Vietnam Unit Lesson #9

**Geography, Environment and Weapons**

**Focus Statement**

This lesson focuses on the geographic and environmental difficulties faced by Americans, as well as Vietnamese soldiers, and the weapons and tactics that were adapted to meet the needs of this particular war. The environment and geography of Vietnam made the war very difficult for both sides. For Americans, the environment and climate created some of the most frustrating difficulties. Monsoons during the rainy season caused massive flooding and the thick jungle foliage sometimes made their weapons ineffective, thereby creating a need for better weaponry and tactics. Also, shadows and jungle noises often caused or enhanced troops’ paranoia as they became accustomed to fighting a 360 degree war. The Vietnamese soldiers also faced severe challenges, but the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong soldiers tried to overcome or capitalize on these complications. One of the greatest challenges for the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong was the need for steady supply lines from the North to the South. Despite nearly impossible odds, they created the Ho Chi Minh Trail to allow supplies to move, albeit in a difficult and dangerous manner. Also, Viet Cong troops were notorious for using the jungle for cover and creating complex tunnel systems that allowed them to appear and disappear quickly.

In this lesson, students will focus on the challenges imposed by the environment and the means by which the people involved in the conflict tried to adapt. Students will encounter stories written or told by people who experienced these challenges as well as images that give them a better understanding of what the war was like in terms of environment and weaponry. In doing so, they will build historical empathy as well as add to their understanding of how humans have interacted with the environment in different places and times.

**Vital Theme and Narrative**  Conflict and Cooperation

**Habit of Mind**  Perceive past events and issues as they were experienced by people at the time, to develop historical empathy as opposed to present-mindedness

**Objectives**

1. Develop explanations for why the environment played a large role in the war.
2. Relate to how the soldiers felt fighting in a foreign land with sometimes inadequate weapons.
3. Assess the preparedness of the US military to fight under the environmental conditions encountered in Vietnam.
4. Examine the ways in which people from both sides of the war dealt with challenges of the environment.

**National History Standard** Era 9 2C  The student understands the foreign and domestic consequences of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. (5-12; Evaluate how Vietnamese and
Americans experienced the war and how the war continued to affect postwar politics and culture. [Appreciate historical perspectives]

Historical Thinking Standard 3B Consider multiple perspectives.

**Procedures**

1. Transition from previous two day’s classes.
   a. Provide a brief recap of U.S. domestic issues and then shift the focus to Vietnam.
   b. Show students pictures of the jungle in Vietnam. Ask them to explain what they see and consider how such conditions would have affected the way the war was fought.
   c. Ask students how fighting in this area might compare to what the U.S. military was used to in its most recent conflicts.

2. Provide a brief lecture on how the American and Vietnamese militaries adjusted their weapons and tactics to be most effective during the war. (See notes)

3. Jigsaw
   a. Divide students into six expert groups. Each group will read one of the following documents (Excerpts from the Dan Rogers interview, *Novel Without a Name*, *The Things They Carried*, or *Patriots*) and complete the accompanying analysis guide.
   b. After groups complete document analysis guides, students will break into predetermined home groups (compiled of one student from each of the expert groups). Students will complete the comparative analysis guides to form a more comprehensive understanding of the weapons and environment in Vietnam.

4. Closure
   a. Reconvene as a whole class and have each expert group write a summary of their content, which should include an explanation of the challenges individual soldiers faced concerning the environment and weaponry. Students should also include an explanation how the environment and weaponry as well as other factors had an impact on the outcome of the war.
   b. Students will turn in both analysis guides at the end of class.

**Assessment**

Students will be assessed on their abilities to communicate what they know and reason about the effects of the environment and weaponry on the individual soldier and the outcome of the Vietnam War.

