

OVERVIEW

Through storytelling, elementary students will explore how conflicts can lead to war, will gain knowledge on key Canadian battles during the First World War and will come to appreciate the humanity of all soldiers.

CONTEXT

I will be implementing this project plan in my grade four French immersion classroom. The students may have basic knowledge on the nature of Remembrance Day, but it is likely they will know little about the First World War.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this project is to use storytelling to expose students to the history and humanity of the First World War, and to have the students explore the reasons in which conflicts can lead to war.

OBJECTIVES

Through storytelling, students will:

- *explore various ways in which conflicts can lead to war.
- *gain knowledge on key Canadian battles during the First World War including Flanders, Ypres, Passchendaele, and Vimy Ridge.
- *appreciate the humanity of the soldiers on all sides of the battlefield.

RATIONALE

Remembrance Day is an issue very close to my heart. It is one of my personal missions as a teacher that my students learn about the First World War and understand what it is we remember when we observe Remembrance Day. In the past I have read books to the students and told them about the war, but it didn't seem like they 'got it'. This course has shown me that if I tell the stories instead of reading them, it will change the whole experience and bring more meaning into the study. Therefore, storytelling is an essential part of this project plan. What better way is there to learn about history than through storytelling? "Through stories, we visit, interpret, mourn, and treasure the past" (page 54, *Constructive Storytelling: A Peace Process*, Jessica Senehi). Or as Philip Pullman puts it: "Storytelling is one of the most important, most humane, most liberating and most democratic things that human beings can do, and it should have a central place in every classroom."

Why do children need to learn about the past that affected their ancestors? As George Santayana once wrote; “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” Students today are so far removed from the First World War, that it is a challenge for them to comprehend. If we want children to be future peace builders, they should understand the effects of war in the past. We often underestimate the power of youth. They are our future leaders or our future warriors. We cannot overlook “...the central and long-term role that education and young people will need to play in sustaining peace.” (page 214, *Young People’s Activism and the Transition to Peace*, Jeff Helsing)

An important component of my project plan is to explore the humanity of the soldiers on all sides of the battlefield. We must resist teaching our children there were ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys’. All sides suffered horrible losses and that should not be discounted. As Jeff Helsing writes; “True peace is not just the absence of violence or the reduction of tensions; true peace is building a future together.” (page 214, *Young People’s Activism and the Transition to Peace*)

THE PLAN

1) Exploring the topic: how do conflicts lead to wars?

a) Tell the story *Feathers & Fools* (see page 6)

Summary: The story of the peacocks and the swans who begin to fear each other because of their differences. Disaster and ruin strike, but peace prevails.

Rationale: It could begin the discussions: should we be concerned about our differences? Are children more peaceful than adults? This story is also great for creative movement, having students act out the part of the peacocks and the swans.

b) Tell the story *Because of a Moustache* (see references)

Summary: An argument about a moustache escalates into a battle between two men.

Rationale: We could discuss the Peul proverb from Mali: “There is a big peace and there is a little peace. But there is no little quarrel. Even a

matchstick can burn down a village.” (p.52, *Becoming the World*) We could also explore the writing exercise as described on page 53 of *Becoming the World*, where students describe two characters and an argument over an article of clothing.

c) Tell the story *Tusk Tusk* (see page 8)

Summary: The black and white elephants hate each other. The peaceful individuals hide in the jungle while the others battle to death. No elephants are seen again until the descendants emerge – and they’re grey!

Rationale: It could begin the discussions: is it hard to see past our differences? Why do differences cause conflicts?

d) Tell the story *It’s not our problem* (see page 9)

Summary: The king lets fall a drop of honey, which causes a chain of events to happen, causing all kinds of conflict.

Rationale: It could begin the discussions: when is it our problem? How are we all connected in the classroom?

e) Tell the story *La première lettre du petit Prince Paul* (see references)

Summary: Prince Paul writes a letter. Through pride, rumor, assumption, misunderstanding, panic and fear, this small action almost leads to war.

Rationale: It could begin the discussions: Should you believe what you’re fighting for? Can gossip lead to conflict? Can you ever really know what someone else is thinking?

f) Tell the story *Animals* (see page 10)

Summary: The death of a fox is the catalyst for a war where alliances of animals do battle.

Rationale: This is an allegory of the First World War, with each animal representing a country. It could begin the discussions: should friends protect each other even in times of war? Why didn’t the other animals listen to the wolves’ call for peace? What can the animals do now?

