INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITIES

Read students this list of words at one second intervals and ask them to memorise as many words (in order) as possible.


Repeat this process four times. What is the best result by any class member? Tell students that the New Zealander they will study took only four readings to remember all of these words in the correct order. How remarkable is this? Do they think there is any way they could train their mind to reach this accuracy?

Discuss the merits of making mental arithmetic part of the school mathematics programme. Have students identify when they use mental arithmetic. Should they use it more?

Identify the mental arithmetic feats that Aitken performed that support him being described as ‘the greatest mental calculator for whom there is any reliable record’.

Have students speculate on the meanings of the mathematical terms in the article. Have them list all they don’t understand. Invite a mathematics specialist to explain them - and their practical everyday uses to the class.

Discuss the modern meaning of epiphany as a life changing event or the awakening of understanding. What brought Aitken’s epiphany about and why was it so remarkable?

Aitken’s memory is described as ‘mind boggling’. Have students list recorded incidents in his life that support this statement.

Aitken’s memory was perhaps his greatest asset. Help students identify a major incident in his life when his amazing memory in fact became a curse. What relevance has this to a commonly held belief that bad memories fade with time?

Read his description of war in the trenches. What conclusions did Aitken reach about trench warfare?

Discuss how being very analytical (as Aitken was) perhaps allowed him to take a closer look than most at the futility of wars present and past. What did he liken war to?

Talk about Aitken’s personality. Identify traits that make him all the more remarkable because of his humanity. What thumbnail description can students give of his personality?

Was there more to life than mathematics for Aitken? List some of his many other talents and interests.

Would it be true to say that we could all memorise things better by thinking harder? Have students identify any special techniques used by Aitken that we could use to help.

Debate: ‘If computers and super calculators were in common use during his early life, Aitken would not have displayed his remarkable genius’.

Conclude by creating an historic timeline of Aitken’s life.