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:
1. Make copies of the four primary sources in the appendix of this lesson plan.

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
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.
This project was made possible by a grant from the Maryland Humanities Council, through support from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this program do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities or the Maryland Humanities Council.
and send me all the news
they all join me in sending
their love to you all no
more at present but remain
your affectionate son
and will wish R Kirkwood

Dear Mother

I am happy to state
that we are all well this morning
able for duty Archy was
discharged from the sick report
this morning he is all right
again except a slight cough in
the chest a foot trouble in the
ears but otherwise is well and we bet he the hospital
yesterday we have just heard
from him he is at present
better he is not so very
serious Capt Cochran is getting
well James Dance is is well
and I Green and all the rest of
the boys all is quiet as far as
I know along the line in front
and no indications of any hostile
movement on either side


22 Res of 120 Reserves was wounded yesterday while bathing in the river well. Mother I am almost at a loss to know what to write. There is nothing going on here than usual. The weather still he discharges them all as he did for continuance Coast at night and don't have the other day all the soldiers 400 when caught but if they don't come soon we will for their discharge and at Coffin's hole in the ground for their blankets I have not come yet and my life here he gives them should we do without these we won't need them. I was pleased to be back at home and I hope we will be able to enjoy myself by the time. But when I think of him I think of the misfortune of poor Henderson. Though we hope for the same offense of that had been done long ago we have whipped the Ricks long ago. Well Mother I hope Mr. railroad I hope that peace and harmony of war will soon be brought to this house as that place and harmony of war we know not how soon will once more sweep over the some of us may follow him I wrote a letter the day before about my health must close rite as soon as I can.
Dear Mother

I am happy to state that we are all well this morning and able for duty. Archy was discharged from the sick report this morning, he is all right again except a slight touch of the diarrhea. Lieut. Robinson is sick and went to the hospital yesterday. We have just heard from him; he is smartly better; he is not at any ways serious. Cap. Cockran is getting well. James Vance is, is well and J. Green and all the rest of the boys are all quiet as far as I know along the line in front and no indications of any hostile movement on either side. Soon a soldier out of the 22nd Regt of Pa Reserves was drowned yesterday while bathing in the river. Well, Mother, I am almost at a loss to know what to write; there is nothing going on here than unusual. The weather still continues cool at nights and our blankets have not come yet and if they don’t come soon we will so use to doing it without them we won’t need them. I was pleased to le learn of Joe’s safe arrival home and I hope he is able to enjoy himself this time but when I think of him I think of the misfortune of poor Henderson, though such is fortunes of war we know not how soon some of us may follow him. I wrote a letter to Joe day before yesterday tell him I want him to reply as soon as possible if he gets it. His Captain is quite anxious to receive a letter from him and J. Garnell. Gen. Mead has took to discharging the deserters now when caught but if he discharges them all as he did 5 or 6 the other day ill soldier all my life time he gives them bullets for their discharge and a coffin and a hold in the ground for their bounty. Gen. Burnside is going to shoot 7 for the same offence if that had been done long ago we would have whipped the Rebs long ago. Well, Mother, I hope this cruel war will soon be brought to a close so that peace and harmony will once more sweep over the land. Well, Mother, as my news are about exhausted I must close. Write as soon as you can and send me all the news they all join me in sending their love to you all no more at present but remain your affectionate son and well wisher R. Kirkwood.
Buckleper Rd, Dec 25th 1864

Dear Father,

I received your kind letter yesterday evening, bearing date of Dec 20th. It afforded me much satisfaction to learn of your all being well and that Bessie is improving in health. I was pleased with your expressions in reference to my reinlisting, which relieved me of much uneasiness for I was afraid that it would cause you and Mother much trouble of mind in your declining years. I have often since regretted that I didn't write to you and get your opinion in regard to it beforehand. The Bn. as you say the cause is just and relations must be crushed and the sooner the better for us all and the only way to do it is for every man that is able to shoulder a musket and...
These few lines will find you and the rest the same. Father, I wish you could see the weather here is very dry and windy, the mud is fast disappearing and the ground is drying very fast, which I think will soon bring on a movement soon as I hope more of importance to write I will close. I received the stamps rite soon expose all blunders and mistakes I send best respects to you all and remain as ever your devoted son.


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Culpepper Va

Dear Father

I receaved your kind letter yesterday evening bearing date of Feb 20th it afforded me much satisfaction to learn of you all being well and that Ben is improving in health I was pleased with your expresions in reference to my reinlisting which releaved me of much uneasiness for I was affraid that it would cause you and Mother much trouble of mind in your declining years I have often since regretted since that I didnt rite to you and get your opinion in regard to it beforehand.