2) Introducing the First World War

- a) Read *A Brave Soldier* (see references)

Summary: The story of Frank, a Canadian soldier, and his experience in the First World War.

Rationale: I would like to read this story instead of telling it, because the illustrations are so evocative. They are rich in detail and meaning and must be shared. It will also help students visualize concepts they are probably not familiar with, such as trenches.

3) Exploring Key Canadian Battles in the First World War

- a) Tell the story from *Flanders* (see page 11)

Summary: The story of a nurse in a field hospital, who sees Dr. John McCrae write a poem.

Rationale: It could begin the discussions: what did the nurse say in her prayer? What would you send out in prayer or as a wish? Was the suffering of the soldiers the same on the other side of the war? Why do you think the poppy is now used as the symbol of Remembrance Day?

- b) Tell the story from *Ypres* (see page 13)

Summary: A brief description of the horrors of the gas attack at Ypres.

Rationale: It could begin the discussions: How could they escape the deadly gas? Who wins a war? Should you fight a war any way you can?

- c) Tell the story from Passchendaele: *The Medal* (see references)

Summary: Malcolm accidentally finds his father's medals from Passchendaele, and his mother explains their significance.

Rationale: It could begin the discussions: Why didn't Malcolm's father tell him about the war? What is the purpose of giving medals to soldiers?

- d) Tell the story from *Vimy Ridge* (see page 13)

Summary: A description of the moments before the attack on Vimy Ridge.

Rationale: We could discuss how this battle was a turning point for Canada as a country. If possible, we could invite Sierra Noble into the classroom to share her experiences traveling to Vimy Ridge.

4) Exploring the humanity of the First World War

a) Tell the story of *Christmas Eve* (see page 13)

Summary: The story of three men in the trenches on Christmas Eve and how they join together in peace.

Rationale: It could start the discussions: what will the men do tomorrow? How can we communicate with people who don't speak the same language as we do? What are the similarities between the three men? Is Franz truly an enemy? What is an enemy?

b) Tell the story of the *Armistice letter* (see page 15)

Summary: A son writes to his parents describing the sights and sounds of the Armistice in Paris.

Rationale: This letter does a fantastic job at showing that at the end of the First World War; there was an incredible feeling of peace and happiness. There was hope for a better future. It could also begin the discussion: how could we honor those who did not live to see the peace? We could then research monuments, including the Vimy Ridge Memorial, erected after the First World War.

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Feathers and Fools by Mem Fox

In a rambling garden, long ago and far away, there lived a pride of magnificent peacocks. Nearby, in the rushes and reeds of a clear blue lake, dwelt a flock of elegant swans.

One day, a peacock, musing on the mysteries of life, said, "How strange that swans should swim. It is fortunate indeed that we do not, for we should surely drown." The other peacocks pecked and strutted, contemplating the meaning of this profound observation. Again the first peacock spoke. "How strange that swans should fly. It is happy indeed that we do not, for we should surely look ridiculous." The other peacocks pecked and strutted again, contemplating the meaning of this second observation. Again the first peacock broke the silence. "I fear the swans," he said. "They have great strength. If they wished, they could turn us out of our gardens, or make us fly, or force us to swim." Here and there, peacock feathers rustled uneasily. "Alas!" cried one. "No home! No happiness! No life!" There followed anxious mutterings and a making of plans.

And so it came to pass that the peacocks gathered a great quantity of feathers which they sharpened into arrows and concealed in the shadows of their gardens. "Now we can defend ourselves against the swans," said the first-and-most-foolish peacock, raising his voice that the swans might hear. "We shall hurl these arrows at their throats and slaughter every one should they ever try to change our way of life."

The swans, in fear, heard these fighting words and sharpened feathers of their own in even greater numbers and concealed them cleverly among the rushes and reeds.

Both sides, for safety's sake, continued to add to their weapons, but in dismay each discovered that the more arrows they acquired, the more terrified they became. At night, in the gardens and on the lake, no birds slept. Every sound made their hearts race. Every movement made them tremble.

One day a swan flew high over the peacocks, bearing in her beak a reed for nest-making. The peacocks in a panic mistook it for an arrow and gathering their forces bore swiftly down upon the lake. But the swans, seeing them coming, made ready. Soon cries filled the air and blood darkened the earth. A cloud of feathers rose into the sky and haunted the sun. Of all the birds, not one remained alive. Silence hung over the gardens. And over the lake.

