

Historica Canada Education Portal

Over the Top: Battle of the Somme

Overview

During World War I, trench warfare was used and often caused the momentum of the war to reach a standstill. Both sides suffered heavy casualties. At the Battle of the Somme, the allies sought to shatter the German trenches with a massive attack and win the war. The first day of this battle holds the record for the most losses in a single day.

Aims

To have students develop a better appreciation of the physical efforts made by soldiers when going "over the top." To get students out of the classroom, doing a physical activity, and having some fun.

Background

This lesson could be done after discussing trenches, no-man's land, going over the top, military strategies during the war, and what soldiers carried in their backpacks (which was usually two sandbags, a rifle, a helmet, two grenades, a shovel and 120 rounds of ammunition, weighing approximately 60 pounds).

Activities

Time Allowance: 1-2 classes

Procedures:

1. Set up an obstacle course of sorts on your school grounds, preferably with a hill involved. You could use pylons with wire/string attached to the tops (simulating barbed wire) that the students have to crawl under, for example.
2. Have either individuals or teams set up to compete against each other.
3. Have 2-4 backpacks with a softener salt bag or bags of flour in each, whatever is available for you to simulate the 60 pound weight. Hint: tape up the corners of these bags as they can rip open with all of this activity! You could use a reinforced backpack or a hockey bag, etc.
4. Have the students start off lying on their stomachs then on signal get up and race through the course to the top of the hill. The team that makes it to the finish line the quickest and the least unscathed wins.
5. When done this outdoor activity, have the students do a journal entry on their efforts to carry the pack. Also have them analyze the effect such a heavy pack could have had on the outcome of a battle. Ask them to consider the many causes to the consequential slaughter at the Somme offensive. They could use a t-chart, flow chart or concept web in this task, whatever they prefer.

Evaluation:

Assess students on their efforts with the outside activity. Assess students on their ability to come up with causes and consequences. Assess the reflections in the journal entries.

Required Materials:

2-4 backpacks, softener salt bags, pylons, wire, flour

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Resources

[Battle of the Somme - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[First World War - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[First World War Timeline - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[First World War Collection - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Canadian Expeditionary Force - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)