

Review of 'Battlefield Recovery' video

- Gwenllian Anthony 1404702

This review will be centred around an episode of 'Battlefield Recovery' which has been titled on YouTube as 'We dig a WW2 Bunker and find LOADS of Relics', and uploaded on the 15th of November 2019. The episode is focused on the 'Battlefield Recovery' team searching and finding a World War II bunker in rural Latvia, where Soviet forces fought the German army towards the end of the war. Although there are some elements showing the importance of physical relics to archaeology and to history, the main focus is on treasure hunting, the discovery of artefacts and their monetary value. Despite the fact that it may open up the world of archaeology and history to a wider audience, the encouraging of destructive and insensitive practices is evident and ultimately promotes the looting of important, sensitive and trauma-linked heritage items.

The episode is centred around the excitement and thrill of the show's team - Craig Gottlieb, Kris Rogers, Adrian Kostromski and Stephen Taylor - discovering World War II relics in a forgotten bunker on a farm in rural Latvia. The episode begins with dramatic music, cartoon like images of the team and a very brief outline of the history of the Soviet and German presence in the area. Although it might be assumed that finding a bunker would be of great difficulty in a large field, with the help of the farmer, they seem to discover one on their first try and within the first six minutes of the episode. With the assistance of a man and a JCB, they continue to dig relentlessly, finding wood, weapons, personal items, ammunition and a hand grenade. These finds are followed by images of Top Trump cards of the items they find, rating their rarity, battle power and fear factor. Although they briefly touch upon the importance of material culture to history and archaeology, the main focus is on the saleability and monetary value of the found items, with the prices for weapons and personal items discussed. Towards the end of the episode, they do touch upon the issues of 'black diggers' that loot and sell relics for profit, when an unknown car, parks alongside the dig.

Unfortunately, it seems as if National Geographic have tried to turn treasure hunting, looting and war grave theft into a marketable product. The use of character-like cartoons and Top Trump card images, as seen between 00:30-1:05, are a blatant attempt to detach the unprofessionalism, insensitivity and possibly illegalities of the team's work from the horrors and trauma that is linked to the artefacts they discover. The dramatic music, the imagery and board game-like maps somehow makes what they are doing seem fun, like a game, an adventure, when in reality they are dealing with historical items, war relics and possible dead bodies. Although they touch upon the issues with 'black diggers', at 21:50, and the negative sides of looting and selling World War II items, they fail to recognise that they are contradicting themselves by taking part in similar activities in the episode. It is known that Craig Gottlieb, one of the presenters, is an avid trader of WWII relics and has been quoted as saying that he 'has no problem getting artefacts past customs or finding artefacts to sell' (No author, 2014). This casts a doubt on the ethicality of the show and whether certain protocols are being followed. To add to this, the way in which they are excavating is incredibly haphazard, with the destructive use of inappropriate tools and the lack of recording context. Context is of utmost importance in archaeology as it helps form and confirm theories and ideas. The location of an artefact, the stratigraphy and its relationship to other items forms the basis of archaeological work, and without this information, the artefact can be rendered useless (Sease, C. 1997). Ultimately, if an archaeologist wanted to work on any of these items or on site, it would be incredibly

difficult to forge any theories or ideas as the context has been completely lost by the disorganised rummaging of the bunker by the 'Battlefield Recovery' team.

To an academic, or someone with a keen interest in archaeology and history, the programme may come across as novice, unprofessional and insensitive. However, to the greater public, the programme could act as bridge to connect them with our past and history. It is quite easy to see how the excitement of finding war relics, weapons or bunkers could entice the public to learn, to connect and get involved in history and archaeology. When young children want to explore the world of archaeology, it's usually through the wonder and awe of all the things you may find, and that can happen to adults too. Although they may look at an episode of 'Battlefield Recovery' slightly different once engrossing themselves in the subject, it is that initial spark, the initial excitement that inspires budding archaeologists to pursue the subject in the first place. However, it is clearly not a programme that is suitable for academic use as the lack of evidence makes it incredibly difficult to separate fact from fiction. The programme is riddled with personal theories and thoughts, without any concrete evidence to back them up. Although theoretical work is greatly important in archaeology, the team aren't made up of academics or scholars, they are novice treasure hunters and collectors who's ideas are unverifiable.

To conclude, 'Battlefield Recovery' is overall a novice and unprofessional programme that portrays the team as experts in their fields, but in reality, they are glorified treasure hunters. The imagery and cartoonified characters are insensitive, immature and are clearly trying to detach the programme from the seriousness of their activities. These are relatively recent events in which there are still living survivors as well as their immediate families. The items they discover are personal, hold trauma and are sometimes attached to missing peoples. It ultimately shows a lack of respect to attach wonder and price tags to items so meaningful. Although it may introduce history and archaeology to a wider spectrum of people, it only encourages bad practices and condones destructive activities, therefore overall, the programme motivates more bad than good.

References

Addictedtoleeps. (2019) *We dig a WW2 Bunker and find LOADS of Relics*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tli1DSsGXPA>

Sease, C. (1997) *Conservation and the antiquities trade*.

No author. (2014) *Excavating the War Dead of WW2: The Eastern Front*. Available at: <https://thesebonesofmine.wordpress.com/2014/03/31/excavating-the-war-dead-of-ww2-the-eastern-front/>