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"We Also Served" Lesson Plan Guide

by Erin McGill

Unit Overview

Duration: 1 week

Grade Level: 3–5

Program: SSYRA Orange Blossom Nonfiction

Subject Integration: ELA, Social Studies/History, Science

Essential Question: *How have animals contributed to military history—and what do their stories reveal about loyalty, service, and the human-animal bond?*

Learning Objectives — Students will be able to:

- Identify and describe at least three animals who served in military roles throughout history
 - Analyze the specialized abilities of different animals and how those abilities were put to use
 - Connect animal service stories to larger themes of loyalty, courage, and the human-animal bond
 - Practice nonfiction reading strategies: text features, main idea, supporting details
 - Express understanding through research writing and creative projects
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ONE-WEEK LESSON PLAN

Day 1: What Do You Know About Animals and the Military?

Objective: Activate prior knowledge, introduce the book's structure, and spark curiosity

Materials: Book, prior knowledge discussion prompts, anchor chart paper

Opening (10 min):

- Quick-write: "Have you ever heard of an animal that helped people in an important or dangerous situation? What do you know?"
- Share out and build a class "What We Already Know" anchor chart

Main Activity (35 min):

- Introduce the book: Read aloud the first two animal stories together
- Pause to discuss: What ability made this animal useful? How did humans and animals work together?
- Introduce key nonfiction reading strategies: How does the text use captions, headings, and illustrations to support information?
- Class discussion: Why do you think these stories aren't in most history books?

Closing (5 min):

- Exit ticket: "Name one animal from the book and one reason their service mattered."

Assessment: Prior knowledge activation, nonfiction text feature recognition, engagement with content

Day 2: Animal Abilities — The Science of Service

Objective: Explore the specific natural abilities that made each animal valuable for military purposes

Materials: Book, animal abilities chart, science reference materials

Opening (10 min):

- Think-pair-share: "What special abilities do animals have that humans don't? How might those be useful?"

Main Activity (35 min):

- Continue reading together, pausing to record each animal's key ability on a class chart
- Science connection: Explore the science behind one or two abilities in more depth (carrier pigeon navigation, dog olfaction, horse endurance)



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- Discuss: Animals can't understand the purpose of their service—so what does their performance tell us about their nature?
- Partner activity: Each pair researches one animal ability and presents one surprising fact to the class

Closing (5 min):

- Exit ticket: "What ability did one animal have—and why was it especially useful in a military context?"

Assessment: Animal science content, ability analysis, nonfiction research skill

Day 3: Loyalty, Courage, and What "Service" Means

Objective: Explore the human-animal bond and what concepts like loyalty and courage mean when applied to animals

Materials: Book, discussion prompts, courage/loyalty definition chart

Opening (10 min):

- Discussion: "Can an animal be brave? What would that mean? Is it different from a human being brave?"

Main Activity (35 min):

- Read the stories that most directly show human-animal partnership and emotional connection
- Discuss: What did soldiers gain from their animal companions beyond just practical help?
- Build a class definition of "service": What does it require? Can it be voluntary or involuntary?
- Personal connection: Have you ever seen an animal do something loyal or courageous? What happened?

Closing (5 min):

- Exit ticket: "Use evidence from the book to argue whether or not animals can truly 'serve' something."

Assessment: Conceptual analysis, evidence-based reasoning, personal connection

Day 4: History Through a New Lens — Connecting Animal Stories to War History

Objective: Connect the animal stories to the broader historical events they were part of

Materials: Book, historical context reference materials (teacher-selected), timeline worksheet

Opening (10 min):

- Partner discussion: "Which war or conflict did one of the animal stories take place in? What do you already know about it?"

Main Activity (35 min):

- Match animal service stories to their historical moments—build a class timeline
- Research connections: Brief teacher-led exploration of the historical context for two key stories
- Discuss: How does knowing the animal's story change how you feel about that moment in history?
- Writing prompt: "Choose one animal from the book. Write a paragraph explaining their contribution and what it tells us about that moment in history."

Closing (5 min):

- Share one sentence from writing prompt

Assessment: Historical context understanding, research writing quality, evidence use

Day 5: Research Project and Recognition

Objective: Apply learning through an independent research project honoring one military animal

Materials: Research materials, art supplies, writing materials

Opening (10 min):

- Preview project options; students select and begin

Main Activity (35 min):

- Option A: Research a famous military animal not in the book (Sergeant Reckless, Cher Ami, Endal) and write a one-page biography
- Option B: Design an award or medal for one animal from the book—illustrate it and write the citation explaining why they deserve it
- Option C: Write and illustrate a "missing chapter" for the book featuring a new military animal you discovered through research



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- Share projects with a partner or the class

Closing (5 min):

- Class closing: "One animal whose story I'll remember—and why."

Assessment: Research quality, creative expression, synthesis of historical and science content

Differentiation

- **Advanced learners:** Research the Dickin Medal (awarded to military animals) and write a comparative analysis of two recipients
 - **Students needing support:** Animal abilities chart with visual supports; sentence frames for writing; option to work in pairs for research project
 - **English Language Learners:** Pre-teach vocabulary around military service and animal abilities; visual anchor charts; collaborative research options
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Materials List

- Class set or shared copies of "We Also Served"
- Animal abilities class chart (Days 2–3)
- Historical context reference materials for Day 4 (teacher-selected)
- Timeline worksheet (Day 4)
- Research materials for Day 5 (books, verified online sources)
- Art and writing supplies for Day 5 project