

TEACHERS NOTES

LOST IN
FLANDERS

Synopsis

Ninety years after the last shots were fired, two young Australian historians embark on an emotional journey to the battlefields of the First World War on the infamous Western Front.

History teacher Michael Molkentin joins battlefield historian Mat McLachlan in an exploration of the Australian soldiers' wartime experience in Belgium. The two young men visit iconic sites, and join an archaeological excavation of the trenches and fields where 20,000 Australians went missing, their bodies lost, their graves unmarked.

While Michael and Mat fail to uncover any soldiers' remains, a twist of fate sees local workers uncover the bodies of five Australian soldiers, while laying a gas pipe nearby. The discovery sparks a unique investigation, bringing science and military history together, involving Michael and Mat in a gripping forensic detective story that leads them back to rural Australia.

Through DNA testing, used for the first time on First World War remains, two of the soldiers are ultimately identified and finally laid to rest in graves marked with their names. As Michael and Mat trace the stories of the missing soldiers, and meet their descendants, they learn more about the cost of Australia's involvement in the war. Speaking with the soldiers' families, visiting the towns where they grew up, walking the ground where they died and finally standing by their gravesides as the men are laid to rest, Michael and Mat rediscover a vital episode in Australian history which illuminates the real sacrifice of the thousands of Australians who lost their lives in Flanders.

Curriculum links

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include English and Literature, Media Studies, History and SOSE/HSIE, Drama Studies, Civics, Science, Art and Photography.

Background and overview

For most of World War One (1914-1918), military battles between the Allied forces and Germans were fought over the same patch of ground known as the Western Front. In effect this was a winding and constantly moving line of opposing trenches facing each other, generally separated by a tiny strip of 'no man's land', extending from the frontier of Switzerland and France, across the north-eastern region of France and

into Flanders (or Dutch-language western Belgium) and onward to the North Sea coast. In 1914 the Germans quickly invaded France via Belgium, but were forced to retreat back into Flanders, where they dug in for three years, until the war ended with a truce, or 'Armistice', on 11 November 1918. (See 'Western Front', website references.) Three huge battles were fought near or around the ancient medieval Belgian town of Ypres (referred to today in the Flanders region as Ieper) in 1914, 1915 and 1917. The historical events referred to in *Lost in Flanders* are mainly from 1917, involving the role played by Australian troops in that section of the Western Front.

- On poster paper draw a map of France and Belgium, also indicating where England, Luxembourg, Switzerland and Germany are, in relation to these two countries. On the map mark the position of Paris (France's capital city) and Brussels (Belgium's capital city), and identify the North Sea and perhaps the English Channel. Mark the Flanders region of Belgium, and indicate the town of Ypres, in western Flanders, plus some of the other locations where battles were fought, such as Passchendaele. Although the positioning of the Western Front altered throughout the war as the armies retreated and advanced at various times and locations, draw a line that roughly indicates its position around 1917, before German troops began their final retreat. Ensure you give the map an adequate title heading.
- Carry out research about the history of Ypres. Plan and write a double-page travel magazine item about the town, looking at its geographical, industrial, economic, artistic and cultural importance and relevance from medieval times to the early 20th century. Why was it a strategic military objective to both the Allied and German forces during World War One? What happened to the town and to its inhabitants during the war? What happened to the town after the war? Explain whether it is a flourishing town today, and whether it has become a popular tourist attraction. Include maps, illustrations and photographs as required.
- Research then discuss in class and make notes on what exactly trench warfare means, how it is carried out, and what its objectives are meant to be. Why was trench warfare used along the Western Front, and particularly in the battlefields around Ypres for three years, when in fact the war began through the advances of swiftly moving armies? How are

soldiers, for example, fed, during times of trench warfare, and what kinds of food are available to them, in contrast to what happens during other kinds of warfare? Why does archaeologist Martin Brown refer to trench warfare on the Western Front as 'industrial warfare'? What kinds of technological advances may have taken place by the early years of the 20th century that could ensure that trench warfare might continue for years? What ultimately successful methods did the Allied forces use to dislodge the German battalions from their trenches?