**Materials**

a. Pictures
b. Lecture Notes
c. Analysis Guides
d. Jigsaw texts

Sources

b. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/low/asia-pacific/720577.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/low/asia-pacific/720577.stm)
h. Dan Rogers interview
Tunnels of Cu Chi diagrams and photograph (suggested source for photograph of the tunnel entrance: [http://www.travelblog.org/Asia/Vietnam/Southeast/Ho-Chi-Minh-City/blog-104907.html](http://www.travelblog.org/Asia/Vietnam/Southeast/Ho-Chi-Minh-City/blog-104907.html), Picture titled “Behind You”)

Suggested source for aerial Cu Chi map: [http://travel.webshots.com/photo/1288825774052022223ODulkw](http://travel.webshots.com/photo/1288825774052022223ODulkw)
Weapons Lecture Notes

- Major weapons used by US and ARVN forces
  - M16 automatic rifle, Machine guns, rocket launchers, grenades, pistols, flamethrowers, antipersonnel (Claymores) and antitank mines,
    - Claymores projected 700 steel balls in a 60 degree arc when triggered, lethal out to 50 meters; typically booby-trapped to prevent the VC from using them
  - Air strikes and artillery support called in with portable radios
    - Key aspect of the “search-and-destroy” element of the US strategy

- Major weapons used by Communist forces
  - AK 47 & SKS carbine- both Soviet made, both used same ammunition (reduced supply problems), machine guns, pistols (largely a symbol of authority)
  - various anti-tank weapons, light and medium mortars (general lack of artillery support), hand grenades, antitank and antipersonnel mines
  - booby traps, other resources found (especially from captured American weapons)
    - i.e. hidden crossbows, bamboo spikes and nail boards triggered by trip wires
  - much emphasis on man-power and element of surprise (especially in constructing Ho Chi Minh Trail and Tunnels of Cu Chi)
Activity Sheet 1: Document Analysis Guide

When was this source written?

Who was the author?

What do you know about the author’s life at this time? What has this person done prior to this time?

What type of source is this (letter, speech, newspaper article, diary, etc.)?

Why was this source created? What was its purpose at the time, and who was the audience?

Describe the experiences detailed in this document. How was the environment/weaponry a factor in this person’s experience?
Activity Sheet 2: Comparative Analysis Guide

Understanding Context

Based on your reading of the primary sources, how did the environment affect soldiers in the field and the weapons/tactics used by the military?

Comparing Sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Doc #1</th>
<th>When Written</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Type of Source</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Main Idea</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doc #2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doc #3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doc #4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doc #5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doc #6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Vu Thi Vinh: “The Truong Son jungle gave us life.”

Along with tens of thousands of North Vietnamese girls, she volunteered to work on the "Truong Son," the dozens of footpaths and roads known to Americans as the ‘Ho Chi Minh Trail." The Volunteer Youth Corps was formed in 1965 as part of the massive effort to expand and improve the transportation network. These teenage boys and girls cut down trees, cleared and leveled trails, filled in bomb craters, and defused unexploded bombs.

Discussing that experience with five women veterans of the Volunteer Youth corps, one thought the minimum age to volunteer was sixteen, another seventeen, and another eighteen. Then one said, “If you insisted, they would let you go whatever your age.” Vu Thi Vinh lied about her age and volunteered to work on the trails at age fifteen despite her parents’ opposition. “We were so young we didn’t know anything, but our patriotism was very high. We went to war willingly.”

“At first there were no trails, just mountains. Cutting the roads was a superhuman task. Our only tools were picks, shovels, and saws. When trees were too big to cut down by hand we blew them down with dynamite. It took at least twenty people to roll the big trees aside. We also had to dam up streams with rocks to keep them from swamping the trails. Sometimes we had to stand forever in water up to our chests. During the rainy season, it was almost impossible to get dry.

Most of the time we worked only at night because that’s when the trucks and soldiers came and we needed to be ready to help if they got stuck. Usually we slept from about seven-thirty to eleven in the morning. Then we had lunch and took classes to continue our education. After that we slept again until four-thirty. Supper was at five o’clock and then we were off to work again. Of course, in emergency situations we worked day and night. If the trail was blocked for just one hour there’d be a terrible traffic jam and that was an invitation to American bombers. Anytime bombs hit the trail, we had to rush out and fill in the craters immediately...

Needless to say, life in the jungle was extremely hard. When we weren’t supplied with rice we ate whatever we could find. We searched for crabs under rocks in the streams and occasionally we were lucky enough to come up with some cassava. Sometimes we had to scrape fungus and moss off rocks. “Aircraft ‘vegetables’” we called them because they were the only edible things left after all the bombing. We were so hungry everything tasted good. The mountains were filled with red ginseng trees. We’d boil the leaves and stems and then throw them away and drink the broth. It was very sweet and nutritious. The Truong Son jungle gave us life.

