

Using Artifacts to Understand the Life of a Soldier in World War II

Staci Anson



An eleventh grade U.S. history student at Ramapo High School in Franklin Lakes, N.J., examines artifacts from World War II veterans.

(Courtesy of Staci Anson, 2009)

For years, when I taught about World War II, I used primary and secondary source readings, I presented Power Points, and had my students watch newsreels and other video clips. However, in 2006, I completely changed the way I approached the war. Today, my students interact with actual artifacts from history so that they can draw conclusions and gain understanding about what soldier life was like during the war.

This new approach took off when I was awarded a grant from the New Jersey Antique Dealers Association to purchase artifacts that would enhance my curriculum. I purchased \$500 worth of World War II artifacts on eBay. It is amazing what people sell from their family collections. I was able to purchase one man's entire military history—his recruitment papers, his service papers, his identification card, and his ration coupons. I also purchased one man's letters home. In addition to personal papers, I found a helmet, canteen, medals, sewing kit, first

aid kit, training manuals, compass, clothing, gas mask and protective gear, emergency signaling mirror, rucksack, shaving kit, anti-Hitler postcards, and coins from liberated countries, and more. Many of the items have names and/or places etched in them, and for items that are around 65 years old, they are in very good condition.

When I started teaching with these artifacts, I was amazed at how much more involved my students became. Being able to see and even touch the different items fascinated them much more so than a picture

in a textbook. They were hungry to know more about the men who once owned these items. The activity grew much larger than I had originally imagined. After doing some research, I found that teachers who utilize such techniques commonly note this increased level of interest.¹ Although I teach high school students, this technique can stimulate interest and foster curiosity at all grade levels.

Prior to this project, I would often bring in items from home for smaller lessons—a political campaign pin or a booklet of war ration tickets—but these items were usually something I had inherited from a family member. By increasing the number of objects and then centering the lesson on them, I was able to approach teaching a historic period in a new light. The artifacts provided a way

to make learning tactile, as opposed to just looking at pictures on a webpage or in a book. As Ronald Morris notes “Students use thinking skills through the discovery method to interpret objects....” and “Students use evidence from artifacts to form insightful conclusions.”²

While I was lucky enough to receive a grant, there are other ways to carry out such an activity without the expense.³ Once word spread that I was buying items on eBay for a class project on soldiers, a local antique shop owner shipped a Korean War veteran’s army trunk to me. Inside the trunk were the veteran’s uniforms, ID cards, bullet shells, and carbine manuals. The shop owner thought it would be better to donate the items to the school than to try and sell them in his store. In fact, I now do a similar assignment on the Korean War, using those very artifacts.

Once the activity was underway, students began bringing in items from their own homes. With that in mind, any teacher could create an artifact collection centering solely on objects from students’ homes. Parent-teacher organizations might also serve as a resource for modern historical artifacts. Asking to speak at a meeting or even asking the PTO to include your request in their newsletter could go a long way. In addition, there is nothing wrong with sending a note home to parents and guardians asking to borrow (or keep) items left sitting in the attic or basement. While this probably won’t be successful for older historical events, like the Revolutionary War, more modern artifacts from the twentieth century should be easier to come by. In addition, many local papers, even craigslist.com, offer free advertising when it relates to getting donations for a school. It is amazing how much “stuff” people have sitting around in their homes. One person’s dust collector can be a teacher’s treasure. Finally, if you do want to purchase items, it is possible to buy many relatively cheap artifacts on eBay, at antique shops, or flea markets. The personal papers cost me \$10, while the medical kit was \$12.

I first bring out the artifacts in class after we have covered the rise of totalitarian dictators and the causes of World War II, as well as the U.S. move from neutrality to full-fledged involvement after Pearl Harbor. I go

over proper handling procedures for these artifacts, as some are fragile. I then lay the artifacts out on two tables in the center of the room and ask the students to walk around the table and make any observations. I also ask them to draw conclusions about the items: why soldiers might have such items, and what the items might say about the soldiers who carried them. At this point, the responses are fairly simplistic (e.g., “They carry the canteen so they can have water,” “They use the postcards to send messages home,” or “They have a sewing kit to fix their uniforms”).

On the second day, the analysis of objects begins. All students are given a guiding sheet, which lists websites that will help with the identification of World War II objects. There are also websites that describe the daily activities of soldiers, the military training, and the location of battles and allied camps. Following is the students’ task:

Recently, construction workers outside of Berlin unearthed a burial of what appears to be a soldier. You are the archaeologist who has been called in to examine the surrounding artifacts. Based upon the pelvic girdle, the forensic anthropologist has identified the individual as a male of approximately 5'11" in height. It is now your job to identify who the individual was and what he was doing prior to his death. In your investigation, please complete the following:

1. *Make a list of all the artifacts found with the body.*
2. *What conclusions can you draw about the individual based solely upon these artifacts?*
3. *What other type of information might you need from the historical record to better understand who this individual was, what he was doing, and why he was near Berlin?*
4. *Using the Internet, start researching this individual. What do the insignias mean? What does the writing on the objects mean? What about the papers? Where was this man stationed? What battles might he have seen/experi-*

enced? Etc.... (Please see the attached list of suggested websites. Also, follow the class guidelines for determining the credibility of a site.)

5. *Finally, write a two-page analysis of the finds in regards to the historical record. Be sure to include an explanation for why he was carrying these objects, what he might have experienced in this war, what might he have done during his down time, and what might he have done during battle.*

With the activity underway, the students find that making a list of the items is not as easy as it seems. Once the easy-to-identify artifacts are catalogued (such as a helmet or shaving kit), the students begin to ponder the less obvious items. For example, one item is a 3"×4" mirror. There is a small, clear opening in the center of the mirror and an X across the opening. It also has a rope handle and directions for use on the back. The students read the directions on the mirror’s back and draw conclusions about why a soldier might be carrying something with this information. Once they go through those steps, they realize that it is an emergency signaling mirror—that if a soldier needed to send a signal or be rescued, this would be the perfect object to have.