- Examining the map you have already drawn in a previous activity, and carrying out further research, discuss in class why control of the North Sea coastline and the sea ports of western Belgium were vitally important to both the British and German armies, and how the desire to gain this control contributed, in part, to trench warfare.
- Winston Churchill, who was a British military officer and a government minister during World War One (before becoming prime minister during World War Two), suggested after the war that Ypres should not be rebuilt, but that its destruction should remain a lasting monument: 'I should like us to acquire the whole of the ruins of Ypres. A more sacred place for the British race does not exist in the world'. (See 'Ypres' in website references.) Discuss in class then write your own reaction to Churchill's thoughts. Do you think his views are justifiable? How do you think the citizens of Belgium, and of Ypres in particular might have reacted to these comments? Explain whether the people of Ypres have ensured that the town and its surrounds did become a 'sacred place'.
- Plan and write a short fiction story about a former resident (or perhaps the members of a family) of Ypres returning to the town in 1920, two years after the end of the war. What will the resident be confronted with? What will he or she think and feel? Will the resident want to live there again, and to help to rebuild the place, and to start again? Consider the story's narrative point of view and emotional impact. Should it be in the subjective first person or the objective third person? Could it be written in diary or letter format?

Poem: In Flanders Fields

The program begins with a voice-over reading of the first two verses of *In Flanders Fields*. (See website references. More on the poem may be found in the

Media Studies section. Note also that an activity on a poem by Siegfried Sassoon may be found in the next section, 'History of the Menin Gate'.)

- Read the full poem then discuss in class and write notes on what you think it means. Who is supposed to be narrating the poem, and why? What is the emotional tone of voice throughout the verses? Explain the significance of the poppies imagery, and how it has since become one of the enduring symbols of commemorating the war dead.
- Carry out some research about the poem. Who wrote it, when, where and why? What became of the poet who wrote it?
- Following from the previous activities, inscribe *In Flanders Fields* onto poster paper. Include explanatory notes, background information and illustrations as required. Ensure you plan the layout and colouring of text and image.
- Either plan and compose a short poem of your own in response to *In Flanders Fields*, from a modern perspective, looking back after nearly a century, or plan and draft a short fiction story derived in any way you see fit from your reading of the poem.

History of the Menin Gate

Very early in the program we see camera shots of the Menin Gate. Why?

- What and where is the Menin Gate? Did it exist before the Great War of 1914-1918? Write a short commentary on its significance to Australians today. You may wish to add an illustration or a photo of the Menin Gate to your commentary.
- Early in the program there is a scene filmed at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra, showing a painting called *The Menin Gate at Midnight* (see website references for more information about the artwork). Carry out appropriate research then construct an illustrated poster display aimed at a young teenage audience about the history of this painting, the artist who painted it, how it came to be created, and its immediate popularity when displayed to the Australian public.
- Following from the previous activity, in pairs or small groups plan and draft a short play designed for radio (narration voice-over, dialogue, incidental sound effects and songs, background mood music) based in any way suitable on *The Menin Gate at Midnight* painting. For example, your story may derive directly from the painting's imagery, or from

the inspiration that led to its creation, or from its resultant popular touring exhibition through Australia. Rehearse one or more readings of the script and make revisions as required. Produce, record and edit a performance for playback or podcast from your school's intranet.

- Siegfried Sassoon was a British soldier and poet who served on the Western Front during the 1914-1918 war. Read his 1927 poem, *On Passing the New Menin Gate*. (See 'Siegfried Sassoon poem' in website references.) In class discuss the viewpoint, the emotion and the poem's tone of voice, in comparison to *In Flanders Fields*. (See activities on *In Flanders Fields* in the previous section). Why, for example, does Sassoon refer to the Menin Gate as a 'sepulchre of crime'?

The war photography of Frank Hurley

During the program there are many references to photographer, Frank Hurley.

- Who was Frank Hurley? Carry out appropriate research then discuss in class and write a short, selective biography of Hurley, looking at his professional life as a stills photographer and film cameraman. What was his role and his official position during World War One? Explain why his photography is distinctive in its use of black and white, in the way it positions human beings in the landscape, and why it is considered to be 'iconographic'. (Note that Hurley's photography and motion camera work also feature in a Film Australia documentary called *Mawson – Life and Death in Antarctica*, for which there are teachers' notes.)
- We are told during the program that when Hurley looked at the Flanders battlefield from his vantage in an observation balloon, he described it as an 'artificial hell'. Discuss in class what you think he meant by this. Examine the aerial photos taken by Hurley that are used during this scene, and write a short description of them, showing in what ways their emotional impact may be different from the reaction viewers may have from looking at photographs of the war taken at 'normal' ground level. Would you consider these photographs to be 'documentary' or 'art'?
- Later in the program Michael Molkentin and Mat McLachlan discuss in detail one of Hurley's photographs of a group of Australian troops in a railway cutting. Examine the details in this photo and write your impressions of what it conveys.

