

TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

Researching War Poets and Writers

Many of those who experienced the First World War were greatly moved, either during the war or in the years that followed, to share their experiences in the form of poems, novels or autobiographies. While most works explored the brutality and sheer horror of frontline combat, others depicted soldiers' living conditions, the suffering of loved-ones, army pay and food, government propaganda, or the simple hope for a better future.

War sometimes made poets out of ordinary men who had never before taken up the pen. In other cases, war radically transformed an established poet or writer from an ardent nationalist into a committed pacifist. Whatever the experience, war greatly influenced each poet or writer's life and subsequent work.

Choose one of the following war poets or writers:

John McCrae

Erich M. Remarque

Siegfried Sassoon

Robert Service

Rudyard Kipling

Robert Graves

William Bird

Wilfred Owen

A.E. Housman

Or you may wish to select a poet or writer from your community.

Once you've selected a poet or writer, find out more about:

- the poet or writer's background (date and place of birth, family, education, career, etc.);
- the poet or writer's war-time experience;
- how the experience of war affected the poet or writer's work;
- the poet or writer's most lasting work of prose or fiction relating to the war-time experience.

Finally, you may wish to provide a personal interpretation of the writer's work, either by pointing out a favourite poem or novel, or by assessing the writer's impact on the literary world.

The finished product can either be in the form of a research paper, an oral presentation or a poster-collage for public display.



First World War Literature

Read one or more of the following literary excerpts and answer the questions that appear at the end of each excerpt.

Goodbye to All That, by Robert Graves

Gaaas!, by Erich M. Remarque

I Want One Volunteer, by Ernest G. Black

Ghosts Have Warm Hands, by William Byrd



Combat in the Trenches

Excerpt from **Goodbye to All That**

By Robert Graves

The men cursed and sulked. Only the officers knew of the proposed attack; the men must not be told until just beforehand. I felt like screaming. Rain was still pouring down, harder than ever. We knew definitely this time that ours would be only a diversion to help troops on our right make the real attack.

The scheme was the same as before: at 4 p.m. gas would be discharged for forty minutes, and after a quarter of an hour's bombardment we should attack. I broke the news to the men about three o'clock. They took it well...

At 4 p.m. then, the gas went off again with a strong wind. The Germans stayed absolutely silent. Flares went up from the reserve lines, and it looked as though all the men in the front trench were dead. The brigadier decided not to take too much for granted. After the bombardment he sent out a Cameronian officer and twenty-five men as a feeling-patrol. The patrol reached the German wire; there came a burst of machine-gun and rifle fire, and only two wounded men regained the trench.

We waited on the fire-step from four to nine o'clock, with fixed bayonets, for the order to go over. My mind was a blank, except for the recurrence of *S'nice S'mince S'pie, S'nice S'mince S'pie . . . I don't like ham, lamb or jam, and I don't like roley-poley . . .*

The men laughed at my singing. The acting C.S.M. said: "It's murder, sir."

"Of course it's murder, you bloody fool," I agreed. "But there's nothing else for it, is there?" It was still raining. *But when I sees a s'nice s'mince s'pie, I asks for a helping twice...*

At nine o'clock brigade called off the attack; we were told to hold ourselves in readiness to go over at dawn.

No order came at dawn, and no more attacks were promised us after this. From the morning of September 24th to the night of October 3rd, I had in all eight hours of sleep. I kept myself awake and alive by drinking about a bottle of whiskey



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a day. I had never drunk it before, and have seldom drunk it since; it certainly helped me then. We had no blankets, greatcoats, or waterproof sheets, nor any time or material to build new shelters. The rain poured down. Every night we went out to fetch in the dead of the other battalions. The Germans continued indulgent and we had few casualties. After the first day or two the corpses swelled and stank. I vomited more than once while superintending the carrying. Those we could not get in from the German wire continued to swell until the wall of the stomach collapsed, either naturally or when punctured by a bullet; a disgusting smell would float across. The colour of the dead faces changed from white to yellow-grey, to red, to purple, to green, to black, to slimy.

On the morning of the 27th a cry arose from No Man's Land. A wounded soldier of the Middlesex had recovered consciousness after two days. He lay close to the German wire. Our men heard it and looked at each other. We had a tender-hearted lance-corporal named Baxter. As soon as he heard the wounded Middlesex man, he ran along the trench calling for a volunteer to help fetch him in. Of course, no one would go; it was death to put one's head over the parapet. When he came running to ask me I excused myself as being the only officer in the company. I would come out with him at dusk, I said – not now. So he went alone. He jumped quickly over the parapet, then strolled across No Man's Land, waving a handkerchief; the Germans fired to frighten him, but since he persisted they let him come up close. Baxter continued towards them and, when he got to the Middlesex man, stopped and pointed to show the Germans what he was at. Then he dressed the man's wounds, gave him a drink of rum and some biscuit that he had with him, and promised to be back again at nightfall. He did come back, with a stretcher-party, and the man eventually recovered. I recommended Baxter for the Victoria Cross, being the only officer who had witnessed the action, but the authorities thought it worth no more than a Distinguished Conduct Medal.

