



## CLASSROOM BASED ENQUIRY



# How and why should we remember the Battle of the Somme today?

## Key Stage 3

## ENQUIRY OVERVIEW

This enquiry is designed to be taught as part of a broader study of the First World War and students should be introduced to its broader historical context prior to embarking on the activities suggested here.

The students will evaluate the significance of the Battle of the Somme – both at the time and since. Too often Battle of the Somme is examined from a limited perspective: as a typical, and possibly futile, Western Front offensive. This is compounded by a limited focus on the events of 1 July.

In the first stage of the enquiry students look at how the Battle of the Somme impacted on communities back home, and how the scale of the casualties sustained along with the specific experiences of the Pals Battalions still resonate more than 100 years after the event.

The second stage of the enquiry is designed to introduce the students to the development of military strategy from 1915 through to 1916, to the real challenges faced by the military leaders in trying to end the stalemate on the Western Front, and how the failure of 1 July 1916 contrasted with the more limited but successful assault by the 14th Division at Thiepval in September 1916.

The students go on to study the contribution of Empire soldiers to the Battle of the Somme e.g. Newfoundland (Beaumont Hamel), Australia (Pozières) and South Africa (Delville Wood), and the longer term impact of the Battle on these Dominions.

Stage 4 of the enquiry focuses on the evolving assessments of military strategy and leadership by different historians and how this might impact on how the events of 1916 are understood.

In the final task the students are asked draw on their learning throughout the enquiry to consider how and why should we remember the Battle of the Somme today?



## Lessons

### Stage 1: To what extent did the Battle of the Somme impact on different local communities and why is it still remembered today?

Set the scene with a brief overview of the Battle of the Somme: where it was fought (a map of France would be useful here along with Map 1 [Map of the battlefield] – see **Resources 1**), why it was fought, the key events including 1 July 1916, and the eventual outcome.

Present the students with images and background information to the Thiepval Memorial (see **Resources 1**). Ask them to consider the following questions:

- *Why is the memorial so large?*
- *Why do they think the soldiers named on the memorial don't have their own individual graves?*
- *What does this tell them about the conditions at the Battle of the Somme?*
- *What impact do they think the number of dead (96,000) and missing (73,000) would have had on communities back home?*

To help the students appreciate the immediate impact of the Missing on the Somme ask them to focus on James Pendlebury, one of the names on the Thiepval Memorial, and complete Activity 1 in **Resources 1** which should help to demonstrate the wider impact of his death. James Pendlebury's name could be substituted with the name from your students' own community – the names on the Thiepval Memorial can be easily researched using the online CWGC database.

*Why do they think Lutyens designed such an imposing memorial at Thiepval fourteen years after the end of the First World War?*

*Do they think the Thiepval Memorial is a particularly fitting way to remember the Missing of the Somme?*

Now look in more detail at the impact of the Battle of the Somme on 4 different local communities: Oswestry in Shropshire, Kidderminster in Warwickshire, Accrington in Lancashire, and Brechin in Fife, Scotland. Accrington has been selected because it is a town associated with the Pals Battalions and because it suffered heavily following the first day of the Somme on 1 July 1916. Studying data from local communities not only makes the losses on the Somme more comprehensible but also brings the casualty figures to a more human level.

The examples of local communities here could easily be substituted with data from your students' own community to add resonance. Data can be compiled using Commonwealth War Grave Commission records along with census data – both are readily accessible online.

Ask the students to look at Tables 1 to 4 and then work out the percentages of casualties in proportion to the population of the 4 communities and compare results. Some of the percentages for Oswestry have already been completed.

- *Were all 4 communities affected equally?*
- *In what way was 1916 different to previous years?*
- *Where did most of the casualties in 1916 occur?*
- *How might this have impacted on the way people at the time viewed the Battle of the Somme?*
- *What were the casualty figures like after 1916?*



## Lessons

### Stage 1: To what extent did the Battle of the Somme impact on different local communities and why is it still remembered today? (continued...)

Try to tease out the following key factors that emerge from the data:

- 1916 was the year when the war really hit home, when there was a substantial rise in the number of casualties.
- Most of the casualties in 1916 were in France.
- By far the largest number of casualties happened between July and December 1916 during the Battle of the Somme.
- A large proportion of the soldiers would have been reported as missing and were later commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial.
- The largest number of soldiers reported as missing during the First World War was on the Somme.

It is also worth looking at the data in the tables from 1917 onwards including from the other large Memorials to the Missing to help put the events on the Somme into the broader perspective of the First World War.

Now focus on the Accrington Pals. Ask the students to use the sources and the Internet research suggested in **Resources 1** to complete the following activities:

- *What were the Pals Battalions?*
- *What experience did they have of front line fighting before 1 July 1916?*
- *What happened to the Accrington Pals on 1 July 1916?*
- *What impact did this have on Accrington and the surrounding towns?*
- *How have the memories of the Accrington Pals been kept alive since 1916 and why does their story continue to attract so much attention?*
- *How reliable are some of these sources?*

Round off this stage by asking the students to reflect on what they have learnt:

- *Why was the Battle of the Somme so significant?*
- *How does the memory of the Accrington Pals affect the way we remember the Battle of the Somme?*
- *What could we do in our local community to make sure that the Missing continue to be remembered?*

### List of resources, worksheets, video clips and interactive activities for use with Stage 1

#### Resource 1



## Lessons

### STAGE 2: What lessons did the Generals learn from the Battle of the Somme?

This stage considers the Battle of the Somme in terms of evolving military strategy and tactics throughout the First World War. The Somme is often presented solely in terms of the failures of 1 July and the weaknesses or lack of imagination of the General Staff. This is a significant oversimplification and it is important to briefly examine the nature of the 1915 offensives, and the impact this experience had on planning for 1916.