Then, in the shadows of the gardens, an egg hatched, and a small bird staggered out into the bloodstained stillness. Among the reeds beside the lake a second egg hatched, and another small bird teetered out into the ruins. They stumbled towards each other, alive with curiosity and trust. "You're just like me," said the first. "You have feathers and two legs." "You're just like me," said the second. "You have a head and two eyes." "Shall we be friends?" asked the first. "Most certainly," replied the second. So off they went together, in peace and unafraid, to face the day and share the world.

Tusk Tusk, by David McKee

Once, all the elephants in the world were black or white. They loved all creatures, but they hated each other, and each kept to his own side of the jungle.

One day the black elephants decided to kill all the white elephants, and the white ones decided to kill the black.

The peace-loving elephants from each side went to live deep in the darkest jungle. They were never seen again.

A battle began. It went on... and on, and on... until all the elephants were dead.

For years no elephants were seen in the world.

Then, one day, the grandchildren of the peace-loving elephants came out of the jungle. They were grey. Since then the elephants have lived in peace.

But recently the little ears and the big ears have been giving each other strange looks.

Not Our Problem: A Tale from Burma and Thailand

retold by Margaret Read MacDonald

The King sat with his Adviser eating honey on puffed rice. As they ate they leaned from the palace window and watched the street below. They talked of this and that.

The King, not paying attention to what he was doing, let a drop of honey fall onto the windowsill.

"Oh sire, let me wipe that up," offered the Adviser.

"Never mind," said the King. "It is not our problem. The servants will clean it later."

As the two continued to dine on their honey and puffed rice, the drop of honey slowly began to drip down the windowsill. At last it fell with a plop onto the street below.

Soon a fly had landed on the drop of honey and begun his own meal.

Immediately a gecko sprang from under the palace and with a flip of its long tongue swallowed the fly.

But a cat had seen the gecko and pounced. Then a dog sprang forward and attacked the cat!

"Sire, there seems to be a cat and dog fight in the street. Should we call someone to stop it?"

"Never mind," said the King. "It's not our problem."

So the two continued to munch their honey and puffed rice.

Meanwhile the cat's owner had arrived and was beating the dog.

The dog's owner ran up and began to beat the cat.

Soon the two were beating each other.

"Sire, there are two persons fighting in the street now. Shouldn't we send someone to break this up?"

The King lazily looked from the window. "Never mind, it's not our problem."

The friends of the cat's owner gathered and began to cheer him on.

The friends of the dog's owner began to cheer her on as well.

Soon both groups entered the fight and attacked each other.

"Sire, a number of people are fighting in the street now. Perhaps we should call someone to break this up."

The King was too lazy even to look.

You can guess what he said. "Never mind, it's not our problem."

Now soldiers arrived on the scene.
At first they tried to break up the fighting.
But when they heard the cause of the fight
Some sided with the cat's owner.
Others sided with the dog's owner.
Soon the soldiers too had joined the fight.

With the soldiers involved, the fight erupted into civil war.
Houses were burned down. People were harmed.
And the palace itself was set afire and burned to the ground.
The King and his Adviser stood surveying the ruins.
"Perhaps," said the King, "I was wrong? Perhaps the drop of honey WAS our problem."

From *Peace Tales: World Folktales to Talk About*. c 1992 Margaret Read MacDonald (North Haven CT: Linnet Books).

The Animals

Not so long ago, in a forest not far from here, there lived a community of animals. There were coyotes and lynxes, foxes and wolves, hawks, owls and wolverines. The animals lived in peace and were content with their lives.

Then one day, a fox was killed.

To avenge this death, the foxes attacked the coyotes. The lynxes, who were friends to the coyotes, attacked the foxes.

The wolves, who were friends of the foxes, asked for peace, but the others would not hear of it and so they joined in the battle too. Soon the hawks joined in. The owls, who remembered a time when the foxes would not give them their help, joined in. The owls saw the need for even more help so they asked the wolverines to join with them.