But as you say the cause is gust and the rebellion must be crushed and the sooner the better for us all and the only way to do it is for every man that is able to shoulder A musket and fly to the standard and swell the ranks of our Army The President and the Authorities at Washington have done all they can do now it rests with the people whether or not we shall have peace in six months if they would pitch in with the patriotism that true Americans should and fill the last call of the Presidents I think it will soon decide it and bring us A permanent peace.

well Father I hope in A few days if we are spared and nothing happens that I will be at home you can look for us between the 1st and the 10th of march I receaved A letter from Aunt Hannah yesterday ritten by unkle Henderson I was pleased to learn of them being well I sind them my kind regards and tell them that I will answer it as soon as opportunity affords. I am happy to inform you that my health is still good and I hope these few lines will find you and the rest the same.

Father I wish you would sen the weather here is very dry and windy the mud is fast disapearing and the ground is drying very fast which I think will soon bring on A movement soon as I have no more of importance to rite I will close I receaved the stamps rite soon excuse all blunders and mistakes I send best respects to you all and remain as ever your devoted son

R Kirkwood
At the request of somewhat partial friends, I have undertaken to write out some of the events which came under my personal observation during the great struggle which convulsed our country, now more than a third of a century ago. The narrative must of necessity be more or less personal in its character, and may offend the sensibilities of some readers, while it will doubtless do violence to my own sense of modesty; but one cannot very well speak of the things he saw or did without this peculiarity, which is here stated at the outset, to break as far as possible the effect of this disagreeable feature.

My early predilections were of a martial character. As a boy, the story of the deeds of soldier and sailor were to me of the most engrossing interest, and the display of heroism which attended the long struggle of the Revolutionary period, the war of 1812, and later, that with Mexico, were cherished in my youthful recollections and read and reread with an ardor that almost approached worship. As soon as my years warranted, I became a member of the State volunteer soldiery in an organization of considerable reputation, the Independent Greys of Baltimore, and acquired a fair proficiency in the elementary work of a soldier, the manual of arms and the school of the company.

My early reading and associations led me to take views of the great questions which agitated and disturbed the public mind, in the days of 1860, by enlisting most strongly my sympathies in favor of the rights of the States under the constitution, and in opposition to efforts and the dominant purpose of the north to violate the express terms of that compact, and to destroy the principles of home government. With all this, in common with most Marylanders, was held in sacred reverence the love of the Union and the glories of our common country. The dissolution of the Union was looked upon as a threatened evil, to be averted by mutual concession and for-
Life in the Confederate Army

Excerpt from:

…Our men had started on this march with as much baggage as they thought they could carry, but they soon threw aside their impedimenta, and each settled down to his one blanket and such clothes as he actually wore. This march across the Carolinas was a very hard one. Our feet soon became blistered and sore, and many of us had no shoes, but trudged along in the cold and mud barefooted as best we could. As I have already said, this was a cold winter, and it seemed to us that it rained and froze constantly. Not a particle of shelter did we have day or night. We would march all day, often in more or less rain, and at nightfall halt, and bivouac in the bushes, with every particle of food or clothing saturated. Within a few minutes after a halt, even under a steady rain, fires would be burning and quickly extend through the bivouac. If a civilian should attempt to kindle a fire with soaked wood under a steady rain, he would find his patience sorely tried, but the soldiers seemed to have no trouble.

After the fires were kindled we had to wait for the arrival of the commissary wagons; and it was not uncommon for a detail of men to be sent back in the night to help push the wagons through the mud; weary, footsore, hungry, in the dark, up to the knees in mud, heaving on the wheels of a stalled wagon! It was often late at night before the wagons were got up and rations could be obtained.

The men, of course, had to take turns in the use of the two or three frying-pans carried for each company, and when worn down by marching from early dawn until dark it was disheartening to have to wait one’s turn, which often did not come until eleven o’clock at night. Frequently the men, rather than wait for the frying-pan, would fry their scraps of bacon on the coals, and make the cornmeal into dough, which they would wrap around the ends of their ramrods and toast in the fire. When the rations were drawn they consisted of only seven ounces of bacon and one pint of cornmeal to the man per day; and on several occasions even these could not be had, and the men went to sleep supperless, and with nothing to eat during the next day. The commissary department of the corps seemed to be unequal to the occasion, but his fact is not surprising when the rapidity of the march and desolation of the country are considered. Nevertheless, on several occasions the writer’s command passed forty hours without receiving any rations, and once fifty hours, so that we were glad of an opportunity to beg at any farm-house for an ear of corn with which to alleviate our hunger.

All along the line of march large numbers of men were constantly deserting. Nightly, under cover of darkness, many would sneak from their bivouacs and go off, not to the enemy, but to their homes. But those of our men who remained were in good spirits.