After our exhausting labor we’d go back to our camps and sing songs or perform plays. We sang all the time to keep our spirits up. We used to joke that you couldn’t hear the bombs over our singing.”

The Things They Carried by Tim O'Brien

A native of Worthington, Minnesota, O'Brien graduated in 1968 from Macalester College in St. Paul. He served as a foot soldier in Vietnam from 1969 to 1970, after which he pursued graduate studies in Government at Harvard University, then later worked as a national affairs reporter for The Washington Post... This is a work of fiction. Except for a few details regarding the author's own life, all the incidents, names, and characters are imaginary.

“What they carried was partly a function of rank, partly of field specialty.

As a first lieutenant and platoon leader, Jimmy Cross carried a compass, maps, code books, binoculars, and a .45-caliber pistol that weighed 2.9 pounds fully loaded. He carried a strobe light and the responsibility for the lives of his men.

As an RTO, Mitchell Sanders carried the PRC-25 radio, a killer, 26 pounds with its battery.

As a medic, Rat Kiley carried a canvas satchel filled with morphine and plasma and malaria tablets and surgical tape and comic books and all the things a medic must carry, including M&M's for especially bad wounds, for a total weight of nearly 20 pounds.

As a big man, therefore a machine gunner, Henry Dobbins carried the M-60, which weighed 23 pounds unloaded, but which was almost always loaded. In addition, Dobbins carried between 10 and 15 pounds of ammunition draped in belts across his chest and shoulders.

As PFCs or Spec 4s, most of them were common grunts and carried the standard M-16 gas-operated assault rifle. The weapon weighed 7.5 pounds unloaded, 8.2 pounds with its full 20-round magazine. Depending on numerous factors, such as topography and psychology, the riflemen carried anywhere from 12 to 20 magazines, usually in cloth bandoliers, adding on another 8.4 pounds at minimum, 14 pounds at maximum. When it was available, they also carried M-16 maintenance gear—rods and steel brushes and swabs and tubes of LSA oil—all of which weighed about a pound. Among the grunts, some carried the M-79 grenade launcher, 5.9 pounds unloaded, a reasonably light weapon except for the ammunition, which was heavy. A single round weighed 10 ounces. The typical load was 25 rounds...

In addition to the three standard weapons—the M-60, M-16, and M-79—they carried whatever presented itself, or whatever seemed appropriate as a means of killing or staying alive. They carried catch-as-catch-can. At various times, in various situations, they carried M-14s and CAR-15s and Swedish Ks and grease guns and captured AK-47s and Chi-Coms and RPGs and Simonov carbines and black market Uzis and .38-caliber Smith & Wesson handguns and 66 mm LAWs and shotguns and silencers and blackjacks and bayonets and C-4 plastic explosives. Lee Strunk carried a slingshot; a weapon of last resort, he called it. Mitchell Sanders carried brass knuckles. Kiowa carried his grandfather’s feathered hatchet. Every third or fourth man carried a Claymore antipersonnel mine—3.5 pounds with its firing device. They all carried fragmentation grenades—14 ounces each. They all carried at least one M-18 colored smoke grenade—24 ounces. Some carried CS or tear gas grenades. Some carried white phosphorus grenades. They carried all they could bear, and then some, including a silent awe for the terrible power of the things they carried.”

Duong Thu Huong, one of Vietnam’s most popular writers, was born in 1947 in Vietnam. At the age of twenty, she led a Communist Youth Brigade sent to the front during the Vietnam War. Of her volunteer group of forty, she was one of three survivors… A vocal advocate of human rights and democratic political reform, she was expelled from the Comunist party in 1989. She was imprisoned without trial for seven months in 1991 for her political beliefs… All of her work has been effectively banned by the Vietnamese government…

“I stayed stretched out like that for a long time. The ground beneath me was scorching now; the fog had evaporated and the grass had turned a deeper shade of green. The sounds of an airplane rumbled overhead. I didn’t care. Why bother running for cover? I thought: Bullets may miss people, but no one dodges a bullet. I got up and looked at the carpet of grass. It had been ten years since I had seen such beauty. What miracle had allowed this patch to survive so many bombings? It was an unreal beauty, like a satin ribbon discarded along the shattered, bumpy road of the war.

