# The Unknown Soldier: Supporting activities



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## Learning objectives

Young people will:

* Have increased understanding of the humanitarian impact of armed conflict
* Explore feelings and emotions of people involved in, and affected by, armed conflict
* Have greater respect for human life and dignity
* Respect the values and the principles underpinning International Humanitarian Law

Age range: 15–19-year-olds

## Introduction

­The following is a series of short activities designed for use with the film [*The Unknown Solider*](https://vimeo.com/144877010) and the accompanying suite of subject specific resources.

Each activity could be used in isolation within form or tutor time.

Alternatively they could be used as a starter for one of the longer subject-focussed resources, or to extend the learning as part of a unit of work.

NOTES

The film portrays life in the trenches and it is strongly advised that teachers review the film before showing it to young people. See introduction for a fuller explanation.

## Activity one: Watch and respond

1. ­Having first watched the film yourself, share that the film is a portrayal of what life might have been like for soldiers in the trenches in WWI. Parts of it might be quite shocking or emotional.
2. Explain that in order to engage with the film properly learners should watch in silence as the sound is an important part of the experience, especially as it starts in total darkness. Note: the film is less than three minutes long.
3. Show the film once and ask young people to turn to someone next to them and discuss:

- What did they notice in the film? What stood out to them?

- How did the film make them feel?

- What questions or thoughts do they have from watching the film?

1. After around five minutes ask for volunteers to share their initial reactions to the film based on their discussions. You may wish to record key points on a whiteboard or flipchart.
2. Explain that the film was made to explore the impact of armed conflict on people. This can also be called the humanitarian impact of conflict. Discuss the term ‘humanitarian’ with the group – what do they think it means?
3. Lead a group discussion inviting contributions to the following prompts:

* What do you think is meant by the term humanitarian impact? *[This might include reference to the impact an event or experience has on people that might be physical, mental, or emotional.]*
* Which aspects of the film do you think emphasise the humanitarian impacts of conflict? Can you identify these as physical (e.g. injury, discomfort), mental (e.g. influencing how you see/perceive things/situations) or emotional (e.g. the feeling of being threatened). *[Examples of this might include: the vomiting; the death; the threatening leader; the first-person perspective of the camera; the confusion represented by the moving camera.]*

1. Finish the activity by asking the group to reflect on when the film was set.

Discuss that it is 100 years since the events of WWI depicted in the film.

Explain that the war resulted in approximately 8.5 million deaths, 21 million injuries and 7.7 million prisoners of war or missing persons.

* What impact do they think this may have had on society?
* How do they think armed conflict might have changed since WWI?
* What does this mean for the humanitarian impact of armed conflict today?

## Activity two: Characters

1. ­Having first watched the film yourself, share that it is a portrayal of what life might have been like for soldiers in WWI. Parts of it might be quite shocking or emotional.
2. Explain that in order to engage with the film properly learners should watch in silence as the sound is an important part of the experience, especially as it starts in total darkness. Note: the film is less than three minutes long.
3. Show the film once and give a few moments for young people to react, perhaps sharing initial thoughts/feelings with a partner.
4. Explain that you are going to show the film again and that you want them to this time focus on the **different characters** in the film. Point out, if they have not already recognised it, that the first person filming (i.e. from the point of view of a soldier) used in the film means that the camera viewpoint is also a character.
5. Having watched the film again and focused on the characters ask learners to take each character and consider:

- What do we know – or what can we infer – about this person from the film?

- **Try and build up a picture of what each character is like**:

* What might they be feeling?
* What might be motivating them to act in a certain way?
* How might their behaviour be linked to their feelings and motivations?

1. Introduce young people to the term ‘humanitarian’. This can be defined as ‘*being humane’* or *‘being kind and caring towards others’.*

Explain that humanitarianism can be shown through **empathy** (sharing the feelings of others) and/or through **actions** (directly helping others whether this be through practical or emotional support).

- Think about what it means to be humanitarian;

- Do some of the characters in the film act with more humanity than others?

- What in the film helps make these distinctions?

## Activity three: Writing home

1. ­Having first watched the film yourself, share that it is a portrayal of what life might have been like for soldiers in WWI. Parts of it might be quite shocking or emotional.
2. Explain that in order to engage with the film properly learners should watch in silence as the sound is an important part of the experience, especially as it starts in total darkness. Note: the film is less than three minutes long.
3. Show the film once and give a few moments for young people to react, perhaps sharing initial thoughts/feelings with a partner.
4. Explain that you are going to show the film again and that this time you want them to **focus in on a character of their choice**. Ask them to observe their chosen character and the part they play in the film. Their aim is to connect with the character as a person, empathise with their feelings and emotions, and try to put themselves in their position.
5. In WWI some soldiers wrote home to their family or loved ones as a way of coping with war and connecting to home while being away. **Ask learners to take on their character and imagine they are writing a letter home on the day before the action we see in the film.** They will need to think carefully about their character and should try and put elements of their thoughts about the character they have chosen into their writing. In addition, the following prompts could be used to help develop their letter:

* Many soldiers knew about the huge losses and injuries of trench warfare so would have known that going ‘over the top’ might mean it was to be their last day.
* Details about the war would not be allowed to be shared in letters, in case they were intercepted by enemy forces and gave away important information. You would only be able to talk generally about life in the trenches.
* Life in the trenches was physically tough and emotionally challenging with only the soldiers of your regiment for company. What would you say to family or loved ones about your friendships or otherwise with the soldiers?
* How might you prepare your family or loved ones for the worst while at the same time giving them hope, optimism and strength to continue the war effort at home?

