

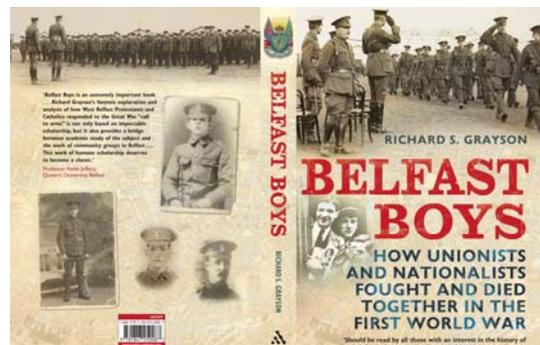
# 'Military History from the Street': Five Steps for Schools

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## Introduction

This briefing sets out five steps which history teachers could use or adapt to help students understand how the military history of the First World War relates to their area. It draws on methods I used for my book *Belfast Boys: How Unionists and Nationalists Fought and Died Together in the First World War* (Continuum, 2009). I describe these as 'military history from the street' because the starting point is the streets of the communities from which men came, rather than which parts of the military they served in.

That book was focused on West Belfast, a city which has its own unique history of the war. The book tackled the stories of the 16<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Division which recruited heavily in the Falls area of Belfast, and the 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division which recruited heavily in the Shankill area. It did that because both divisions are widely known as having links to the city and had strong religious/political connections: Catholic/Nationalist in the case of the 16<sup>th</sup> and Protestant/Unionist in the case of the 36<sup>th</sup>. However, it also sought to tell the whole story of West Belfast, going beyond only those who served in these 'political' divisions. In so doing, it uncovered a hidden history of men in all areas of the military, including the 10<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Division, sailors, airmen, and especially the regular units of the British army in which Protestants and Catholics served side-by-side.



Adapted to school use, such an approach can be applied across the United Kingdom and could help students understand that the story of the war is more complicated than the simple narratives handed down to us. Equally, this approach can also ensure that where students wish to understand the story of a very specific part of the community (such as 'Pals' battalions in parts of England), they can do so in a way that is based on rigorous historical research and is aware of broader contexts.

## Purpose and audience

Teachers will judge for themselves how they wish to use such research. It might well be best to use this approach for a small number of classes which are offered to each year group on an annual basis. However, there is the potential for students' research to be used for the wider benefit and interest of the community.

An example of this is the 'Hemel at War' project ([www.hemelatwar.org](http://www.hemelatwar.org)), which I helped to initiate in my local area. This project has focused on capturing the memories of those who lived through the Second World War, but it has also been used to build up a picture of local service in the First World War. Its website contains a downloadable research guide, and the project has also been covered in *Teaching History* (issue 145, December 2011).

The key point to flag about this project is that it offers both purpose and audience for students' work. It is often the case that when students research an individual, they are carrying out original work which has never been done before. They are actually working as historians. Students can find that very exciting. If their work is recorded on a website, it adds extra validity to what they are doing. Setting up such a project is time-consuming, but offers huge benefits both within history teaching and also as an extra-curricular activity.

## **Five steps for schools**

Whether research is carried out for a website or simply as part of school classes, there are five steps which can be taken. The five steps outlined below are designed to allow research to develop in as much detail as the teacher wishes. The steps also allow different levels of research to be carried out according to students' abilities. Research can stop at the end of Step 1 if that is suitable, but equally, it can go beyond Step 5 (and some suggestions on how to do this are included).

### **Step 1: A local memorial**

If you have a local war memorial, and it contains names, then visit it and ask students to note down those names. Depending on the memorial's size, the number of students, and how much time you have, they could try to copy down all the names, or they could just note down one each. Having noted down the names, moved on to Step 2 a).

*If you don't have a war memorial containing names nearby, then just start with Step 2 b).*

### **Step 2: The Commonwealth War Graves Commission website ([www.cwgc.org](http://www.cwgc.org))**

This website contains the names of all those who were killed in the First World War while serving in the British and Commonwealth forces. It tells you where each person is either buried or commemorated on a memorial. Each record contains basic information such as date of death and the unit in which they served, and there is often more, such as family information. This site can be used for two purposes:

- a) If you have a local memorial, you can use the site to find out more about the people listed on it. You just go to [www.cwgc.org](http://www.cwgc.org) and use the 'Search for Casualty' section. In some cases, if the name is common (for example, Wilson, J, results in 1038 individuals for WWI), you will need to narrow down the search. If you find the individual (and you are very likely to) then you will almost always have some information about the date on which they died, and the specific unit in which they served. In the case of infantry units, that means both battalion and regiment, such as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Irish Rifles. You can use that to find out more by going to Step 3.
- b) Whether or not you have a local memorial, you can use the 'Advanced Search' option to find out about people from your area. There are a number of boxes into which you can put search terms, but the crucial one for a specific place is the last box: 'Key Word Search e.g. home town, football, poet'. If you type in, for example, Lurgan (a town in County Armagh), this will reveal 338 records. If you then click on the red 'EXPORT DATA' button you can download this information to a spreadsheet which can be used over and over again. In lots of cases, teachers will probably download the spreadsheet in the first instance and divide the individuals between the class as appropriate. One point which should emerge from such a search is how many different types of units men from just one area served in. Both the 16<sup>th</sup> Royal Irish Rifles and the 9<sup>th</sup> Royal Irish Fusiliers are closely associated with the Lurgan area, but just the first page of search results shows men serving in a very wide range of other units. There is one cautionary note – this method will not find all the men from your local area because not all records (often far from all, in fact) include a place of residence. However, it does offer a very good starting point for examining the story of a local area.

