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### **Lesson: The Experiences of Union and Confederate Soldiers during the Civil War**

**Objective:** Students will use primary sources to compare and contrast Union and Confederate soldiers' reasons for fighting and experiences in the army during the Civil War.

**Grade Level:** Grade 8 - Entire Lesson; Grade 4 - Part Two and Closure/Assessment

#### **Voluntary State Curriculum Correlation:**

##### **Grade 8:**

5.C.7.c Describe the views and lives of leaders and soldiers on both sides of the war, including black soldiers and black regiments.

##### **Grade 4:**

5.C.3. Identify the causes of the Civil War and its effects on people in Maryland.

##### **Estimated Time:**

One or two 45-minute class sessions

##### **Advance Preparation:**

*(Note: The links below are in PDF format and may take a few minutes to open.)*

1. Make copies of the four primary sources.

- Booth, George Wilson. *Personal Reminiscences of a Maryland Soldier in the War Between the States, 1861-1865*. Baltimore : [Press of Fleet, McGinley & co.], 1898. Pages [5-6](#).
- Ford, Arthur. *Life in the Confederate Army: Being Personal Experiences of a Private Soldier in the Confederate Army*. New York: Neale Publishing Company, 1905. Pages 42-43.
- Robert Kirkwood to Father, February 25, 1864. ([File 1](#), [File 2](#), [Transcript](#)) Correspondence, 1857-1923, William Kirkwood. MS 2797. H. Furlong Baldwin Library. Maryland Historical Society.
- Robert Kirkwood to Mother, September 5, 1863. ([File 1](#), [File 2](#), [Transcript](#)) Correspondence, 1857-1923, William Kirkwood. MS 2797. H. Furlong Baldwin Library. Maryland Historical Society.

2. Make copies of new vocabulary words and definitions.

##### **New Vocabulary:**

**afforded** - provided

**ardor** - passion, intense like  
**bivouac** - temporary camp for soldiers  
**bounty** - money given to soldiers as a reward for enlisting  
**coercive** - by force  
**commissary** -- supply  
**Confederacy** -- the group of Southern states that tried to leave the United States and form a new country  
**convulsed** - upset  
**desert** - to leave one's army unit without permission, to abandon one's duty  
**dire calamity** - disaster  
**discharged** - released  
**dissolution** - break-up  
**engrossing** - completely absorbing  
**enlist** - to voluntarily join the army  
**forbearance** - the act of not responding when someone offends you  
**futile** - useless  
**fly to the standard** - unite behind the flag, support the United States  
**home government** - government at a local, or community, level rather than on a national level  
**impedimenta** - things that slow down progress  
**impelled** - pushed toward  
**the line** - line of battle  
**manual of arms and the school of the company** - the army's rules of behavior and handling a weapon  
**mutual concession** - compromise, each side in an argument gives up some of what it wants to reach an agreement  
**partial friends** - people who like the writer and may not be objective about him  
**perpetuation** -- continuation  
**primary source** - a first hand account of something that happened in the past  
**proficiency** - skill  
**ramrod** - a rod or metal pole used to load a firearm  
**reminiscence** - an account of past experiences  
**reverence** - intense respect  
**offend the sensibilities** - offend, disagree with another person's opinions  
**predilections** - interests, likes  
**Union** -- the United States of America, during the Civil War "Union" refers to the North  
**usurped** - take possession by force  
**War Between the States** - another name for the Civil War

### **Historical Background:**

Although the American Civil War was the result of conflicting politics and cultures between the northern and southern states, the experiences of common soldiers during the war were surprisingly similar. Both the forces that motivated soldiers to fight and the hardships soldiers faced in the army were much the same for both Union and Confederate troops.