Present the students with the following question. *Why did the British attempts to break through the German lines in 1915 end in failure?* Ask them in small groups to complete Task 1 in **Resources 2** where they are required to use the sources provided to identify the reasons behind the failure of the British offensives on the Western Front in 1915.

Now move on to the plans for the 1916 offensive on the Somme. Start by explaining why the battle of the Somme was necessary e.g. from February 1916 the French found themselves under fierce attack from the Germans at Verdun where their losses were huge. By June 1916 the attack on the Somme had changed to a largely British operation which was designed to help the French by forcing the Germans to move troops away from Verdun to fight the British on the Somme. The hope was to break through the German lines and end the stalemate on the Western Front.

In their groups ask the students to complete Tasks 2ab in **Resources 2** where they are required to look at the list of problems faced by the Allies in 1915 and to judge whether or not the plans drawn up for the Battle of the Somme adequately addressed these. Task 3 requires them to use the sources provided to explain why 1 July 1916 was such a disaster.

To help the students appreciate the enormity of the events of 1 July it is worth focusing at this point on one part of the battle. In Task 4 the students are asked to use a range of sources to find out exactly what happened to the Accrington Pals Battalion on that day. Remind them of the previous work they carried out on the Accrington Pals. The experience of the Accrington Pals could easily be substituted with an example from your students' own community using similar sources to add resonance.

It is important at the conclusion of this stage to put the events of the Battle of the Somme into a broader perspective – not everything ended in failure, some lessons were learnt, new tactical ideas were developed and new weapons were tried out for the first time. To illustrate this, the failure of 1 July 1916 can be contrasted with the more limited but successful assault by the 18th Division at Thiepval in September 1916 through completing Tasks 5ab.

### List of resources, worksheets, video clips and interactive activities for use with Stage 2

#### Resource 2





## Lessons

### STAGE 3 What role did soldiers from Newfoundland and Australia play in the Battle of the Somme and what effect did this have on their countries?

This section examines the role the First World War played in creating a sense of national identity amongst soldiers from the former dominions of Newfoundland and Australia.

Introduce your students to the background information and map in **Resources 3** making sure that they understand the important role played in the First World War by countries of the British Empire.

Divide the class into small groups and allocate each group either Newfoundland or Australia. Ask them to use the relevant section in **Resources 3** to answer the following two questions:

What exactly happened to the Newfoundlanders (or) Australians in the Battle of the Somme?

How has the Canadian/Australian Government ensured that the memory of what happened to the soldiers been kept alive to this day?

Once the groups have completed these tasks, ask them to share their findings with another group.

As a whole class discuss why the exploits and sacrifice made by the Newfoundlanders and Australians in the First World War are still so important to Canada and Australia today.

The attack of the Newfoundland Battalion on 1 July 1916 was a tragedy in more ways than one. The losses suffered were the heaviest of any Battalion in action on 1 July. The attack was also pointless, the Newfoundlanders were never part of the first wave and were ordered across No-Man's Land on the mistaken assumption that the German front lines had been taken.

After the War this part of the battlefield was bought by the Newfoundland Government to be preserved as a permanent memorial to the Newfoundland Regiment and the names of the Missing are recorded on the Caribou Memorial.

The Australians as part of the Anzac Corps had already established a reputation for themselves at Gallipoli and 25 April, ANZAC Day is still a national holiday. It might be argued that Gallipoli was ultimately a defeat and highlighted many shortcomings in the planning of the offensive. Pozieres demonstrated a different side of the Australian war effort and was ultimately a success, if a bloody one.

### List of resources, worksheets, video clips and interactive activities for use with Stage 3

#### Resources 3



## Lessons

### STAGE 4: How has the way the Battle of the Somme is viewed changed over time?

The purpose of this stage is to get your students to assess the immediate outcome of the Battle, its cost – personal, military, financial – and to examine how the story and the lessons of the Battle of the Somme have been told since early 1917.

Organise your students into small groups and ask them to work their way through the tasks in **Resources 4**. After each task, ask the groups to share their answers as part of a whole class discussion.

In Task 1 the students are presented with an overview of the Battle of the Somme, the outcome and the cost, and have to consider whether the Battle was worth fighting and who, if anyone, was to blame for the enormous losses.

The focus in Task 2 is on how the Battle of the Somme was viewed in the immediate aftermath by both the Strategic High Command and soldiers who had experienced the Battle for themselves. The purpose here is to show that different views were taken and that the criteria for judging success are not straightforward.

Tasks 3 and 4 look at the contrasting and controversial views of different historians. Once they are familiar with these views the students are asked to re-evaluate their responses to Task 1. At this point it is worth getting the class to come to an overall and more balanced view of the Battle of the Somme in preparation for the final stage of the enquiry.

**List of resources, worksheets, video clips and interactive activities for use with Stage 4**

#### Resource 4

### STAGE 5: How and why should we remember the Battle of the Somme today?

In this final stage the students draw on their learning throughout the enquiry to consider: *How and why should we remember the Battle of the Somme today?*

In small groups, ask the students to produce an information leaflet for a battlefield tour group. This should include:

- A brief overview of the Battle of the Somme (why it was fought, how it was fought, the outcome, the cost). This section should be presented in factual and broadly neutral terms.
- An explanation of how and why the Battle of the Somme is still remembered today.

The second part is critical and the students should be asked to select which aspects of the Battle to include in this section along with which sources they might choose to illustrate their text. You should stress that the choices they make may have an impact on how the readers of the leaflet view the events of 1916.

To help the students to organise their ideas, ask them to use the template provided (**Template 1**).

**List of resources, worksheets, video clips and interactive activities for use with Stage 4**

#### Template 1