In pairs or small groups, plan and draft a drama scene based on any aspect of this photo you think appropriate. Rehearse a play reading, edit the script until it is satisfactory, then either present a reading or an enacted performance to the class.

The main 'players'

Carry out the following activities on the main participants featured in *Lost in Flanders*.

- Discuss in class then write your own description of the importance to the program, the roles carried out within it and, if relevant, the biographical and *curriculum vitae* backgrounds, of:
 - Michael Molkentin
 - Mat McLachlan
 - Johan Vanderwalle
 - Molly Millis
 - Faye Harris
- Write a short commentary on what Michael experienced at the Australian War Memorial that motivated him into wanting to visit Flanders.
- During the program, at the end of an unsuccessful archaeological dig for the remains of Australian soldiers, Michael says, 'I must admit deep down I was relieved that we didn't find human remains'. Discuss in class Michael's reactions. Why do you think he was relieved rather than disappointed? Describe and explain how you may have reacted if you had come across the bones of an Australian soldier 'in Flanders fields'. How would you have reacted had you found an Australian soldier's Rising Sun badge? Would you keep it as a memento or give it to the soldier's living relations or hand it over to the Australian Army to be reburied with the soldier in a newly marked grave? (See 'Rising Sun badge', website references.)
- Why do you think Johan, who is Belgian and lives in Ypres, was moved to tears when helping to excavate the graves of five Australian soldiers, now collectively known as the 'Westhoek Five', who had died 90 years previously? Imagine you were in his situation. Compose, draft, revise and edit a short poem responding to these experiences, thoughts and emotions. You may first want to discuss in class the possibilities for the poem, in terms of theme, imagery, choice of verse structure, rhyme and metre.
- Mat runs a business escorting Australian tourists to the Western Front battlegrounds and war cemeteries. Discuss whether you think this is an

ethical activity. (Mat is also listed in the credits of *Lost in Flanders* as its Associate Producer.)

- Imagine you were someone such as Molly Millis or Faye Harris. You have been approached by the Australian Army to undergo a DNA test to establish whether your family is related to a soldier who has been missing, killed in action, since 1917. Either write a personal letter (or email) to a friend expressing your thoughts and feelings about these events, or write a sequence of personal diary entries about them. (You may be able to extract ideas for this activity from 'Media reports', in website references.)

Detective investigations

Modern scientific advancements and research in DNA testing are of paramount importance in identifying the remains of long lost human bodies. However, this is only one link in the chain of detective work that has to be done before a successful 'match' is found between a body and a name, in this case a soldier's name. Luck, chance, and many other forces also need to come into play.

- Carry out appropriate research if necessary, then write a short commentary defining the meaning of DNA. Add illustrations to your commentary if required. What are mitochondria, and in what ways are they used to identify human remains? Why is the distaff, or female side of a family's genetic makeup, important in establishing an inherited family link between individuals, whether male or female? (See 'DNA identification' and 'Mitochondria' in website references.)
- From the program, discuss in class the problems of accurate DNA identification that may arise in certain circumstances. Also look at the broader aspects of DNA testing. What are some of the other purposes of DNA testing, and the ethical considerations that need to be taken into account in its use?
- From the program and from any further research you have done, describe in writing the various interrelated ways by which the remains of World War One Australian soldiers Jack Hunter and George Calder were tracked down and identified. (This also applies to the identification of George Storey's remains, referred to at the end of the program.) How did luck and chance play a role? Look at the relevance of DNA testing, existing military records, the importance of cemeteries and war memorials, archaeological diggings, family history and heritage, and family artefacts held in trust and handed down through generations.

