During the Fall 2008 semester, students in the Secondary Social Studies Methods course in the History Department at Ball State University utilized oral history interviews from the Cantigny First Division Oral History Project in order to develop a unit on the Vietnam War. Multiple purposes guided the creation of this unit. First, the ten lessons were designed to teach content incorporating multiple parts of the United States’ involvement in Vietnam including examination of U.S. foreign policy ideals and practices, changes in American society and culture, the stories of individuals involved directly in tours of duty in Vietnam, and impacts of the Vietnam experience on Americans. The lessons are united by two core Vital Themes and Narratives: “Values, Beliefs, Political Ideas, and Institutions” and “Conflict and Cooperation.” Specifically, the lessons focus on the ways in which America, as a democratic society, has addressed challenges that result from an interplay among moral values, aspirations for freedom and security, changing material conditions, and the tenuous balance between liberty and order. In the context of the Vietnam War, these lessons document interactions between U.S. political and social developments as leaders strove to address domestic affairs and the consequences of war and peace for American civilians and soldiers and other people in the world.

Second, each of the lessons seeks to assist students in perceiving past events as they were experienced by individuals during the time period. This habit of mind emphasizes the development of historical empathy as opposed to present-mindedness. Each lesson also emphasizes at least one aspect of historical thinking as specified in the National Standards for History. In order to engage students in the doing of history, these lessons have been designed to foster historical inquiry through enabling students to examine the historical record for themselves, to raise questions, create their own narratives based on evidence from the past, and utilize historical perspectives when engaging in the analysis of issues and problems.

Third, this unit incorporates multiples aspects of the U.S. experience in Vietnam while drawing significantly from the experiences of Vietnam Veterans from the 1st Infantry Division (The Big Red One) of the United States Army. Various lessons incorporate transcripts from oral history interviews conducted as part of the Cantigny First Division Oral History Project in conjunction with the History Department at Ball State University. Therefore, in addition to emphasizing content-rich thematic teaching that focuses on engaging students in doing the discipline of history, these lessons expose students to the value of oral history as a window to the past.

Fourth, teacher candidates in the History Department’s teaching major experienced lesson and unit planning in a team environment based on agreed upon guiding themes, habits of mind, and incorporation of specific aspects of content. This experience hopefully contributed to candidates’ abilities to plan curriculum while recognizing that the construction of units in the teaching of history involves the creation of narratives about the past.

In the recent past, most teachers hesitated to teach about Vietnam and what the historian George C. Herring aptly termed “America’s Longest War.” The lessons created in
conjunction with the Cantigny First Division Oral History Project at Cantigny in Wheaton, Illinois and the History Department at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana do not claim to represent all there is to be known and taught about the Vietnam War. They do suggest that a new generation of teachers no longer hesitates to probe the Vietnam War, and many do so through the lens of Vietnam War Veterans.