

Research Note

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Literacy Teachers Fight Illiteracy During War Time: A Message for Veteran's Day 2004

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Whenever I visit Washington, DC I try to find time to honor those who died during the Vietnam War whose names are carved into the black stone of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. This is a very personal experience for me because I came into contact with thousands of the young men who fought in Vietnam. And not just any of the young men, but a very special group, those who were the undereducated youth typically cast-off by society as losers. My job was to find out what kinds of jobs poorly literate men might best be suited for, and to develop literacy programs that would help thousands of these barely literate young adults improve their literacy skills so they could do the jobs they had volunteered for or had been drafted to do in the Army of the United States.

Improving the reading skills of undereducated Army recruits took on a special meaning for both the adult literacy teachers and the new soldiers themselves. It was entirely possible that their lives and the lives of their comrades would depend upon their ability to read directions for administering first aid treatments to themselves and their buddies. I recall the enthusiasm with which small groups of men would work on a reading passage dealing with the four life saving first aid steps:

First Aid

In combat or in the field, doctors and medics can not be every place to treat injuries as they happen. You may have to give fast emergency care to yourself or to someone else. Such emergency medical care before a doctor or medic can see the patient is called first aid. The most immediate first aid steps are the four basic lifesaver steps. Follow these steps in order:

(1) clear the airway and restore breathing and heartbeat (2) stop the bleeding (3) control shock (4) put on dressing and bandages.

The first aid passage went on to discuss each of the four life saving steps. Men would read the passage and then draw pictures illustrating what the passage said. Or they would produce flow charts showing how to perform the four steps. Enthusiasm for reading and learning the four life saving steps had a great deal of functional meaning for these new recruit soldiers because they knew that in a war like that of Vietnam, they might really need to be able to read, comprehend, and use directions for administering first aid to stay alive.

The job-related, functional context literacy program that our team of teachers and researchers developed was implemented at all Army recruit training centers across the nation, including Fort Dix, New Jersey; Fort Jackson, South Carolina; Fort Polk, Louisiana; Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri; Fort Knox, Kentucky; and Fort Ord, California. In evaluation studies, some 3400 students taught by 30 teachers in these six states improved their reading ability by studying authentic job-related materials having real meaning and relevance to them.

In the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, World War I, World War II, Korean War, Vietnam War and up to the present, adult literacy teachers have been there with the troops helping them reach a new level of dignity and self-sufficiency. How many lives these teachers have saved is not known to me.

Nor do I know which, if any, of the soldiers named on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial may have improved their reading skills in the Army's literacy programs. But looking at the wall, I remember not just the fallen soldiers, but also the thousands of undereducated soldiers who came through these literacy programs, fought for their nation, and survived. I also recall that studies of hundreds of thousands of undereducated soldiers of the Vietnam war showed that some 85 percent of these young

men, all of whom society had labeled as failures, actually fought with courage and completed their service honorably.

So when I celebrate Veteran's Day I have a special place in my thoughts for the hundreds of thousands of undereducated, less literate veterans who have served our nation honorably. I also think of the thousands of veteran adult literacy educators who, through their dedication to fighting illiteracy, have helped thousands of these military personnel succeed. I have found no stone monuments to these veterans of literacy education. But I know that their names are recorded in the book that records our nation's struggle for freedom.

We are now in the 4th year of the United Nation's International Decade of Peace.