Source: Graves, Robert, *Good-Bye to All That*, London: Anchor Press, 2nd Edition, 1998.




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Glossary

brigadier: a senior officer; a general

Cameronian: a British military unit

fire-step: a step inside a trench that allows one to look over the parapet to shoot at the enemy or observe their movements

C.S.M.: Company Sergeant-Major; a senior rank among non-commissioned officers

brigade: in this context: head-quarters, where orders are issued

battalions: an army unit comprising some 2,000 men

No Man's Land: the narrow, muddy, treeless stretch of land, pitted by numerous shell holes, that separated German and Allied trenches during the First World War. Being in No Man's Land was considered very dangerous since there was little or no protection for soldiers.

parapet: the front of the trench, usually consisting of sandbags to protect soldiers

Victoria Cross: The Commonwealth's highest award for bravery in the face of the enemy.

Distinguished Conduct Medal: A decoration awarded for distinguished, gallant and good conduct.

Questions

- 1) What do you think prompts the author to break out into song just seconds before taking part in an attack?
- 2) How do we know the author expects to die in the upcoming attack?
- 3) What happened to the dead and wounded stranded out in No Man's Land?
- 4) Would you say that Lance-Corporal Baxter's act was foolish or brave?



GAAAS!

An excerpt from *All Quiet on the Western Front*

by Erich M. Remarque

Three o'clock in the morning. The breeze is fresh and cool. The pale hour makes our faces look gray. We trudge onward in single file through the trenches and shell-holes and come again to the zone of mist. Katczinsky is restive, that's a bad sign.

"What's up, Kat?" says Kropp.

"I wish I were back home." Home - he means the huts.

"We'll soon be out of it, Kat."

He is nervous. "I don't know, I don't know --- "

We come to the communication trench and then to the open fields. The little wood reappears. We know every foot of ground here. There's the cemetery with the mounds and the black crosses.

That moment, it breaks out behind us, swells, roars and thunders. We duck down - a cloud of flame shoots up a hundred yards ahead of us. The next minute under a second explosion part of the wood rises slowly in the air, three or four trees sail up and then crash to pieces. The shells begin to hiss like safety valves - heavy fire.

"Take cover!" yells somebody, "Cover!"

The fields are flat, the wood is too distant and dangerous - the only cover is the graveyard and the mounds. We stumble across in the dark and as though he had been spat there every man lies glued behind a mound.

Not a moment too soon. The dark goes mad. It heaves and raves. Darknesses blacker than the night rush on us with giant strides, over us and away. The flames of the explosions light up the graveyard. There is no escape anywhere. By the light of the shells I try to get a view of the fields. They are a surging sea, daggers of flame from the explosions leap up like fountains. It is impossible for anyone to break through it. The wood vanishes. It is pounded, crushed, torn to pieces. We must stay here in the graveyard.

...

Before me gapes the shell-hole. I grasp it with my eyes as with fists. With one leap I must be in it. There, I get a smack in the face, a hand clamps onto my shoulder - has a dead man woken up? The hand shakes me. I turn my head in the second of light I stare into the face of Katczinsky. He has his mouth wide open and is yelling. I hear nothing. He rattles me, comes nearer, in a momentary lull his voice reaches me: "Gas - Gaas - Gaaas - Pass it on."



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I grab for my gas mask. Some distance from me there lies someone. I think of nothing but this: That fellow there must know: Gaaas – Gaaas –

I call, I lean toward him, I swipe at him with the satchel, he doesn't see - once again, again - he merely ducks - it's a recruit. I look at Kat desperately. He has his mask on - I pull out mine. My helmet falls to one side, it slips over my face, I reach the man, his satchel is on the side nearest me, I seize the mask, pull it over his head, he understands, I let go and with a jump drop into the shell-hole. The dull thud of the gas-shells mingles with the crashes of the high explosives. A bell sounds between the explosions, gongs, and metal clappers warning everyone – Gas – Gaas – Gaaas.

Someone plumps down behind me. I wipe the goggles of my mask clear of the moist breath. It is Kat, Kropp and someone else. All four of us lie there in heavy, watchful suspense and breathe as lightly as possible. These first minutes with the mask decide between life and death: is it air-tight? I remember the awful sights in the hospital: the gas patients who in day-long suffocation cough up their burnt lungs in clots.

