

# LESSON ONE: SIGNING UP

## Context

In the scene you are about to watch you will see the reaction of young people, mostly aged 15–16, to the outbreak of war. The call for volunteers was for men aged 19–35. Our main protagonists were only aged 15–16 but were still intent on joining up. For many it seemed to offer the exciting prospect of travel and the possible glory of fighting for king and country.

Look at the additional historical information sections, **Signing Up**, **Boy Soldiers** and **Recruitment** on the reverse of this sheet and **Trench Slang**, see Lesson Three.

**Play DVD:** *Section One: Signing Up*

The following drama exercises are intended to stimulate discussion and debate about signing up.

## Exercise One: Taking Sides

Begin in a standing circle numbering your students 1, 2, or 3 giving each of the three groups a designated space in the room. All are too young to legitimately volunteer to fight. Group 1 is in favour of joining up despite being under-age and follow the arguments given by the character of Harry. Group 2 is against joining up under-age and side with the character of Betty. Group 3 are undecided.

Groups 1 and 2 are given five minutes to put together their argument selecting a spokesperson to voice their opinions. Group 3 are to circle the room observing and listening. After five minutes Groups 1 and 2 should 'sell' their argument to Group 3 who will then be asked to make a choice (either as a group or individually) and explain their reasons.

## Exercise Two: Attention!

Chants and songs were very popular on the home and battle fronts. During the First World War popular tunes were adapted with different words to fit with the experiences of being a soldier in the trenches, sometimes using trench slang.

As the exercise continues the group should be instructed to move to the centre of the room increasing the volume as they do so. Levels of volume should be played with, culminating in a sudden cessation of the sound indicated by you lowering your arm sharply. The objective is to stop together as a team in absolute silence.

The lyrics, below taken from the DVD, should be copied for the students. Bring the group to a standing circle before splitting them into four groups.

The additional information on trench slang will also give some alternatives regarding words and phrases commonly used by soldiers especially when they became accustomed to trench life.

- Group 1 – Rifle
- Group 2 – Ammunition
- Group 3 – Helmet
- Group 4 – Bomb

Each of the groups should be allocated a corner of the room. Using the lyrics provided give each group approximately five minutes to create a modern day chant. Suggestions could be rap, football chant, boy band, hymn. Once done you should move to the middle of the space. On raising your right arm high each group performs their chant at the same time. At first this should be done quietly almost in a whisper.

## Lyrics

*Where are our uniforms?*

*Far, far away.*

*And when will our rifles come?*

*Perhaps, perhaps one day.*

*All we want is a shiny gun,*

*For to chase the bloody Hun.*

*Think of us when we are gone,*

*Far, far away.*

## Exercise Three: Improvisation

Remain in the same three groups as exercise two. Using the arguments touched upon in the first exercise, each group should begin thinking about how to dramatise their findings incorporating the following key characters:

- Sergeant (keen to recruit as many men as possible)
- Cocky recruit (perhaps under-age but very keen not to miss out)
- Scared recruit (perhaps under-age, afraid that he will be found out and having second thoughts about what he is doing)
- Objectors (realise that many of the young men who wish to join are too young and mothers, wives and girlfriends who do not want their loved ones to go)

Each group should think of a clear beginning, middle and end and their improvisation should last no more than two minutes in duration and involve everyone in the group. Each group should then perform their scene back to the rest of the group.



## HISTORICAL INFORMATION: SIGNING UP

It is important to look at the different reasons why thousands of men were so keen to volunteer to fight for their country in 1914.

### Key Points

① Boredom at work and a desire for adventure. Most children left school at 14 and sometimes 13 and would therefore be out at work. The main characters in the play are aged 14–16.

② Patriotism. This was strongly ingrained at school and in the media. People were brought up on stories of the British Empire and the 'heroic' tales of those who had helped to create it. Empire Day, 24 May, Queen Victoria's birthday, started in 1902, the year after her death. It was seen as a way of upholding pride in the nation's achievement and the importance of defending the Empire should it be endangered. Youth organisations such as the Scouts endorsed it too, 40% of boys belonged to a youth organisation. Our main characters had been in the Scouts.

③ Desire to escape family pressure and responsibility. It was easier for teenagers who did not have families of their own and were not major wage earners.

④ Peer pressure. Desire to do what your friends do. Also pressure from adults. White feathers were often handed out to teenagers who were too young to legally join up.