Soon, the foxes, wolves and hawks were battling against the coyotes, lynxes, owls and wolverines.

written by Laura McKenzie

A story from Flanders

Long ago, in the middle of the war, there was a hospital. Really, it was no more than a collection of beds placed on a muddy field, covered over by a large tarp to form a sort of tent. At this hospital you saw the most terrifying sights every day. Soldiers, who stood for days in cold water in the trenches, got trench foot, which was like frostbite. Soldiers caught bronchitis, pneumonia, and influenza because they spread so quickly between everyone. And remember – this was a different time and medicine wasn't what it is today. If a soldier was wounded, he might have to wait hours for the stretcher-bearers to reach him and bring him back to the hospital. Many men were shot, and some had to have their legs or arms removed because the bullet holes became infected. Soldiers returned from the front lines exhausted, bloody, and haunted. Those who didn't make it back alive were buried beside the hospital, their place marked with a simple white cross.

Now at the hospital there was a nurse. She treated the soldiers, washed their wounds, and gave them water and food. She wiped their foreheads with a cool cloth, urged them to rest and made sure they were comfortable, because that was all she could do. Then the nurse moved on to the next patient.

The nurse's favorite doctor at the hospital was Dr. John McCrae. He had a winning smile, and entertained everyone with lively stories. He was also an exceptional doctor, who treated the soldiers respectfully and carefully.

One dismal day in May, the nurse was bandaging a wounded soldier when she heard a shout. She turned to see the stretcher-bearers carrying in the body of a soldier. Dr. John must have known the young lieutenant because he cried like the nurse had never seen him cry when he realized he could not save the young soldier. She watched him walk out of the hospital and down the muddy road to sit on a tree stump. His head was bent with hands covering his face. Then the nurse saw him pull out his journal and begin scribbling into it. He ripped out the page and walked back to the hospital. He passed the paper to her and asked her to hang onto it for safekeeping. She read:

In Flanders fields the poppies blow

Between the crosses, row on row,

That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders Fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders Fields.

The nurse looked up from the page. The only thing that dared to grow in the middle of all that suffering was red poppies. She closed her eyes and sent out a silent prayer.

written by Laura McKenzie

Ypres

In the trenches near Ypres, Canadian soldiers were shocked to see French soldiers running towards them. Some were coughing their lungs out, others clawing at their throats, gasping for breath. Later that day they could see a greenish-yellow cloud seeping toward them. What could they do? Where could they go? How could they escape the deadly gas?

From At Vimy Ridge by Hugh Brewster

Vimy Ridge

Before dawn on Easter morning 1917, big flakes of snow began falling over Vimy Ridge. For the Canadian soldiers huddled in darkness below the ridge, the snow was a reminder of home. Many of them had just written letters to those they loved back in Canada. "This may be a note of farewell, for we attack tomorrow morning" All of them knew that the ridge that loomed ahead of them was a fearsome enemy stronghold. They knew that the French and the British had tried to take it and failed. But they had planned and rehearsed this attack for months. And for the first time, the four Canadian divisions would be fighting together, 100,000 strong. Just as the sky began to lighten, the whole world seemed to shudder. Imagine the loudest clap of thunder you ever heard, multiplied by two and prolonged indefinitely. This was the moment for the Canadians to advance.

From At Vimy Ridge by Hugh Brewster

Christmas Eve

There once was a boy named Jean-Jacques. Jean-Jacques loved his family and riding his bike to la pâtisserie to eat fresh scones. He loved reading books and he was happy. Then, the war broke out. Jean-Jacques loved his country and decided the right thing to do was go to war and so he did. On Christmas Eve, Jean-Jacques sat in his trench and looked around. He hated the muddy ditch he had to live in, he hated the water seeping in his boots, he hated the rats that scurried by and most of all he hated the loneliness that crept into his heart. His mind soon turned far away from the trench, to his home. He pulled out the picture of his family that he carried with him, always close to his heart underneath his itchy

uniform. As he ran his finger down the photo, he remembered his brother's silly laugh and his maman's warm hug, when he heard something, in the distance, a song...

Now further down the trench from Jean-Jacques there was another young man named Ewen. He was a farmer from Devonshire where he lived with his wife and his young son. He would have much rathered stay on his farm but things were tough and he needed the money so when the war broke out, he joined the army. That night, Christmas Eve, he remembered the dancing he'd be doing if he was at home, twirling his wife around to the sounds of music, his fingers thrummed up and down as if he could hear the music. What he did hear was a song, a song he knew quite well, a song coming from across No man's land, the space between his trench and the enemy's...

