



*JRR Tolkien is best known as the famous author of 'The Lord of the Rings' books, but he also served as an officer during the First World War. He experienced first hand the Battle of the Somme in 1916. These experiences influenced both his later life and writing.*

### Activity 2

These extracts from *The Two Towers*, the second book of *The Lord of the Rings*, seem to reflect Tolkien's experience at the Battle of the Somme.

- Look at the images from the actual battle – how do these sources match up to Tolkien's first description.
- Label language used to describe those who have died in the second extract – what is he saying about the dead?

### Activity 1

How can we use the timeline to infer what Tolkien's experience in the Army was like and how his life might have changed?

#### Timeline

**1892:** John Ronald Reuel Tolkien is born  
**1903 – 1911 Attended** King Edward's School in Birmingham; forms a society with close friends to debate literature and ideas

**1911–1915:** Studies at Oxford

**1915:** Joins the British Army as an officer in the Lancashire Fusiliers

**June 1916:** Sent to France

**July–Oct 1916:** Fights in the Battle of the Somme; experiences trench warfare; two close friends are killed

**Oct 1916:** Becomes ill with trench fever; returns to England

**1916–1918:** Recovers while continuing army duties in England; begins writing

**Nov 1918:** War ends—Tolkien survives

*'The marsh-reeks lay in heavy banks. No sun pierced the clouded sky...a shadowy silent world...an endless network of pools, and soft mires, and winding half-strangled water-courses. It was dreary and wearisome. Cold clammy winter still held sway in this forsaken country. The only green was the scum of livid weed on the dark greasy surfaces of the sullen waters. Dead grasses and rotting reeds loomed up in the mists like ragged shadows of long-forgotten summers'*



*'They lie in all the pools, pale faces, deep deep under the dark water. I saw them: grim faces and evil, and noble faces and sad. Many faces proud and fair, and weeds in their silver hair. But all foul, all rotting, all dead.'*



Before the First World War, J.R.R. Tolkien and three close friends, Christopher Wiseman, Geoffrey Bache Smith & Robert Quilter Gilson, who all attended the same school in Birmingham formed a group called the T.C.B.S. (Tea Club and Barrovian Society). They met in the school library and local tea rooms to share ideas about stories, art and the future. Their strong friendship was torn apart by the war, and only two of them survived, leaving a lasting sense of loss that stayed with Tolkien for the rest of his life.



### Activity 3

Read the information about Tolkien and his friends.

- What do the quotes from Tolkien, his friends and from Samways Gamgee in *The Lord of the Rings* about Frodo tell us about the importance of friendship?
- Why might this be even more important in times of war?

'by 1918, all but one of my close friends were dead'

'Something has gone crack.... I don't feel a member of a little complete body now...I feel a mere individual.'

'the death of one of its members cannot, I am determined, dissolve the TCBS.... Death can make us loathsome and helpless as individuals, but it cannot put an end to the immortal four!'

'I'm going with him, if he climbs to the Moon'

'I can't carry it for you, but I can carry you!'

### Lieutenant Robert Quilter Gilson



**Robert Quilter Gilson** (22) was the first of the four friends to be killed. Robert died in a shell explosion leading his men out of the trenches in the first wave of the Somme offensive, on the 1st July 1916. He is commemorated at **CWGC Becourt Military Cemetery, France.**

### Lieutenant Geoffrey Bache Smith



**Geoffrey Bache Smith** (22) was injured on the 29th November 1916. His Battalion was shelled behind the lines, and Geoffrey was hit by shrapnel. By the 2nd December his injuries were considered 'worrying' and he died the following morning. He is buried in **CWGC Warlincourt Halte British Cemetery, France.**

### Lieutenant Ralph Stuart Payton



**Ralph Stuart Payton** (22) was another of Tolkien's close circle of friends. He was killed on the 22nd July 1916 during intense fighting on the Somme between High Wood and Delville Wood. His body was never recovered, and he is remembered on the **CWGC Thiepval Memorial, France.**

### Remembering the Fallen of the Somme



The CWGC commemorate all those who died during the Battle of the Somme. Many men were never recovered after the battle. Our Thiepval Memorial remembers over 72,000 soldiers who died on the Somme and have no known grave.

### Activity 4

- Look at the pictures of the headstones and the Thiepval Memorial – discuss what is different about these two ways of remembering someone?
- Why is it still important we remember these people 110 years after the battle?



This resource is intended to provide a one-off lesson that begins exploring the experience of the Battle of the Somme on its 110<sup>th</sup> anniversary though the experience of one man and his friends. Many young people will be familiar with Tolkien as a writer but will not necessarily know about his wartime experience.

The activities on the worksheet are intended to provide a flexible one-off introduction to the topic or can be used in conjunction with the following extension activities.

### Activity 1 Inference prompts

- What might life in the trenches have been like for Tolkien?
- How do you think he felt losing close friends during the war?
- What challenges might he have faced as a young officer?
- Why might these experiences stay with him for the rest of his life?

### Activity 2 extension

Identify and analyse the language techniques Tolkien uses in these extracts and the effect they have on the reader.

### Activity 3 extension

Write a short paragraph answering: How might Tolkien's experiences in the First World War have influenced his thoughts and feelings about friendship and war? Include:

- At least one historical detail (e.g. Somme, trench warfare, loss of friends)
- At least one idea about feelings (e.g. fear, grief, loyalty, hope)

Challenge: Link your ideas to a character like Sam or Frodo.

### Activity 4 Further Prompt Questions

- Why were so many soldiers missing after the Battle of the Somme?
- How might families feel if their relative had no known grave?
- Why do you think memorials like Thiepval were built?

**Further Suggested Activities:**

- Use any of the battlefield images as a creative writing prompt.
- Letter writing activity:
  - The friends writing to each other about the deaths of their other friends.
  - A letter home about the experience of being in the Battle of the Somme.
- Research casualties from your location who died during Battle of Somme or who are remembered on the Thiepval Memorial using our database: [Find war dead | War graves search | CWGC](#)
- Explore what was happening beyond the Somme across the globe using our 'One Day in a World War' resource: [World War Resources for Learning: Guides and Research | CWGC](#)
- Explore further stories of those who died on our For Evermore Stories Portal: [Battles of the Somme | For Evermore](#)
- Upload your own research to the For Evermore site to share: [Add your story to For Evermore](#)

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