My students tend to become fascinated with the letters and personal papers. They want to read every little line. They ask about the handwritten note inside the Bible, the letter from a friend describing what is going on at home, and even the ration tickets from the military bases in Europe. Then, once they see the dog tags and identification card with a soldier’s picture, they all want to know what happened to this individual. I don’t yet give them the real soldier’s discharge papers (for the sake of the activity we had pretended he died near Berlin). However, once we are all done, I will tell them about the man, where he lived after the war, how he used the GI Bill, how he was denied Veterans Affairs benefits for an injury, and when he died. I also point out that a number of the objects are from different soldiers, and there are items that have a different name etched in them. For the sake of this activity, I tell them to pretend the names on the other objects

are the same as the man's name on the pile of military papers. This man was a medic, and as a result, I made sure the objects I purchased were all something a medic would have had. However, you could easily do this assignment by having students solely analyze the documents and artifacts to understand soldier life in general, and not try to reconstruct the experience of one person.

Once the cataloging and reading are done, I allow students the opportunity to research World War II soldier life on the Internet. There are many great sites that identify such things as patches, medals, unit insignias, and codes on ration cards. There are also many sites describing the different types of objects carried by soldiers in every unit of the military. As I mentioned earlier, the items I purchased were not all from the same individual. So while the helmet and canteen have the initials of different individuals, I did try to make sure all items were from the European Theater and would be consistent with the rank and position of the person on the identification card.

We usually spend a couple of days with the computers working on the identification process. Students are allowed to work with partners so as to be able to identify as many of the items as possible. Once class time on the analysis is complete, students are then given a few more days to complete the written analysis of the artifacts. I've found that many of my students exceed my expectations in reconstructing the daily life of this individual. They locate maps and plot out his experience from boot camp in the United States to locations in the European Theater. They research his unit and, in addition to explaining unique experiences his unit faced, they explain what might have happened to him on a daily basis. Based on his personal papers, they draw conclusions about why he joined the military and how his skills might have influenced his unit placement (see excerpts from student papers). Many in my class saw this assignment as a giant puzzle or mystery that they wanted to solve. They learned a lot about what it was like being a soldier.

I have used this activity in both my 11th grade U.S. history and my 11th & 12th grade anthropology and archaeology classes. I have also used a modified version with my 9th

The activity aligns with the following standards:

Curriculum Standards for Social Studies

IV INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY

National Standards for History

Standards for Historical Thinking, 5–12

Standard 3: Analysis and Comprehension

Standard 4: Historical Research Capabilities

History Standards, 5–12

United States Standard 3: The causes and course of World War II, the character of the war at home and abroad, and its reshaping of the U.S. role in world affairs.

Standard 3B: The student understands World War II and how the Allies prevailed.... Describe military experiences and explain how they fostered American identity and interactions among people of diverse backgrounds.

(National Standards for History, 1996)

Excerpts from student write-ups:

Student A:

"Investigation of the body discovered and its materials revealed that the body was that of one [name omitted], a medic and 1st Sergeant of the 345th. Items found on his person included an ammunition belt, a sewing kit with four different colors of thread, each ten yards long, a soldier's Souvenir Handbook that included a page outlining what the soldiers were fighting for, a metal-covered, pocket-sized Bible, two war propaganda cartoons, three Army Exchange Ration Cards, a protective cover, and several medals and pins.... The significant amount of coins that was found on his person suggests that his unit may have stopped in several towns or cities during their campaign in Europe, in between battles....

Other items found on his person like the metal-covered Bible suggests that a Bible was a very important item to carry around with you for both religious and moral purposes and support, and the protective individual/cover that was meant to protect an individual against sprayed vesicants suggests that the use of chemicals was still practiced or at least anticipated, because the cover was never used. One item that provided some very useful and interesting information was/were the APO numbers found on the ration cards, which gave the precise location of where his unit was stationed. After researching the numbers, it was revealed that this unit was stationed in Bristol, England; Dinant, Belgium; Neuenahr, Germany; and Wuerzburg, Germany."

Student B:

"The anti-Hitler postcard found in the soldier's belongings proves that at that particular point of war, Americans had already dehumanized the figure of Hitler. He was simply evil in human form to the soldiers and they were determined to stop him and his army at any cost. In addition, the various currencies [the soldier] had showed that there was much traveling involved in his time at war. It is clear that this soldier had been in England, Belgium, France, and Germany. Furthermore, the personal letter found hints that the soldier had a wife at home...."

grade world civilizations students, in which the class draws conclusions about the artifacts together. While this activity is connected to the unit on World War II for my history classes, my anthropology students use this as a culminating activity (they would have studied battlefield archaeology and learned artifact analysis in our archaeology unit). This assignment allows them to practice those skills. Although my expectations are slightly different for each of these subject areas, the students' level of interest in the artifacts is always significant. 

Notes

1. Ronald V. Morris, "Teaching Social Studies with Artifacts," *The Social Studies* 91, no. 1 (Jan/Feb 2000): 32-37.
2. Morris, "Use of Artifacts to Teach Ancient History in the Elementary Classroom," *Social Studies Review* (Fall 2002).
3. S. Kay Gandy, "Teaching Social Studies on a Shoestring Budget," *Social Education* 69, no. 2 (March 2005): 98-101.

STACI ANSON is a social studies teacher at Ramapo High School in Franklin Lakes, New Jersey. She can be reached at sanson@rih.org.