- Create a poster (or a website page) visually linking the deaths of Jack and George in 1917 to the process of their identification and reburial 90 years later. Add explanatory text where applicable.
- We are told during the program that one way in which archaeologists were able to identify that a particular soldier belonged to the Fourth Australian Division was through the preservation of a distinctive button on his uniform. Drawing in any way you wish from these details, plan and write a short story called *The Button*. You may, for example, wish to write the story as a monologue from the button's viewpoint.
- Before Jack Hunter and George Calder enlisted for service in the Great War, who were they, what did they do for a living, where did they live, and why do we now know a great deal about their lives? Discuss whether you think they were 'average, typical Aussies' of the early decades of the 20th century. In connection with these questions, what is a 'hero'? Were these men 'heroes'?
- Discuss in class whether the Australian Government should fund the search for and the identification of the remains of soldiers from so long ago, in comparison, for example, to the need to fund schools, hospitals, roads and scientific and technological research for the benefits of contemporary citizens and taxpayers.

'Ripples' in the water – Remembrance

Throughout the program strong connections are drawn between the distant past, the present and even the future.

- Near the end of the program Michael evokes the metaphor of a 'stone dropping in water...ripples just flowing out...to today and...well beyond'. Discuss in class the meaning and significance of this metaphor.
- Plan and write a short fiction story titled *Ripples in the Water*, drawing on Michael's words, and on any other aspects and images from the program that may be significant to the narrative, its themes, settings and characters.
- Discuss in class whether the content of programs such as *Lost in Flanders* is of relevance to people newly settling in Australia from non-English cultures. Over decades does immigration and multiculturalism affect the Australian heritage and the way Australians perceive their own history?

- The final sequence of *Lost in Flanders* is of an Australian Army reburial ceremony at Buttes New British Cemetery, Flanders. As a visiting tourist, write an email to a friend back home expressing your thoughts either after attending a reburial ceremony, or visiting and walking through a cemetery such as Buttes. (See 'Buttes Cemetery' and 'Office of Australian War Graves' in website references.)
- Write a short commentary on what Remembrance Day, observed on 11 November each year, means to you. Do you think its meaning may have changed over the decades, since the end of World Wars One and Two? How is Remembrance Day observed in Australia, or even locally in the suburb, town or rural community where you may live? Does your school observe this day? If so, how and why? If not, should it? Offer reasons for your opinions.
- From the program, discuss in class the special significance of the words inscribed on some reburied soldiers' headstones, 'An Australian Soldier Known Unto God'. Plan and create a remembrance poster inspired by this phrase.
- Write a commentary on the importance of archival film and photographs, and the use of explanatory maps, to an understanding and appreciation of the events depicted during the program.
- Select one sequence from *Lost in Flanders* and comment in writing on the purpose and impact of its accompanying mood or 'atmospheric' instrumental or orchestral music.
- At the end of *Lost in Flanders* is a song titled *Long Way From Home*, by Wendy Matthews. Discuss in class and write a description of what the song is about, and its significance to the themes and images presented during the film.
- Plan and write your own review of *Lost in Flanders* in 350-450 words, for a newspaper TV liftout magazine section that is to be published during the week leading up to the annual Remembrance Day observances.

References and Further Resources

Books

- Les Carlyon, *The Great War*, Pan Macmillan Australia, Sydney, 2006
- John Laffin, *Digging Up the Diggers' War: Australian Battlefield Archaeology*, Kangaroo Press, Kenthurst, 1993
- EPF Lynch and Will Davies, *Somme Mud: The War Experiences of an Infantryman in France, 1916-1919*, Random House, Milsons Point, 2006
- Colin Masters, *DNA and Your Body: What You Need to Know About Biotechnology*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2005
- Alasdair McGregor, *Frank Hurley: A Photographer's Life*, Penguin Books Australia, Camberwell, 2004
- Mat McLachlan, *Walking With the Anzacs: A Guide to Australian Battlefields on the Western Front*, Hachette, Sydney, 2007
- Nicholas J. Saunders, *Killing Time: Archaeology and the First World War*, Sutton, Stroud, UK, 2007
- Jon Silkin (ed.), *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, Penguin Books, London, revised edition, 1997
- G. Kingsley Ward and Edwin Gibson, *Courage Remembered: The Story Behind the Construction and Maintenance of the Commonwealth's Military Cemeteries and Memorials of the Wars of 1914-1918 and 1939-1945*, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1989

Media studies

- Discuss in class the purpose and the impact on viewers of the way the program begins with the rendition of the poem, *In Flanders Fields*. How is the poem interpreted visually, through the sequence of camera shots?
- Discuss then write your own commentary on the role and style of the narrative voice-over (spoken by actor, Rachael Blake). In a film about warfare and battlefields, hosted by a male historian, why do you think a female voice was used throughout on the soundtrack?
- In the film's press kit, director Geoff Burton says that he used three different filming styles during *Lost in Flanders*: 'observational and free-flowing'; 'stylistic'; and 'investigative report' utilising 'science-film devices'. What do you think he means by these descriptions? Discuss this in class, then select and write an analytical commentary of three sequences from the film that you think demonstrate those three approaches. For example, what is the purpose of the 'reconstructed' scenes, shot in both colour and black and white and accompanied by inserted sound effects, music and archival footage, showing Michael and Mat walking and running among the trees of Polygon Wood?

