

LESSON FOUR: INTO BATTLE

Context

This scene shows the final terrifying moments before soldiers were sent over the trenches. After seven days of heavy bombardment of the German trenches there was hope that much had been destroyed and that capturing these and pushing the German front line further back would be possible. The feeling of terror was also mixed with a sense of excitement and fervour, as this was what the training and preparation had led up to.

Look at the additional historical information sections **Trench Warfare** and **Battle of the Somme**.

Play DVD: *Section Four – Battle*

The following drama exercises are intended to stimulate discussion and debate about the battle.



Exercise One: Eyes Front

Bring the group to a standing circle. Once done, make eye contact with someone across the circle, walking up to him or her, and saying their name as you do so. This will generate much amusement but generally not from the person you are making eye contact with.

Once you reach the person you have chosen, stop, and explain to the group that the person 'receiving' the eye contact is the next person to make eye contact with someone else across the circle. This is great exercise to improve concentration and communication skills.

Exercise Two: The Box

Remain in a standing circle then, using tape, mark out a box shape roughly one metre square. Place the 'box' in the centre of the circle. Ask a few of the more confident students to approach the 'box' and keeping in mind the scenes they have just watched, get them to imagine there is something shocking and disturbing in there. You may like to give them a few examples such as a bloody piece of kit or an unexploded bomb. The rest of the group should try and guess what they are seeing.

This exercise is a great way to encourage discussion on the feelings of fear and trepidation, feelings common when going into battle. Next put the group into pairs. The box will now become a prison cell. Pairs must decide whether they are a prison guard or a prisoner of war. Each pair must then improvise a scene in which the prisoner must try to escape from the box/cell outwitting the guard on the outside. The constraints of the box shape will enable the students to feel what it might be like to be captured and helpless.

Exercise Three: Cover Me

This exercise is about teamwork and is useful when thinking about camaraderie and how dependent soldiers were on one another. Ask the whole group to find a chair and place it anywhere in the room and sit on it. A volunteer should then be taken to one end of the room leaving their chair empty. The rest of the group must ensure the volunteer never gets to the empty chair by leaving their own chair to 'cover it' effectively creating another empty chair. The success of the exercise depends on teamwork to ensure there are not too many empty chairs and that the volunteer does not get anywhere near an empty chair. If the first volunteer is successful simply pick another one.



Exercise Four: Forum Theatre

Forum Theatre uses arts-based techniques like role-play to tackle issues highlighted in a scene. It encourages students to comment and think about issues and to work out effective solutions. You should begin by pairing the group up and ask each pair to allocate themselves either A or B. Once done ask the As to play the part of a German soldier whilst Bs should play the part of a captured British soldier.

Having given sufficient time call the group back and ask each pair to perform their scene. Once done ask the stronger pairs to perform again but this time ask them to remain in character once their scene is completed so that other members of the group can ask them questions. Try and encourage the questions to be as inventive as possible as this exercise is about getting the group to empathise with both points of view.

THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME

The Battle of the Somme was the first major offensive where the British Army took the leading role with the intention of breaking through the deadlock on the Western Front and winning a decisive victory against the Germans. The battle started on 1 July 1916 but continued until 18 November. The army had increased to nearly 1 million and those who took part were largely volunteers from all professions and classes with a significant number of teenagers, 'boy soldiers', who were under the minimum age of 19.

The battle was preceded by a week-long artillery bombardment with over 1.5 million shells fired into the German lines. Zero Hour was set for 7.30am on 1 July 1916. Unfortunately the bombardment had not destroyed the heavily fortified German trenches and there were 57,470 British casualties, of whom nearly 20,000 died, the heaviest losses ever suffered by the British Army in a single day. There were only limited gains and General Sir Douglas Haig, in overall command, realised that there would be no quick and decisive breakthrough and that the battle would be time consuming and costly.

Contribution from India, Africa and the West Indies

India

At the beginning of the war the Indian Army was the only army in the Empire with a well-trained core of regulars who could be deployed straight away. They were to play an extremely important role on the Western Front especially before Kitchener's army had been trained and was ready to fight. 1,440,500 Indian men took part in the fighting, on the Western Front, Middle East and Africa, and all were volunteers. It was also a self-financing army, providing their own food, supplies and equipment. By 1916 many were moved to the Middle East to fight in Mesopotamia nearer to home with a more sympathetic climate. Two divisions of the Indian Cavalry Corps stayed on in the Western Front and took part in the Battle of the Somme. The nature of trench warfare made it difficult to use cavalry and when they did try to break through they suffered high casualties. These men were therefore mostly used to help build roads and trenches and help the infantry.

At the end of the war some 113,743 Indians were reported dead, wounded or missing. Indian personnel won 12,445 British and 463 Allied medals for bravery, including 12 Victoria Crosses, the highest award for bravery.

West Indies

When war broke out the West Indies offered to send contingents of men to England. The British government felt that they would best be employed defending the Islands from the threat of the German Navy. The West Indian Regiment dates back to the American War of Independence. By 1915 a Royal Warrant established a new force, the British West Indies Regiment and 15,000 men volunteered from across the islands. These men served in France, Palestine, Egypt and Italy. Two battalions were sent to France in 1916 and by 1917 there were seven. During the Battle of the Somme these men were used in a supporting capacity carrying ammunition to the front line but did not bear arms, as they were to do in the other theatres of war. The Bermudan Militia Artillery and the Bermuda Volunteer Rifle Corps did however fight on the Somme and were trained as Lewis gunners. Overall the West Indies suffered 1,325 casualties, 185 killed in action, 1,071 died of sickness with 81 receiving medals for bravery.

Britain also had her Empire, now the Commonwealth, to draw upon and they made a considerable contribution both with raw materials and manpower. Men from Newfoundland, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Canada took part. What is perhaps less known is the role of the Bermuda Volunteer Rifles Corps, the Indian Cavalry and the British West Indies Regiment.

Very little land was captured for the cost of over a million casualties, 419,654 from Britain and the Empire, 125,000 of them dead. French casualties were 204,253 and German between 437,000 and 680,000. The Germans were weakened and valuable lessons had been learnt regarding tactics, which would be applied with greater effect later in the war. However the Allies failed to achieve all their objectives and the war was to continue for another two years, in fact this was only the halfway point.

Africa

By 1914 the continent of Africa was divided into colonies and protectorates owned by the European powers and fighting took place in Togoland, the Cameroons, German South West Africa and German East Africa. There were approximately 30,000 East Africans fighting for Britain in the King's African Rifles and 25,000 West Africans in the West African Frontier Force. At least 300,000 Africans were used as carriers. The African contribution on the Western Front was fairly small as they were mainly involved in the war in their own continent. On the Western Front, behind the lines, the South African Native Labour Contingent played an important role bringing in supplies, quarrying and felling timber and West Africans also served as carriers, which was vital in ensuring that the army was properly supplied in the front line. Overall, in Africa, 3,000 African soldiers were killed and substantially more carriers, but figures are inaccurate.

