Aerial Reconnaissance Background Notes

The PowerPoint can be used to show how the military used aeroplanes to observe what was going on across enemy lines during World War I.

This activity should take about 20-30 minutes.

Background:

Before World War I, the main method of carrying out reconnaissance on the activities of the enemy had been to use the cavalry. In some battles, air balloons had been used, although this wasn't terribly reliable.

World War I turned out to be fought very differently to previous wars; the use of Trench Warfare mean that the war became more static, and so the use of cavalry for observations was no longer possible.

The introduction of the aeroplane at the turn of the twentieth century meant that there was a new technology available to the military.

Aircraft would often have two seats – one for the pilot, and one for the observer. In the early days aerial reconnaissance was simply carried by aircrew observing from their aircraft and making notes or drawings of what they could see beneath them to take back to base.

There were many things aerial reconnaissance could tell commanders about what was going on behind enemy lines, i.e. the location of trenches, communication centres, supply stores, aerodromes, artillery and the movement of troops. One major problem faced by aircraft flying over and making observations was attack from anti-aircraft weapons. This meant that aircraft had to fly higher to avoid them. In turn, this made observations harder and less accurate. The addition of cameras was critical here – meaning they could capture more information and with more detail.

Aerial reconnaissance proved its worth early on in the war at the Battle of Mons in August 1914. The German's had defeated the French army and intended to take the British Expeditionary Force by surprise. Thanks to aerial reconnaissance, however, the British noticed this early on, and found an alternative route to avoid the advancing German army.