Both Northern and Southern soldiers who enlisted voluntarily did so because of strong moral or ideological convictions. Patriotism and nationalism motivated soldiers from both sides. Northern recruits joined the federal army to help save the Union and defend the principles expressed in the United States Constitution. They believed that the seceded states were illegally attempting to dissolve the Union. Southern soldiers also acted out of strong senses of patriotism and nationalism, although their loyalty lay with the South before the United States government. In

fighting, they sought to defend the South's rights to self-government and free their region from what they perceived as the tyranny of the federal government. Both Union and Confederate soldiers often claimed that they were fighting for liberty, but they obviously had different understandings of what liberty meant.

Cultural values also inspired men on both sides to take up arms. Powerful senses of duty and manhood made fighting a matter of personal honor, and community and peer pressure further motivated men to enlist. These same forces, in addition to religious beliefs, helped keep men in the ranks even after they had experienced the horrors of battle. At the time of enlistment, a desire for adventure often motivated recruits, but soldiers' understanding of war as a fun exploit ended soon after their first combat.

Interestingly, the issue of slavery affected relatively few white soldiers' decisions to enlist. Most common Confederate soldiers owned no slaves, and many did not think that the perpetuation or demise of slavery would impact their own lives very much. At the beginning of the war, the majority of Northerners insisted that the war was not about ending slavery but preserving the Union. Gradually, antislavery sentiment increased in the North, especially after President Abraham Lincoln's issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862, and a desire to free the slaves became important to more Northern soldiers.

About three million men fought in the Civil War, and Union and Confederate soldiers shared many similar hardships. Service in both armies was characterized by extended periods of inactivity with occasional forced marches and punctuated by moments of intense action and danger. Life in camp was very monotonous, and soldiers faced boredom, general discomfort, illness, inadequate food and supplies, and poor hygiene.

Among the most serious problems was disease. Two men died from disease for every one that died as a result of battle. The most common ailment was dysentery, or severe and often bloody diarrhea. Other common illnesses included diarrhea, typhoid fever, pneumonia, measles, chickenpox, mumps, and colds.

These illnesses were exacerbated by difficult living conditions. Soldiers were constantly exposed to the elements, marching through brutally hot summer days and shivering through winter snowstorms. They complained frequently about the lack of blankets and warm clothing during the winters. Hygiene was also an issue. Soldiers seldom changed or even washed their clothes, and personal bathing was limited to quick dips in cold streams. Moreover, the soldiers' diet did little to promote health. During long marches or battles, soldiers often went days without eating at all. When they did eat, meals usually consisted of a bit of salted meat, coffee, and a piece of bread or hardtack (hard, flour crackers). The army was responsible for providing soldiers with daily rations, which the men had to cook for themselves.

Soldiers often supplemented what was provided by the army by using their own meager wages to purchase supplies and food from sutlers, peddlers who followed the army. They also asked family members to send what they needed from home, but this could be a very long process if it was successful at all. As the war progressed, Southern soldiers had to be especially resourceful in finding supplies to fulfill their own needs as the struggling Confederate government became less able to provide basic supplies. The suffering of many Southern soldiers was intense by the middle of the war. Northern soldiers remained reasonably well provisioned throughout the conflict.

Death was a constant possibility. Over 620,000 soldiers died during the war, more than the number who died in all other American wars before Vietnam combined. A soldier's chance of dying from disease or wounds during the war was approximately one in four. Soldiers watched strangers and friends receive wounds and die and were always aware that a similar fate could befall them. Casualties were

extremely high during the Civil War because armies used more accurate and powerful weapons but continued to use the military tactics and battle styles that had been used at the time of the American Revolution.

Such hardships led some men to desert. Historians estimate that 280,000 Union soldiers and 104,000 Confederate soldiers, or 11% of all who served, deserted during the war. In some cases, these deserters merely wandered off to find much-needed food or supplies or straggled on a march but soon returned to their units. As the war dragged on, Southern soldiers often deserted in response to pleas for help from struggling family at home. If caught, deserters faced punishments ranging from reprimand, flogging, imprisonment, or execution. The armies could not afford to diminish their numbers by executing all deserters, but periodically this punishment was delivered in front of the entire unit to serve as a negative example.