Film/TV

Documentary:

Geoff Burton et al (directors), *Australians At War* (episode 3: 'Mateship was the Greatest Thing'), Roadshow, 2001

Malcolm McDonald (director), *Monash – The Forgotten Anzac*, Screen Australia, 2008

Simon Nasht (director), *Frank Hurley: The Man Who Made History*, ABC, 2004

Feature drama:

Lewis Milestone (director), *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Universal, 1930

Websites

Archaeological projects, Belgium:

<http://plugstreet.blogspot.com>

www.no-mans-land.info

Australians At War:

www.australiansatwar.gov.au

Buttes Cemetery:

<http://www.wwlwesternfront.gov.au/zonnebeke/fifth-australian-division-memorial/buttes-new-british-cemetery.php>

Department of Veterans' Affairs

www.dva.gov.au

DNA identification:

<http://www.genetics.edu.au/Publications-and-Resources/schools>

<http://www.nij.gov/journals/256/pages/lessons-learned.aspx>

In Flanders Fields (poem, museum):

www.greatwar.nl/frames/default-poppies.html

www.inflandersfields.be

Hill 60:

<http://www.wwlwesternfront.gov.au/ploegsteert/zwarte-leen/tunnels-at-hill-60.php>

Frank Hurley:

www.awm.gov.au/people/222.asp

www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A090408b.htm

The Menin Gate:

<http://www.wwlwesternfront.gov.au/ieper/menin-gate/names-on-the-menin-gate.php>

The Menin Gate at Midnight (painting):

www.wwlwesternfront.gov.au/menin-gate/menin-gate-at-midnight.html

www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/menin/index.asp

Mitochondria:

www.genexdiagnostics.com/special/mitochondrial.php

<http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/mi/Mitochondrion>

Media reports:

[http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/lost-for-90-years-diggers-identified-by-](http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/lost-for-90-years-diggers-identified-by-dna/2007/09/04/1188783237546.html)

[dna/2007/09/04/1188783237546.html](http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/lost-for-90-years-diggers-identified-by-dna/2007/09/04/1188783237546.html)

[www.thewest.com.au/default.](http://www.thewest.com.au/default.aspx?MenuID=77&ContentID=100286)

[aspx?MenuID=77&ContentID=100286](http://www.thewest.com.au/default.aspx?MenuID=77&ContentID=100286)

Office of Australian War Graves:

<http://www.dva.gov.au/commemorations-memorials-and-war-graves/office-australian-war-graves>

Passchendaele museum:

www.passchendaele.be

Polygon Wood:

<http://www.wwlwesternfront.gov.au/zonnebeke/fifth-australian-division-memorial/battle-of-polygon-wood.php>

<http://www.anzabattlefields.com/polygon.htm>

Rising Sun badge:

<http://www.army.gov.au/Our-history/Traditions/The-Rising-Sun-Badge>

<https://anzacday.org.au/traditions-facts-and-folklore>

Siegfried Sassoon poem:

<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/aftermath/>

Western Front:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_Front_\(World_War_I\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_Front_(World_War_I))

Ypres (Ieper):

www.wwlwesternfront.gov.au/ieper/index.html

www.ieper.be/ieper_en.aspx?SGREF=10587

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ypres>

Lost in Flanders

A Screen Australia National Interest Program in association with Intomedia & McLachlan Media. Developed with the assistance of the New South Wales Film and Television Office and the Australian Film Commission. Developed and produced in association with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Executive Producer: **Penny Robins**

Producer: **Stuart Scowcroft**

Writer/Director: **Geoff Burton**

Year: **2009**

Duration: **52 minutes**

Study guide written by Roger Stitson. © NFSA

Archive photographs courtesy of the Hunter family and Australian War Memorial. Poppies image by Chris Windsor/Getty Images © Getty Images

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