1. Explore writing letters to family and loved ones to inform them of a loss or injury to a soldier. This was a task undertaken by [volunteers in the British Red Cross](http://www.redcross.org.uk/What-we-do/Teaching-resources/Lesson-plans/First-World-War-volunteers) during the war.

**Compose a letter home to the family of the soldier in the film** who climbed to the top of the ladder and was immediately killed, falling back into the trench. What would you write? How would you ensure that you respected the dignity of the soldier and of his family or loved ones?

1. The trenches of WWI may be history, but armed conflict still takes place today and soldiers still have to spend time away from family and loved ones in positions of risk.

Close the activity by asking learners to reflect on how communications have changed in this time. Have these changes reduced the humanitarian impact of armed conflict, or is being separated from loved ones still the same now as it was then?

## Activity four: Counting the cost

1. ­Having first watched the film yourself, share that it is a portrayal of what life might have been like for soldiers in WWI. Parts of it might be quite shocking or emotional.
2. Explain that in order to engage with the film properly learners should watch in silence as the sound is an important part of the experience, especially as it starts in total darkness. Note: the film is less than three minutes long.
3. Show the film once and give a few moments for young people to react, perhaps sharing initial thoughts/feelings with a partner.
4. Explain to learners that WWI was extremely costly in terms of lives lost and injuries. It is thought that the total deaths were around 8.5 million with a further 21 million injured, many of the wounded with life-changing and permanent disabilities.

The film very clearly shows why so many people were killed or injured in WWI. Trench warfare has often been described as futile (pointless) because of the high levels of casualties.

1. Explain to learners that one of the ways people would find out about those killed and wounded in the war would be through listings printed in the newspapers.

Show learners [an example of this from 1915](http://www.redcross.org.uk/~/media/210A28AC293A4A6CA7CD8C014D44FD69.ashx) and ask them to look at how casualties were reported before discussing some of the following questions.

* Why do you think casualties were reported in this way?
* Is this brief mention in a newspaper a dignified way to honour a life?
* How else do we honour the dead from WWI?
* What might it be like to have survived the war; to carry memories of scenes like in the film?
* There is a phrase from this period ‘what doesn’t kill us, makes us stronger’. How accurate do you think this is for the soldiers who survived going ‘over the top’?
* What do you think a survivor would think of the film? Would they think it was a good idea to show this? Why/why not?

NOTE:

This quick activity may be especially appropriate in the build up to Remembrance Day.

## Activity 5: Who and what is affected by war?

1. ­Having first watched the film yourself, share that it is a portrayal of what life might have been like for soldiers in WWI. Parts of it might be quite shocking or emotional.
2. Explain that in order to engage with the film properly learners should watch in silence as the sound is an important part of the experience, especially as it starts in total darkness. Note: the film is less than three minutes long.
3. Show the film once and give a few moments for young people to react, perhaps sharing initial thoughts/feelings with a partner.
4. Ask learners how they think the soldiers in the trenches would have been affected by war? Prompt them to consider the emotional and physical impacts.
5. Leaving WWI behind, ask learners to think about the people and communities that might be affected by armed conflict today. Who and what is affected by war?

Ask learners to make two lists; one detailing ‘who’ is affected, and the other ‘what’ is affected.

Who: As well as thinking about those who are directly involved in the conflict, prompt learners to think of people who are not involved e.g. civilians, aid workers, doctors, etc.

What: Encourage learners to think about where armed conflicts take place now. Their ‘what is affected’ list could include different community assets e.g. buildings such as hospitals, churches, mosques or infrastructure such as dams, roads, power stations, or livelihood e.g. animals, vehicles to travel to work, etc.

Once they have the two lists ask them to consider how they think those affected might feel and how the damage to buildings, infrastructure and livestock might impact on people’s way of life.

1. Discuss what limits and protections could be put in place in times of conflict to protect:

• soldiers no longer involved in the fighting,

• civilians and other community members, and

• the community assets they rely on.

You could ask young people to consider this in terms of the principles they would put in place e.g. civilians should not be targeted as part of conflict, those soldiers who are injured and no longer involved in the fighting should be protected and treated for their injuries, civilian property should be protected, etc.

1. Explain that there are rules of war, also called International Humanitarian Law (IHL), which are in place to protect people and limit the effects and impact of armed conflict.

IHL or the rules of war are further explored in the Citizenship and History activities.