Planes howled across the sky. I remained buried in the high grass. The grass protected me; at the very least, its green tenderness soothed my soul. The planes veered toward the southwest, glinting in the sun. A carpet of bombs gushed forth. They tilted toward the ground, gently, calmly. Falling toward the earth, they looked like a cloud of giant termites, their wings sheared off.

The cataclysm lasted about half an hour. Then the forest and the mountain sank back into silence. The sun was dazzling, at its zenith. The ground around me was hot and gave off a dense, steamy vapor. I undid my rucksack, drank a bit of water, ate some dried provisions I had, and returned to the road. The prairie was much vaster than I had imagined. I struggled across what seemed like a sea of grass. At dusk, I reached the footpath through the forest marked ‘N22’ on the map…

“…Hunger tortured me. My knees trembled; my back was drenched in sweat. For two days, I had walked in circles in a valley covered with red colocassias. It was as if I had wandered into a haunted labyrinth. I had been walking since dawn. Now I realize I had come full circle to my point of departure: a colocassia bush wedged between three large boulders. I rested for half an hour and then struck out in another direction. Two hours later, at noon, I found myself back in front of the same bush. There was no longer any doubt; this wild, chilly gray valley was spirit-haunted…

I put my knapsack down on one of the boulders and began to search the brush. Both sides of the path were choked with the violet flowers and silvery leaves of creeper vines. The vines twined around one another chaotically, tougher than any man-made rope, weaving through the dwarf brambles and ferns. I got out my knife and started slashing the brambles that hung overhead. Green snakes might jump out of them in a flash; their venom was always fatal. For a long time all I had seen were brambles and creeper vines. By early afternoon, the north wind had started to howl. It seemed as if I could hear strains of a bamboo flute. My skin contracted, my hair bristled. Sweat trickled down my back in slow, chilly rivulets.

Dan Rogers served with The Big Red One as a platoon leader in Bravo Company First of the Eighteenth Infantry, First Platoon during 1965.

M14

Reidy: ... When you deployed, as one of their earliest units over you were on with the M14, am I correct?

Rogers: We did have the M14.

Reidy: And, quickly transition to I'd say—I think in a year the M16 made its appearance with combat troops over there. How would you rate, or how would you compare, if you can, the M14 to the M16?

Rogers: Well, I can compare it because of my second tour over, but I got evacuated before uh, the first year was out.

So we still had the M14s with select gun, you know, some had the selector switches for the AR [Army Reserve] men and the platoon had the selector switch. So we could fire full automatic, um, they were heavy, they were very accurate, um, they didn't bog down in the sand—in the swamps, you could put them under the water and bring them up and they'd still fire without any problems, the M16 had many problems. Um, it was a lightweight weapon—that was about it.

Reidy: Was there any I guess, shop talk among the men regarding the smaller calibers, 223 calibers as opposed to the 308, whether or not it would actually stop someone.

Rogers: 3.72, not 308.

Reidy: 7.62

Rogers: 7.62, yeah.

It was 7.62. Um, the smaller caliber had a high velocity and when it hit the foliage in Vietnam, it would just burst away, so you weren't getting a kill factor, unless you were right on them. M14—good penetration. You knew that when you pointed it, it was like the old M1, you know. You were going to reach out and touch somebody.

Reidy: What, I guess in the jungle setting with the enemy perhaps close around you, did shorter combat ranges make the M16 more viable?

Rogers: [coughs] I didn't think so. Um, the fact that it was lighter, I would have preferred the M1A1 Carbine in fact, that's what I carried the second tour
over, I managed to scrounge one off a rough cuff and I carried an M1A1 Carbine because it was light, it gave out good firepower, so um.
Night Patrols

Reidy: So when you put, you say you put up the squads out into the field, did they do search and destroy or night ambush? What were their missions?