Cautiously, the mouth applied to the valve, I breathe. The gas still creeps over the ground and sinks into all hollows. Like a big, soft jellyfish it floats into our shell-hole and lolls there obscenely. I nudge Kat. It is better to crawl out and lie on top than to stay where the gas collects most. But we don't get as far as that; a second bombardment begins. It is no longer as though shells roared; it is the earth itself raging.

With a crash something black bears down on us. It lands close beside us; a coffin thrown up.

I see Kat move and I crawl across. The coffin has hit the fourth man in our hole on his out-stretched arm. He tries to tear off his gas-mask with the other hand. Kropp seizes him just in time, twists the hand sharply behind his back and holds it fast. Kat and I proceed to free the wounded arm. The coffin lid is loose and bursts open, we are easily able to pull it off, we toss the corpse out, it slides down to the bottom of the shell-hole, then we try to loosen the under-part. Fortunately the man swoons and Kropp is able to help us. We no longer have to be careful, but work away till the coffin gives with a sigh before the spade that we have dug in under it.

It has grown lighter. Kat takes a piece of the lid, places it under the shattered arm, and we wrap all our bandages round it. For the moment we can do no more.

Inside the gas-mask my head booms and roars - it is nigh bursting. My lungs are tight, they breathe always the same hot, used-up air. The veins on my temples are swollen. I feel I am suffocating.

A grey light filters through to us. I climb out over the edge of the shell-hole. In the dirty twilight lies a leg torn clean off; the boot is quite whole, I take that all in at a glance. Now something stands up a few yards distant. I polish the windows, in my excitement they are immediately dimmed again. I peer through them. The man there no longer wears his mask.



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I wait some seconds – he has not collapsed – he looks around and makes a few paces – rattling in my throat I tear my mask off too and fall down, the air streams into me like cold water, my eyes are bursting, the wave sweeps over me and extinguishes me.

The shelling has ceased. I drag myself to the crater and tell the others. They take off their masks. We lift up the wounded man, one taking his splintered arm. And so we stumble off hastily.

Source: Remarque, Erich Maria, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1929.

Questions

- 1) What compels the author and his colleagues to “stay here in the graveyard”?
- 2) What prompts the “fourth man in the hole” to tear off his gas mask?
- 3) How does the author describe the experience of wearing a gas mask?
- 4) In what way is the author’s description of the battle similar to that of recounting a nightmare?



A Meal Fit for a Soldier

Excerpt from *I Want One Volunteer*

By Ernest G. Black

At the Somme something went wrong with our ration supply and for several days we had nothing to eat but bully beef and biscuits. That put a strain on the cook. For breakfast he gave us bully beef hash. That could be good on a frosty morning. For dinner we had bully beef stew. That I could never learn to like. When bully beef is stewed you get a stringy, tasteless mess that requires a real appetite to make it palatable. We had the appetite. For supper we had cold sliced bully beef. It was a bit monotonous but no one went hungry.

After several days of this we got a parcel mail, the first since we came to the Somme. Someone decided that even though rations could not be delivered properly we should have our parcel mail. Mail, it was thought, was better for morale than rations. That is debatable. For letter mail it might be true. There was only one parcel for our subsection and that was for our sergeant. The name on it was immaterial. Food in a parcel was communal property. We gathered round the sergeant knowing that if the parcel contained food we had a proprietary interest in it. It was a large wooden box not quite the shape for liquor and almost certain to contain food. That is exactly what it did contain. When the box was opened we could hardly believe our eyes as we looked at the contents; it had come all the way from Vancouver, B.C., a five-pound tin of bully beef. That is all there was in the box for soldiers who had eaten nothing but bully beef for over a week.

For the benefit of young people, bully beef was corned beef, the stuff one buys in wedge-shaped cans. The kind you see is not bad. Most of what we got was specially made to fill army contracts by suppliers who felt that they were performing a patriotic duty, being convinced that soldiers fight best when they are mad. You might find almost anything in a tin, a strip of skin with hair on it or a bone. One of our boys claimed that he had found a dog tag in a tin. We never quite believed that. If he had said a cowbell we might have been less sceptical. I would not eat the stuff in the dark. Sometimes on a night march we had a halt, when the horses would get their nosebags or haynets and we would get a half-tin of bully and a biscuit or two. I would put my bully beef in my mess tin, break it up with my clasp knife and then light a match and examine it before I ate it.



