World War One webquest: a teacher’s guide

The idea is simple.

- Take a camera to the nearest war memorial.
- Find the memorial for the Great War or World War One.
- Photograph the list of names on it and return to school.
- Print the photograph.

- Log on to the internet and navigate to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission’s databases (www.cwgc.org/find/find-war-dead).
- Type in a name from your list in the ‘Last name’ box and any initials or first name in the next two boxes.
- Leave the other boxes blank, unless you know any of the other details.
- Tick the ‘First World War’ box.
- Click ‘Search’.

The process will show you the difficulty of identifying men with common names. You can filter further with the options on the advanced search. Sometimes the memorial mentions the man’s regiment, and this will help you immensely. Sometimes you’ll just have to accept that you can’t be certain you’ve got the right person. Occasionally, you won’t find the name in the database at all.
Task sheet

For each name you choose …

- Find out where they are buried and locate it on a map using Google Maps.
- Find out in what battle they were killed.
- Find out where they used to live if you can (the database sometimes mentions the man’s parents or his wife, and gives their address).
- Mark the addresses on a local map.
- Check the dates - did large numbers die in the same battle, or the same day?
- Check the ages of the men (not always mentioned) where you can and make a list.
- What’s the average age for the list you’re researching? You could make a spreadsheet and a graph.

More to think about …

- Did they all die in France and Belgium or did some die in Germany or Turkey? Were any taken prisoner? Were any of them airmen or sailors?
- How many of the men actually have a grave? Were any simply recorded by a name on a general war memorial, indicating that their bodies were never found? Were they lost in battle? The Thiepval memorial in France has 72,000 names of British soldiers who disappeared during the battle of the Somme!
- Are there any women on your list?

The CWGC site is vast but usefully limited. It will certainly give results. If you have 20 names, you’ll be able to track down at least ten. Once you’ve established the basic facts, you can expand the research using tools such as Google Maps. The Imperial War Museum holds plenty of information on individual battles.

You can imagine the men, where they lived and the impact of their deaths on the streets where they lived. It might be useful to look at old pictures of the streets in question and pictures of men at the Front during World War One.

Google Maps / Google Earth can even let you see the satellite image of the graveyard – though if it’s out in the countryside it won’t be as high-definition as the cities and major towns.

Extension task

Do you have relatives that died in World War One or Two? If so, can you use the same database to track down where they are buried?