⑤ Impact of propaganda. Depictions of the most recent war, Boer War 1899–1902, in illustrated magazines, especially *Boy's Own* papers had often been romanticised, making war look exciting. Recruitment propaganda posters were designed to be very persuasive in encouraging enlistment. As the First World War progressed anti-German propaganda and war atrocity stories had an impact too.

⑥ Money. Joining up offered a regular wage, food and accommodation. 500,000 men were made redundant at the beginning of the war. This would have included teenagers as most left school at 14.

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## HISTORICAL INFORMATION: BOY SOLDIERS

The story of Harry, Archie, Alfie, Lennie, Albert and Horace is not unusual; there would have been a considerable number of under-age soldiers in the army. Richard Van Emden, in his book, *Boy Soldiers of the Great War*, argues convincingly that there could have been as many as 200,000 under-age soldiers taking part.

### Why so many? Key Points

- ① Younger men were more susceptible to propaganda
- ② More willing to accept orders
- ③ Less aware of the dangers of war
- ④ Feel more indestructible
- ⑤ Not same kind of responsibilities as men with families
- ⑥ Fear that the war would be over by Christmas and therefore might miss out

⑦ Many belonged to youth groups such as the Scouts and public school boys received military-type training as cadets. This instilled a sense of patriotism, discipline and good citizenship.

⑧ Many children left school at 14 and would therefore be used to working in an adult environment. This was often factory work, which would have been hard with long hours and sometimes dangerous.

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## HISTORICAL INFORMATION: RECRUITMENT

At the outbreak of war, 4 August 1914, there were 450,000 men in the British Army, with 268,000 part time soldiers in the Territorial Force. Britain was the only European power without a conscript army. Lord Kitchener, Secretary of State for War, realised that this was not enough and in August 1914, issued an appeal for 100,000 volunteers. The Parliamentary Recruiting Committee supervised the most concerted leaflet and poster recruiting drive this country has ever seen. It has been estimated that by the end of March 1915, 20 million leaflets and 2 million posters had been issued with over 200 designs. By the end of August there were in fact 300,000 volunteers and by the end of 1915, nearly 2.5 million. They were to become known as Kitchener's Army.

### What did you need to become a recruit? Key Points

① Initially you needed to be aged 19–30 (this was later raised to 35 and then 41). You could enlist at the age of 18 but could not be sent overseas until 19; this was lowered to 18½ in 1918. Nineteen proved to be a popular age in 1914. There were far too many 19 year olds than would have been possible in the British population! Proof of age was not required; passing your medical was enough. All the main characters in the play lie about their age so that they can be recruited.

② In August 1914 the minimum height was 5'3" with chest of 34". By 11 September that was raised to 5'6" to stem the flow of recruits.

③ Recruits came from all walks of life, all professions and from all classes.

④ At first there were too many to cope with and there was a shortage of equipment and uniforms.

⑤ Recruiting sergeants were paid two shillings and sixpence (£6 in today's money) per recruit on top of their wage, which was an incentive to turn a blind eye to recruits who looked too young.

⑥ Initially men from the same village or town were encouraged to join together with the incentive that they would train and fight together; these were called Pals Battalions. This also meant that if they were involved in a particularly dangerous campaign, they could all die together too.

⑦ By the end of 1915 it was apparent that there were not going to be enough volunteers and that therefore men would need to be conscripted, compelled to join the army unless medically unfit or doing essential war work on the home front. On 25 January 1916 the First Military Service Bill was passed introducing conscription for single men aged 18–41 and on 16 May, this was extended to married men. You still had to be 19 before you were sent abroad.

⑧ Some men believed that it was wrong to fight the Germans for religious or political reasons and refused to join the army, they were called 'Conscientious Objectors (COs)'. There were 16,500 COs, most agreed to help in a non-combatant role eg ambulance drivers or agriculture labourers some however refused and 6,000 were imprisoned.

⑨ Recruitment of black Britons was far from consistent. Some were rejected as being medically unfit, while others were sent to join the British West Indies Regiment or even encouraged to join the Canadian Army. Some however were recruited but there are no official records as to how many. Most are hidden stories but we do know of Walter Tull, whose father came to Britain from Barbados in the 19th century. He was Britain's first black outfield player, playing football for both Tottenham Hotspur and Northampton Town. He was also one of the first black army officers and recommended for the Military Cross but sadly killed in 1918.

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