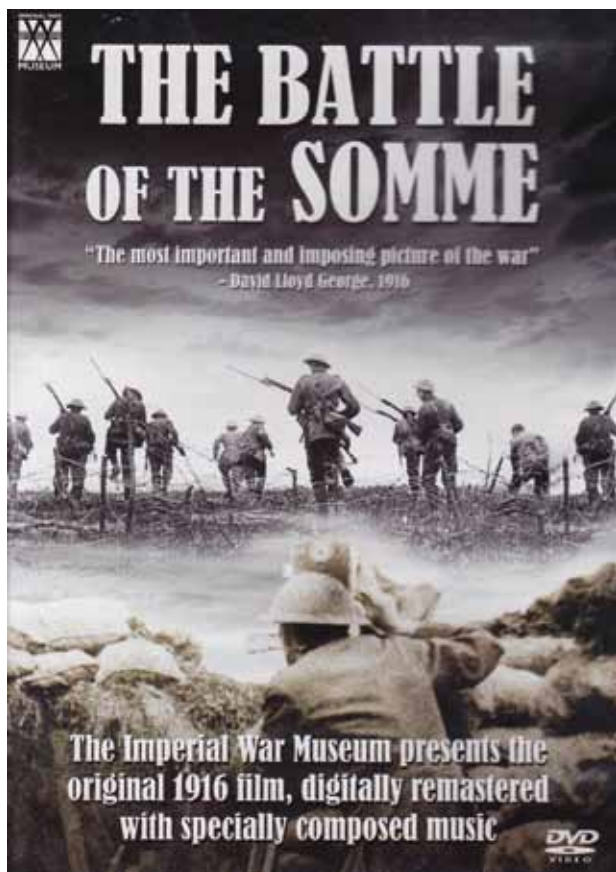


IDEAS FOR ASSEMBLIES...



Battle of the Somme

Commemorating the Battle of the Somme through an assembly is not an easy task and one which needs careful thought and preparation. This battle officially started on 1 July 1916, after a week-long artillery bombardment, though both British and French commanders had prepared for the offensive for several months. To highlight the location it is worth looking at a map of the area – the Somme is the name of the river. The area this battle focused on is only 22km yet thousands of men were mobilised for action.

Unlike those of our Allies, the British Army was quite small, but by 1916 Britain was prepared to undertake a major offensive. Many men who had volunteered from August 1914 were now trained to fight. Some of these men had been encouraged to volunteer together, to serve with their friends and colleagues in 'Pals' battalions – men from the same street or factory in urban areas, or the same village in more rural areas. The huge casualty toll therefore had devastating consequences for these areas.

Some tasks for children

- Use a visual of local volunteers training – talk to your local history librarian, Museum Education Officer, archive office or search online at the Imperial War Museum as there are many photographs available.
- Locate where the men lived who are commemorated on your local memorial – are there any photographs of them in the local newspapers? Do the houses they lived in still exist? Could their location be charted on a street map?
- Discuss what the training involved – handling weapons i.e. learning to kill, digging trenches, following orders and improving fitness.
- Consider the logistics of getting these men and their kit out to the Somme – the heavy reliance on our railway network. Look at a simple map of northern France showing the 'Front' where the fighting was taking place. How did the soldiers travel there?

Plans for the Battle of the Somme were prepared – the British Generals were certain this would be a decisive victory over the enemy in this small area of France. However, from February 1916 the Germans attacked the French at Verdun, putting the French Army under enormous strain. The French command appealed to their Allies, the British, to bring forward the proposed attack on the Somme in order to take the pressure off their army. In June tunnels were dug and explosives planted. From 24 June, big guns (artillery) started a week-long bombardment in an attempt to destroy the enemy trenches and barbed wire.

Some tasks for children

- What effect would this have on the British soldiers with constant noise day and night? What do you think the German soldiers would do – wait to die or hide away? Differences between British and German trenches can be useful discussions.

At 7.30am on 1 July the artillery stopped firing – how could anyone survive the week-long barrage? Explosives were detonated causing massive craters, the vibrations from which were felt across the Channel in southern England. As the soldiers went ‘over the top’ of their trenches on that fateful morning it became evident that their enemy had not been wiped out. Within minutes, many British soldiers were killed or injured. On 1 July there were over 57,000 casualties, and almost 20,000 killed, including many officers. These casualty figures are why we remember this battle perhaps more than many others. But the Battle of the Somme continued for a further 141 days, becoming one of attrition, until the final engagement on 18 November. Throughout the whole period the British gained a mere seven miles, with the loss of thousands of soldiers.

Some tasks for children

- Use a clip from the Imperial War Museum’s film *Battle of the Somme* which was made in 1916 – there were worries the film would have a negative effect on moral as it shows many wounded soldiers but it strengthened the resolve of the British people that this battle must not be in vain.
- Perhaps you could explore what happened to casualties, find out about the local convalescent homes and medical support. Is this the same for soldiers in modern conflicts?
- Additionally, you could show a photograph of the Thiepval memorial to the missing or your local war memorial. Check out the Commonwealth War Graves website to see if any of the names on the memorial are Somme casualties.
- You could end the assembly with a look at commemoration. What impact do you think the death of a soldier had on his family, his friends, his work colleagues, his community? Check out the Royal British Legion website for further ideas.

Useful resources

Imperial War Museum film and other online resources

www.iwmshop.org.uk/product/19580/Battle_of_the_Somme_1916_DVD?_ga=1.32491966.1487468275.1462191275

www.iwm.org.uk/corporate/projects-partnerships/first-world-war-centenary-partnership

British Legion resources

www.britishlegion.org.uk/remembrance/ww1-centenary/somme-100-toolkit?gclid=CITc3s6vu8wCFbEy0wodvhwHaA

Commonwealth War Graves www.cwgc.org

BBC WWI Resources for Primary Schools

www.bbc.co.uk/schools/0/ww1/25827997

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