Rogers: Actually they were online, and then we’d take individuals from the squads and run patrols at night.

We were on daytime patrols too, but daytime was to make sure that nighttime had someplace to go, especially if—in case that something happened, they could go to a particular area and be, have a safe haven. We knew not to fire at that area.

Reidy: And when the units were online, were they perimeter defense?

Rogers: Primary, yes.

Reidy: What sort of I guess, fortification for that, for the camp to have— just wire?

Rogers: When you have a camp set in, normal its barbed wire and trip flares, Claymore mines. When you’re actually on a sweep mission, and it becomes night, you don’t have the barbed wire, all you got’s Claymore mines and the guy next to you, and maybe five to ten foot between one fighting position and another.

Reidy: So when I guess, in my reading when they described the NDP [Night Defense Position], a night defense position, it wasn’t anything that was built up—

Rogers: No, that’s about as hasty as you can get, NDP.

Reidy: How often did you find yourself out in the field at night on these?

Rogers: On the NDPs?

Reidy: Yeah.

Rogers: A lot.

Reidy: Was that the, I guess, most hair-raising mission you would go on?

Rogers: No. No.

Reidy: What I guess, was either more difficult or most—
Rogers: I got—I got more excited over, over river crossings—knowing that for some reason the machine gunner is always the littlest guy, uh the heavy mortars are always the little guy.

You got the base plates and the tube and the ammo, yeah, those are—that’s three major components. And you’re expecting those guys to swim with this stuff? Or at least wade across, you know, sometimes it didn’t work. Sometimes they used dug-outs that were handy and they didn’t work—you get too much weight on the dug-out, goes straight to the bottom along with—we lost a couple of guys. We got a mortar base plate strapped to your back; you don’t have a lot of chance to get out of it. So, you know, those crossings, those things excited me more because people wanted them done right then.

They didn’t take safety precautions to get, make sure that everybody knew what they were doing and how they could, could you swim? Can you swim carrying 150 pounds on your back? ...

Reidy: Talking about the river crossing as platoon leader, you had to arrange your squads and you were in control of them, in some ways, as you said you had people above you pushing you to get across that river. How would you, how did you organize your men to get across the river, was there particular tactics you used to keep them safe in case it was an opposed crossing?

Rogers: We put our equipment in the sand pan, or the dug-outs. You swam next to it or held onto it and kicked your way across.
Reidy: You said thirty, you know coming back from these patrols and obviously you’re crossing rivers and walking through rice patties. What other, besides the environmental problems, leeches and snakes and such, um, booby traps—were there mines and booby traps—what were the dangers that you had to kind of, go through?

Rogers: There was always a danger of the VC [Vietcong] Uh, whether it’d be as mines, as booby traps or they were industrious little fellows—they built terrific underground facilities and they could pop up in the middle of nowhere, and they’d get you, you know, and they’d disappear as quick at they came.

And you never knew where they were coming from; you really had to look to find their hole in the ground that they went into.

Reidy: What were some of the telltale signs—did you ever develop skills to find them more readily?

Rogers: Yeah, you could tell the grasses is pushed down or worn around, they tried to keep that pretty fresh. After so much fighting and so many people in and out, it’s hard to keep it looking like it’s not been entered into for a long time, you know.

We knew that it was a different type of war, so we were learning.

Reidy: When you were training with the division and without the division, prior to deployment, was your focus Europe? Was your focus the Soviets?

Rogers: Yeah. It was no one [?] like frontal assaults, everybody online, your reserves—that’s not what it was about, but that’s the way we trained. That’s the way that the first jungle operation we went into, we went into online.

Reidy: How quickly did the junior officers, yourself included, come to realize that—

Rogers: It didn’t take us long; it took the more senior officers a longer time to figure out that, what they had planned on us doing in the day.

We got about twenty meters into the jungle instead of making a five hundred meter run. The S3G3~ said, “Well, there’s a trail up in front of you, it appears to be a hard stand road.” Well, he was using a French map, from years ago and that trail was overgrown—it wasn’t in existence anymore. The concrete was still there, it just, you couldn’t get anything through it.
Visual materials:


This diagram is credited to the U.S. Army according to Cornell University, which makes it public domain.
