only in extraordinary situations like military service. This activity can be completed individually, in pairs, or small groups of 3-4. Students share, discuss, and compare their definitions and examples.

- Explain that students will explore the story of Gary G. Wetzel, a Vietnam War veteran and one of the recipients of the Medal of Honor. Project Document 1: Selection of photos from the private collection of Gary G. Wetzel on a screen and provide background on Wetzel to students. Provide only basic information: how old he was when he enlisted, why he enlisted, that he volunteered to serve two tours in Vietnam, etc. (see “Background information” above). Note that two photos reveal that Wetzel served as a member of a helicopter crew. Ask if students can recognize what Wetzel’s role was in Vietnam. Point out that in the photo on the right, Wetzel is wearing the Medal of Honor and that students will learn next what he did to earn it. Students might also notice Wetzel’s prosthetic arm in that photo. If they do, tell them that they will also learn next how that happened. If they do not, bring it to their attention and tell them that they will also learn next how that happened.

Activity 2

- Project Document 2: “Gary G. Wetzel’s Medal of Honor Citation” on a screen and/or distribute copies of the text to students. Students read the citation and fill in Part II of Sheet 1. This activity can be completed individually, in pairs, or small groups of 3-4. Students share, discuss, and compare their responses. When students share their findings, encourage them to retell Wetzel’s story in their own words. Ask students to reflect on Wetzel’s experience and choices. Suggested questions:
 1. The Vietnam War is sometimes referred to as “the helicopter war” because helicopters were widely used in Vietnam. Based on Wetzel’s story, what were the advantages and the risks of relying on helicopters in Vietnam?
 2. What did you learn about the Vietnam War from Wetzel’s story?
 3. Despite being very seriously injured, Wetzel continued to fight the enemy and support his fellow servicemen. What five adjectives would you use to describe his actions?
 4. What do you think about Wetzel’s decision to risk his own life to save others? What kind of values does this decision reflect?
 5. If you could talk to Wetzel in person, what would you like to tell/ask him?

Activity 3

- Explain that students will now hear from Wetzel himself. Students watch Document 3: “Gary Wetzel: 50th Anniversary Medal of Honor Commemoration,” War Memorial Center (7’01”) and fill in Part III of Sheet 1. This activity can be completed in several different formats (individually, in pairs, small group work) but we recommend discussing the four quotes provided in Part III with the entire class, preferably in a brainstorming session format. In the video, Wetzel reflects on a variety of issues that might be challenging for students to grasp, including the brutality and violence of war, living with the memories of war decades after the Vietnam War, severe injuries, sacrifice, anti-Vietnam war sentiments, distinguishing between the war and the warrior (violence vs. service), etc. Encourage students to reflect on these issues and the tension, to which Wetzel frequently alludes. On the one hand, he was a soldier “doing his job.” As such, he was a young man in great danger, and he risked his life to help his fellow servicemen. On the other, Wetzel makes it clear that he does not want to glorify war. Suggested questions:

1. How do you understand a difference between “reliving” and “not forgetting” past traumatic experiences that Wetzel makes?
2. How does Wetzel see his prosthetic arm? What do you see when you see his prosthetic arm?
3. What does the Medal of Honor represent to Wetzel? What does it represent to you?
4. Why did Wetzel get hate mail after being awarded the Medal of Honor? What does it tell you about anti-Vietnam war sentiments in the late 1960s? How did he respond to the hate mail?
5. How do you understand the distinction between the war and the warrior that Wetzel makes? What does this distinction tell us about war and service?
6. Wetzel was very seriously injured and, as you could hear in the video, was convinced he would die. And yet, he calls himself “just one lucky son of a gun.” What does this statement tell us about Wetzel’s character?
7. Was there anything else in the video that caught your attention?
6. Now that you saw Wetzel talk about his own experiences, if you could talk to him in person, what would you like to tell/ask him?

Activity 4 (closing activity)

- Return to the six core values of the Medal of Honor and conclude the lesson with a discussion on what it means to serve through action. Suggested questions:
 1. In the video that we watched, Wetzel says that he wears his Medal of Honor “for everybody.” What does he mean by that? How do you understand his statement? In what ways does this statement reflect the six core values of the Medal of Honor?
 2. Over time, it became clear to the American public that the Vietnam War was extremely brutal and dangerous. Many young American men did everything to defer military service or entirely avoid being drafted and sent to Vietnam. Wetzel not only volunteered to serve in Vietnam, but he did it also after he had already witnessed the war when he volunteered to serve the second tour. What does his decision tell us about Wetzel’s approach to service? How does his decision reflect the six core values of the Medal of Honor?
 3. What does Wetzel’s story tell us about the experience of young men who chose to serve in the armed forces in the midst of the Vietnam War? What risks did they face? What consequences did they have to consider when they were making the decision to enlist?
 4. How can we honor and demonstrate the six values of the Medal of Honor in our daily lives? Give specific examples of actions that we can take every day to make sure that these values are present in our lives.
 5. How can we all serve through action in the time of peace? *Stress to students that we do not need to be war heroes, like Wetzel, to help and support others. Whatever talents we have, no matter how small they may seem, we can serve others.

Suggested additional activity 1: Encourage students to organize an event that will serve others through action. For example, students can organize a fundraising event, the proceeds from which will be donated to a non-profit organization of students’ choice. Suggested fundraising events: bake sale, talent show, garage sale, fundraising walk or run, arts and crafts market, etc. Students can also research local non-profit organizations to see which one need volunteers or help with a specific project. We recommend drawing students’ attention to the needs of local veteran organizations if they exist in your area.