



THE NATIONAL
WWII MUSEUM
NEW ORLEANS

What makes a Hero Studying Heroes in WWII

A Lesson from
the Education Department

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What Makes a Hero? Studying Heroes in WWII

The National WWII Museum honors the heroes of World War II by celebrating their deeds and honoring the values that they carried with them into the struggle. Whether on the battlefield or on the Home Front, heroes were in no short supply during the war. However, war is not the only place we find heroes. They come in all shapes and sizes—and from some surprising places. Students need heroes, role models they look up to. But for our students' search for role models to be successful they must first define for themselves what makes a hero.

OBJECTIVE: After studying selected vignettes of heroism from D-Day history and establishing their own criteria for what makes a hero, students will compose an essay utilizing their critical thinking and persuasive writing skills.

GRADE LEVEL: 7-12

STANDARDS: History Thinking Standard 3—the student engages in historical analysis and interpretation while comparing and contrasting differing sets of ideas and considering multiple perspectives.

Content Era 8 (1929-1945), Standard 3B—the student understands World War II and how the Allies prevailed. Standard 3C—the student understands the effects of World War II at home.

TIME REQUIREMENT: One class period and time to compose their essay (in class or as homework).

DIRECTIONS:

1. Individually or as a class read the four attached excerpts from historian Stephen Ambrose's books about D-Day and WWII. Discuss what elements of heroism are presented in each and what is required to make a hero.
2. Have students write their own lists of "heroic" characteristics (bravery, honesty, selflessness, creativity, kindness, etc.) and share them with the class.
3. Have students write their own lists of "heroic" situations—situations in which a person could be called on to act heroically (war, social injustice, grave illness, peer pressure, etc.), and share them with the class.
4. Assign students to write an essay of a designated length titled *What Makes A Hero*. Students may include examples of actual people in their essays, but should not write an essay about their personal hero. The essay should concentrate on their ideas of "heroic" characteristics and situations. This essay may be assigned as homework to give students ample time for thought and composition.
5. Students may share their papers with the class.

ASSESSMENT: Components for assessment include class participation in the discussions and the completed essay.

ENRICHMENT: Have students write an essay titled *The Hero I Want to Be*, describing their vision of their own heroic potential.

What Makes a Hero?

Women in War

On D-Day, a vast majority of the American people was involved. Most of them had made a direct contribution, as farmers providing the food, as workers in defense plants making planes or tanks or shells or rifles or boots or any of the myriad items the troops needed to win the war, or as volunteers doing the work at hundreds of agencies. The bandages they rolled, the rifles they had made were being put to use even as they heard the news. They prayed that they had done it right.

Polly Crow worked the night shift at the Jefferson Boat Company outside Louisville, Kentucky. She helped make LSTs (Landing Craft Tanks). She wrote her husband, who was in the Army, about their savings—something young couples in the Depression could only dream about: “We now have \$780 in the bank and 5 bonds which sure looks good to me....”

To make that money, Mrs. Crow worked a ten-hour night shift. She cared for her two-year-old son during the day; her mother looked after the child at night. She did volunteer work at the Red Cross. She shared her apartment with another woman and her mother.

There were tens of thousands of young women like Mrs. Crow... When the boy husbands left for the war to become men, the girl wives became women. They traveled alone—or with their infants—to distant places on hot and stuffy or cold and overcrowded trains, became proficient cooks and housekeepers, managed the finances, learned to fix the car, worked in a defense plant, and wrote letters to their soldier husbands that were consistently upbeat.

Women in uniform were a new phenomenon for the Americans of the 1940s. They were in every branch of service, but more strictly segregated by their sex than blacks were by their race.... The women in uniform did everything the men did, except engage in combat. They were clerks, mechanics, administrators, radio operators, photo interpreters, cooks, meteorologists, supply sergeants, test pilots, and much more. Eisenhower felt he could not have won the war without them.

They did not have an easy time. Cruel and vicious jokes were told about them—although not by the wounded about the nurses. These pioneering women persevered and triumphed. The contribution of the women of America, whether on the farm or in the factory or in uniform, to D-Day was a *sine qua non* (it was indispensable) of the invasion effort.

Excerpt from Stephen Ambrose, *D-Day, The Climactic Battle of World War II*, 1994.



Line of women shipbuilders, Pascagoula, MS
Spencer Beebe, 1943

What Makes a Hero?

On Omaha Beach

When the ramp on the Higgins boats dropped, the Germans just poured the machine gun, artillery, and mortar fire on them. It was a slaughter. Of the 200-plus men of the company (Company A, 116th Regiment, 29th Division), only a couple of dozen survived, and virtually all of them were wounded.

Sergeant Thomas Valance survived, barely. “As we came down the ramp, we were in water about knee-high and started to do what we were trained to do, that is, move forward and then crouch and fire...” The tide was coming in, rapidly, and the men around Valance were getting hit. He found it difficult to stay on his feet—like most infantrymen, he was badly overloaded, soaking wet, exhausted, trying to struggle through wet sand and avoid the obstacles with mines attached to them. “I abandoned my equipment, which was dragging me down into the water.