### **Step 3: 'The Long, Long Trail' website ([www.1914-1918.net](http://www.1914-1918.net))**

This website, produced by military historian Chris Baker is one of the most reliable reference sources it is possible to find on the internet. I use it myself and recommend it to my own students.

For schools, the site can be used to supplement the information you have found in Steps 1 and 2, to find out more about where specific parts of the army were when your local men were killed.

To do that, select 'Histories of army units' ([www.1914-1918.net/army.htm](http://www.1914-1918.net/army.htm)) from the top menu, and then under the heading 'The Regiments and Corps' choose an option. In most cases, this will be 'The Infantry Regiments' ([www.1914-1918.net/regiments.htm](http://www.1914-1918.net/regiments.htm)) and you can then choose the appropriate regiment on the page. If you look under 'The Line Regiments' and select 'Connaught Rangers' ([www.1914-1918.net/connaught.htm](http://www.1914-1918.net/connaught.htm)) you will see an example of the listing.

The crucial piece of information in the section for each battalion is which division they were serving in. In the case of the 6<sup>th</sup> Connaughts, that was the 16<sup>th</sup> Division for the entire war. Using that information, go back to 'Histories of army units' ([www.1914-1918.net/army.htm](http://www.1914-1918.net/army.htm)) and then under 'The Order of Battle' click on 'Divisions – British' ([www.1914-1918.net/britdivs.htm](http://www.1914-1918.net/britdivs.htm)).

On this page, you will find all divisions listed and the 16<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Division page ([www.1914-1918.net/16div.htm](http://www.1914-1918.net/16div.htm)) shows what information is on offer. In particular, you will see that specific battles are listed. More can be found about these simply by using the search option at the top left of the page, but there is also a link to the different theatres of war in the top menu under 'Campaign histories' ([www.1914-1918.net/greatwar.html](http://www.1914-1918.net/greatwar.html)) and this page has specific links to, for example, Western Front battles ([www.1914-1918.net/wf.htm](http://www.1914-1918.net/wf.htm)) and Gallipoli ([www.1914-1918.net/Gallipoli.htm](http://www.1914-1918.net/Gallipoli.htm)).

#### **Step 4: Local Newspapers**

Local newspapers are a very rich source for many local areas and are often very easily accessed in local libraries. These can be used to supplement information found in Step 2. You will often find that a local newspaper contains a photo of a soldier who has been killed and/or much biographical information about him. In some cases, there will be a detailed description, perhaps from a letter home from a comrade, about how they died.

When looking for information in a local newspaper, you need to go prepared with a date of death, and then be prepared to look ahead several weeks for a reference to that soldier, simply because news took time to get home. As a rough guide, based on what I found in Belfast newspapers, it is worth going ahead about six weeks from the date of death to find information. After that point, the likelihood of finding anything is greatly reduced. Of course, this is a simpler task if the local paper is weekly rather than daily, because there will be fewer issues to look at.

An alternative use for local newspaper is not to look for specific individuals, but to take one issue of a newspaper and examine what it contains about the war. This can be easier to manage in terms of planning the time taken for an activity.

#### **Step 5: War Diaries**

Each infantry battalion of the British army, and also other units such as Field Ambulances in the Royal Army Medical Corps, produced a daily record of their activities. At some moments, these would include hour-by-hour accounts of what the battalion was doing and where it was.

This record was called a 'war diary'. They are a valuable way of supplementing the material found in Steps 1 and 2, and can also add much to Steps 3 and 4. However, they can be hard to read (they are generally

handwritten) and many teachers will probably think that they are best utilised only by the most keen and/or able students.

Until recently, it was necessary to travel to the National Archives at Kew to use war diaries (in Kew's WO 95 catalogue category). But they are now steadily being made available online, and it is expected that all will be online in due course. Details of what is available can be found at: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/war-diaries-ww1.htm> The National Archives are steadily digitising war dairies and for those available there is a small charge to download each diary as PDF, but they can then be used for educational purposes. Other diaries need to be viewed at Kew.

## **Further steps**

There are a number of other ways in which further information can be added to individual biographies found in steps 1-5 if so desired.

Individual service/pensions records are available online (subject to a charge) through [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com) or [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk). These relate to non-officers in the British army. Unfortunately, around three-quarters of the service records were destroyed during the London Blitz in 1940, and many of those which did survive were badly damaged. However, there is still roughly a one-in-four chance of finding any individual soldier and if a record does exist, it will contain a vast amount of personal information.

Although parts of army officers' records were also damaged during the Blitz, significant information for each officer did survive and can be consulted in person at Kew, mainly in the WO 339 category (but also some in WO 374).

Finally, for further details on individuals serving beyond the army, see:

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/looking-for-person/default.htm>

## Further information

In addition to downloading the research guide available at:

[www.hemelatwar.org/documents/GuideforSchoolsJuly2011.pdf](http://www.hemelatwar.org/documents/GuideforSchoolsJuly2011.pdf)

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I am also on Twitter (@ProfRGrayson) and will be tweeting information on the First World War.

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