

The Cost of War

In 1969, at the height of the war, over half a million American soldiers were in the tiny country of Vietnam. American soldiers fought against the Viet Cong in the south, while American fighter planes bombed North Vietnamese military bases and cities. In all America sent almost three million Americans to fight in the Vietnam War.

After the fighting ended, both countries faced difficult times. Vietnam was in ruins. Almost a million North Vietnamese had died, as had over a million South Vietnamese. South Vietnamese who had opposed the communist takeover were sent to “reeducation camps” that were little more than concentration camps where many of the prisoners died. Fearing for their lives, many Vietnamese sailed across the South China Sea to other countries in southeast Asia—so many people that they earned the nickname “boat people”.

In the United States, Americans mourned the loss of almost sixty thousand men. Hundreds of American soldiers captured by the Vietnamese, called POWs (prisoners of war) had been released, but hundreds more were missing. Many never came home. They remained “missing in action” (MIA). Their families never knew what happened to them.

Thousands of Americans came back wounded, or so disturbed by their years of fighting that they had trouble leading normal lives. And because the war had been so unpopular, soldiers who came back from Vietnam weren’t treated as heroes. After World War II, soldiers coming back home were cheered, honored, and thanked. Soldiers returning from Vietnam were just as likely to be jeered at, or criticized in public by those who opposed the war.

Continue to learn more about the high price paid for the Vietnam War...



Complete the following activities:

1. With a partner complete the "POW Code" sheet and find out how American soldiers communicated through a series of taps.
2. Once you have practiced the code by deciphering the secret message, each person should write out a new secret message. Once you have each letter coded sit back to back with a partner. Tap out your message and see if your partner can crack the code. Remember to pause between each letter so your partner will know when to begin counting. Once you have completed your message, switch roles and send another secret message.
3. Analyze the data table on the "Vietnam Stats" sheet in order to answer questions regarding the number of American troops sent to Vietnam and the number of American deaths throughout the war.
4. Read "The Bitter Homecoming" for a first-hand experience of what it felt like to come home after Vietnam and how it feels to look back now. Once you have read the article discuss the following: has America done enough to show the Vietnam Vet our gratitude? What more could/ should be done?
5. How does the current conflict in Iraq compare to the Vietnam War? Go to the following link:
<http://www.defenselink.mil/news/>

Click on OIF/OEF Casualty Update on the right-hand column and answer the following questions:

- How many years has Operation Iraqi Freedom been in action?
- How many total casualties have occurred during Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom?
- How many troops have been wounded in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom?
- Do you think there is any information missing from this data table? What information would be helpful/ what would you add? What would you like to know more about?
- During the Vietnam War, there were only three years where the number of deaths was less than the total number of deaths that have occurred throughout Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. Why do you think that the number of American troops killed is so reduced?
- How do you think the American people would react if our troops began to suffer as many casualties as they did during Vietnam?