In that very trench, the enemy trench, was a gentle soul named Franz. He was tired. Tired of fighting, tired of watching men around him die, tired of eating disgusting food, tired of being cold, smelly, dirty, tired of having lice, tired of sitting there in his trench. He was just plain tired. His mind wandered to his bride, they had just been married and he missed her. His heart felt so heavy, it just ached. If only he could be home with her celebrating Christmas together. The longing was so strong that he couldn't help himself – he started singing. "Stille Natch". His commanding officer yelled at him to stop. But Franz had had enough. What was the point of all of this, all this war? So he kept on singing.

Ewen heard the song and as soon as he realized which song it was, he started singing along in his deep, rich voice. "Silent Night". His commanding yelled at him to stop. But Ewen just kept on going. He had had enough. And after all, it was Christmas Eve.

Jean-Jacques had heard the chorus of voices singing, and he joined in. "O nuit de paix". His commanding officer didn't like this very much. "Arrête de chanter!" he yelled. As the voices across the way got louder, so did his. And he peeked up over the trench and saw something glowing. He rubbed his eyes, thought maybe he was dreaming but no, he wasn't mistaken – on the other side of the muddy field were Christmas trees and they shimmered in the night air and seemed to glow in a way that was almost supernatural. As he eyes continued to scan that trench across the way, he noticed the head of a man poking up, the man who was singing.

"Ewen, look!" And as Ewen continued to sing, he turned his head and peeked up over the trench to look at the other side of the field. He was momentarily distracted by the glowing trees, but then he saw a man,

climbing out of the trench, into No man's land. His hands were up and he was singing as loud as he could: "Stille Natch". 'I bet he doesn't like this war anymore than we do,' thought Ewen. He scrambled up from his trench and walked slowly out to meet the singer.

Jean-Jacques saw the English soldier walking out and he was too curious. He had to hear what was going to happen, so he pulled himself up and over his trench and walked cautiously out to meet the other two. "Joyeux Noel" he said, nodding. "Merry Christmas" replied Ewen. "Frohe Weihnachten" said Franz.

It turned out Franz and Jean-Jacques knew a little bit of English, so they were able to talk together quite easily. Soon their respective commanding officers joined them in the middle of No Man's Land, where an agreement was reached between both sides. A ceasefire would be upheld for that night, no fighting would happen.

Jean-Jacques, Ewen and Franz went back to their comrades and told them the news. Soon, men, in all kinds of uniforms were coming together. Some huddled together in a group to exchange cigarettes. Others showed each other photographs of their wives and families back home. Soon, a soccer game started and men lined the edge of the playing field and cheered and yelled together. Some sang carols together and talked the best they could without speaking the same language, but it really didn't matter, because that night they understood each other, even without words.

As dawn approached, Jean-Jacques, Franz and Ewen, along with all the other men, said good-bye and returned to their respective trenches to await the morning.

written by Laura McKenzie

Armistice Letter

Dear Mom and Pops:

I arrived here last night, and was on the street today when we heard the announcement: that on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, the armistice was signed and the war was over. Anyone who was not here can never be told, or imagine the happiness of the people here. They cheered and cried and laughed and then started all over again.

Immediately a parade was started and has been going on ever since. In the parade were hundreds of thousands of soldiers from the U.S., England, Canada, France, Australia, and Italy. Each soldier had his arms full of French girls, some crying, others laughing; each girl had to kiss every soldier before she would let him pass. The hearts of these French people have simply bursted with joy.

The streets are crowded and all traffic held up. There are some things, such as this, that never will be reproduced if the world lives a million years. They have taken movies of the crowds, but you can't get sound nor the expression on the people's faces, by watching the pictures.

There is nowhere on earth I would rather be today than just where I am. Home would be nice, and is next, but Paris and France is Free after four years and 3 months of war. And oh, such a war!

It is impossible to buy a flag in Paris today. Everyone has one it seems and the old streets are one solid mass of colors from all the allied nations. Paris, that grand old city that has been dark for so long, is now all lit up. Folks! It's wonderful! So full of feeling and meaning.

Thank God, thank God, the war is over. I can imagine the entire world is happy. But nowhere on earth is there a demonstration as here in Paris. I only hope the soldiers who died for this cause are looking down upon the world today. The whole world owes this moment of real joy to the heroes who are not here to help enjoy it.

Lovingly,

Your son,

Charles.

Contributed by Lois Normington Haugner, adapted by Laura McKenzie