**Motivation:**

Ask students to describe what they think it is like to be a soldier in a war. What kinds of conditions and hardships do soldiers face? Suggest that a person who volunteers to fight in a war and endure all those hardships must believe strongly in the purpose of that war. Ask students to suggest some issues or causes for which they would be willing to fight in a war.

**Procedure:**

PART ONE - Motivations for Fighting

1. Review Union and Confederate positions on key issues that prompted the Civil War, including states' rights and slavery.
2. Divide the class into two groups - one representing Union (Northern) soldiers and the other representing Confederate (Southern) soldiers.
3. Explain that students will be examining primary sources created by Civil War soldiers that help explain their reasons for enlisting to fight in the war. Define "primary source" - a first-hand account of the past. Explain that historians use primary sources to figure out what happened at various times in history.
4. Distribute Robert Kirkwood's letter dated February 25, 1864 to the Union group and the excerpt from *Personal Reminiscences of a Maryland Soldier in the War Between the States, 1861-1865* by George Booth to the Confederate group. To make the sources more digestible for students with limited reading ability, you may choose to select excerpts of the sources or underline just a few sentences for the students to read.
5. Distribute the vocabulary list.
6. Have the students read their sources in pairs to answer the following focus questions (write questions on the board to guide reading):
  - Why did your soldier choose to fight in the war?
  - What issues did he believe in that led him to join the army?
7. Ask students from each group to share their responses to the focus questions with the class. Compare and contrast the Union and Confederate soldiers' reasons for fighting. How do their reasons compare with the North and South's positions on the major issues of the war?

### PART TWO - Hardships Soldiers Faced

8. Explain that next students will be reading about what life in the army was like for Union and Confederate soldiers during the war.

9. Distribute Robert Kirkwood's letter dated September 5, 1863 to the Union group and the excerpt from *Life in the Confederate Army* by Arthur Ford to the Confederate group. Again, you may select excerpts if necessary or underline the most important sentences or phrases.

10. Have the students read their sources in pairs to answer the following focus question:

- What hardships did Civil War soldiers face?

11. Ask students from each group to share their responses to the focus question with the class. Compare and contrast Union and Confederate soldiers' experiences. Point out to students that, as the war progressed, Southern soldiers' suffering increased dramatically as the South ran out of supplies, including food, shoes, and clothing.

### PART THREE - Strengths and Weaknesses of Primary Sources

12. Explain that different types of primary sources have different strengths and weaknesses as historical evidence. Issues to consider when evaluating a primary source include:

- the author's purpose (Is he writing for his own records? To inform a friend? To persuade someone? To make himself seem important?)
- the amount of time that has passed since the event being described happened
- the completeness and level of detail of the account

13. Ask students in the Union group what type of primary sources they read (letters written during the war). Ask them to describe the letters' strengths and weaknesses as historical evidence. (Strengths: Written at the time the soldier was experiencing the events so probably accurate, have a specific date, get a sense of the soldier's emotions at the time / Weaknesses: Not very much detail, grammar and spelling make it a little difficult to read)

14. Ask students in the Confederate group what type of primary sources they read (narratives, or essays, written by ex-soldiers many years after the war). Ask them to describe the narratives' strengths and weaknesses as historical evidence. (Strengths: Smoothly written story so easy to read, writer has had time to think about experiences / Weaknesses: Much time has passed between the war and the soldier writing this narrative so his memory may not be entirely accurate, he may be changing what happened to make himself look better)

15. Explain that all types of primary sources have strengths and weaknesses that historians must keep in mind. That is why historians must look at many primary sources on the same topic before deciding what really happened.

### **Closure/Assessment:**

Students should pretend that they are Confederate or Union soldiers who have been fighting in the army for only a few months. Have students write letters home to their



families explaining why they decided to fight in the war and what their experiences have been so far.

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