“I remember floundering in the water with my hand in the air, trying to get my balance, when I was first shot through the palm of my hand, then through the knuckle.” Valance was hit again, in the left thigh by a bullet that broke his hipbone. He took two additional flesh wounds. His pack was hit twice, and the chin strap on his helmet was severed by a bullet. He crawled up the beach “and staggered up against the seawall and sort of collapsed there and, as a matter of fact, spent the whole day in that position. Essentially my part in the invasion had ended by having been wiped out as most of my company was. The bodies of my buddies were washing ashore and I was the only live body in amongst so many of my friends, all of whom were dead.”

By 0640 only one officer from A Company was alive, Lieutenant E. Ray Nance, and he had been hit in the heel and the belly. Every sergeant was either dead or wounded. On one boat, when the ramp was dropped every man in the thirty-man assault team was killed before any of them could get out.

Excerpt from Stephen Ambrose, *D-Day, The Climactic Battle of World War II*, 1994.



D-Day landing at Omaha Beach

What Makes a Hero?

At Pointe du Hoc

Companies D, E, and F of the 2nd Ranger Battalion came in at the wrong time from the wrong direction at Pointe du Hoc. Most of the special equipment for scaling the cliff never made it to shore; much of what did failed to work. When the companies nevertheless made it to the top, they found that their objective, five 155mm cannon capable of dominating both Utah and Omaha beaches, were not in their casements. Apparently what the rangers had accomplished in one of the most famous and heroic actions of D-Day had gone for naught and the skills and sacrifices of one of the most elite and highly trained forces in the Allied army had been wasted. But in fact what the rangers accomplished at Omaha and at Pointe du Hoc was critical to the ultimate success at both American beaches.

The primary purpose of the rangers was not to kill Germans or take prisoners, but to get those 155mm cannon. The tracks leading out of the casements and the effort the Germans were making to dislodge the rangers indicated that they had to be around somewhere.

There was a dirt road leading south (inland). It had heavy tracks. Sergeants Len Lomell and Jack Kuhn thought the missing guns might have made the tracks. They set out to investigate. At about one kilometer inland, Lomell abruptly stopped. He held his hand out to stop Kuhn, turned and half whispered, "Jack, here they are. We've found 'em."

Unbelievably, the well-camouflaged guns were set up in battery, ready to fire in the direction of Utah Beach, with piles of ammunition around them, but no Germans. Lomell spotted about a hundred Germans a hundred meters or so across an open field, apparently forming up. Evidently they had pulled back during the bombardment, for fear of a stray shell setting off the ammunition dump, and were now preparing to man their guns.

Lomell never hesitated. "Give me your grenades, Jack," he said to Kuhn. "Cover me. I'm gonna fix 'em." He ran to the guns and set off thermite grenades [grenades that produce great heat, but no explosion] in the recoil and traversing mechanisms of two of the guns, disabling them. He bashed the sights of the third gun.

"Jack, we gotta get some more thermite grenades." He and Kuhn ran back to the highway, collected all the thermite grenades from the rangers in the immediate area, returned to the battery, and disabled the other three guns.

Excerpt from Stephen Ambrose, *D-Day, The Climactic Battle of World War II*, 1994.



Army Rangers at Pointe du Hoc, June 6, 1944

What Makes a Hero?

Old Jim Crow

In World War II the world's greatest democracy fought the world's greatest racist with a segregated army. It was worse than that: the Army and the society conspired to degrade African-Americans in every way possible.... One little incident from the home front illustrates the tyranny black Americans lived under during the Second World War.

In April 1944 Corp. Rupert Trimmingham wrote *Yank* magazine. "Here is a question that each Negro soldier is asking," he began. "What is the Negro soldier fighting for? On whose team are we playing?" He recounted the difficulties he and eight other black soldiers had while traveling through the South—"Where Old Jim Crow rules"—for a new assignment. "We could not purchase a cup of coffee," Trimmingham noted. Finally the lunchroom manager at a Texas railroad depot said the black GIs could go on around back to the kitchen for a sandwich and coffee. As they did, "about two dozen German prisoners of war, with two American guards, came to the station. They entered the lunchroom, sat at the tables, had their meals served, talked, smoked, in fact had quite a swell time. I stood on the outside looking on, and I could not help but ask myself these questions: Are these men sworn enemies of this country? Are they not taught to hate and destroy...all democratic governments? Are we not American soldiers, sworn to fight for and die if need be for our country? Then why are they treated better than we are? Why are we pushed around like cattle? If we are fighting for the same thing, if we are going to die for our country, then why does the Government allow such things to go on? Some of the boys are saying that you will not print this letter. I'm saying that you will."

In ETO [European Theater of Operations], many black soldiers were assigned to prisoner duty. It is the universal testimony of the German POWs interviewed for this book that they got better treatment from black than white guards, to the point that the POWs had a saying, "The best American is a black American."

Yank magazine did print Corporal Trimmingham's letter. A couple of months later, he wrote again. "To date I've received 287 letters," he said, "and, strange as it may seem, 183 are from white men in the armed service. Another strange feature about these letters is that the most of these people are from the Deep South. They are all proud that they are from the South but ashamed to learn that there are so many of their own people who are playing Hitler's game. Nevertheless, it gives me new hope to realize that there are doubtless thousands of whites who are willing to fight [Jim Crow]." *Yank* noted that it had received thousands of letters from GIs, "almost all of whom were outraged by the treatment given the corporal."

Excerpt from Stephen Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers*, 1997.



41st Engineers on Parade, Fort Bragg, NC