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After a while we got a break at the Somme. The cook got some rice and a box of raisins. That was a big day for us in more ways than one. Our flash-cover there was inadequate and from previous shelling we knew that our position was well known. Early that afternoon the counter-battery people opposite decided that it was a good day to exterminate us. As soon as the shoot started we got the order to scatter and in no time at all we were away to the flank. As I left our gun-pit I heard one coming and went down flat. That is the only time in the war that I saw an enemy shell before it burst. Just as it hit the ground it slowed down and I saw the big ugly brute for a fraction of a second not more than seven feet from my head. When the debris had cleared away I found that my head was within two feet of the edge of the shell hole. It was a nice shell hole, too, four or five feet deep and about eight to ten feet in diameter. When we got back after the shoot we found our battery position pockmarked with shell holes like that but not a gun or an ammunition pile hit. That was very satisfactory but made us wonder how often our own shells did nothing but scare people.

While we gunners had abandoned our guns on orders, the cook, bless his greasy old soul, had stuck to his dixies. The cook-house was in the dead centre of the battery line in an old trench not more than thirty yards from the guns. It was directly in the line of fire and just where it might easily be hit. But the cook would not move. He had that rice and those raisins cooking and we were going to have them for supper instead of bully beef, and no so-and-so Germans were going to stop him. When we got back from the flank we found supper almost ready and soon we had it. There were great piles of fluffy white rice studded with raisins so close that they almost touched each other. Mess tins were piled high and there were unlimited seconds. That rice was one of the gastronomical highlights of the war.

Source: *Black, Ernest, I Want One Volunteer, Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1965.*



Glossary

the Somme: an area in Northern France and the scene of some of the heaviest fighting in the First World War

subsection: a small group of soldiers

haynets: a large net in which hay was placed to feed horses

flash-cover: a type of camouflage that concealed gun positions

counter-battery: a group of guns, whose purpose is to destroy the enemy's guns

dixies: refers to a type of cooking oven

Questions

- 1) Why do you think rations and parcel mail were good for soldiers' morale?
- 2) How does the author make use of humour to describe the food situation in the trenches?
- 3) What is "the big ugly brute" the author mentions, and why is it called this?
- 4) What do you think prompts the author to refer to his meal of rice and raisins as "a gastronomical highlight"?

The Return Home

Excerpt from *Ghosts Have Warm Hands*

By William Bird

We were to return on the *Adriatic*, a very fine boat, and the R.C.R.s were already on board. Filing up the gangplank was a slow process, but to my delight my brother was on the wharf, walking with crutches. He was in hospital in Liverpool and had got leave to see me. There was so much to talk about that the whole battalion was on board, and they were shouting that the gangplank was going up, before I noticed. I just made it, and on deck there was only the faithful Brown. The rest were all below.

“You have surely messed it this time,” he said. “There is not one, get it, not one single hammock or cabin or anything left below. I don’t know where you can put your pack and rifle. And we’ve all been issued our meal tickets.”

Just then the dinner gong went and away he rushed. I moved over to the rail and waved to my brother, watching a member of the ship’s staff who was writing in chalk on the first-class cabin doors: “Two officers,” “One officer,” etc. He stopped, scanned his list carefully, put the chalk down on a ledge and went below deck. I looked around and saw two doors on my right, opened the first and entered a beautiful stateroom with bath. In seconds I had deposited my rifle and pack, taken the key and locked the door from outside. Then I got the chalk and marked OCCUPIED in large letters, and went down to get a meal ticket.

A dozen fellows asked me curiously what I was going to do for a sleeping place. Each time I shrugged and said I would wait till I was sleepy. There was much hilarity in some of the cabins and we carried on until late. It was a quarter to twelve when I went up on deck, not a person in sight. I unlocked the door and went in, and had a wonderful night’s rest.

Not one person knew where I was staying. Everyone was in great spirits and at first the officers did not bother us at all. However, as we went around the deck we saw some of the lieutenants, wonder boys who had arrived in the last five minutes, flirting with a number of nurses who were on board. We saw one bright boy who had joined the regiment in October exhibiting a German helmet and Iron Cross that he had purchased from some front-liner, and we wondered what fiction he was circulating. Then, the third morning out, these lads wanted to shine before their admirers, and made a great show of rounding up all the lowly ranks for “exercise.”




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The lack of desire, sheer stupidity, and awkwardness of the men were so discouraging that the officers decided something really simple would have to be devised. From some quarter they produced three long ropes. We were to have a tug-of-war tourney. Men were simply numbered off with no regard to size, and so it happened I was thrown the end of the rope and told I would be the anchorman. At five feet nine and 170 pounds, I was anything but. However, we lined up, and I suddenly noticed an iron upright just behind me. I tossed a coil of the rope around it and held on to the end. When our team gained a few inches, the gain was held, as the loop around the upright was firm. But when the other team tugged with might and main they could not gain an inch. So they were declared losers. We pulled the third team in the same way. This caused the officer in charge of the other team to come and investigate our prowess. His team out-weighed us by at least three hundred pounds. What he saw filled him with disgust. "I'm through," he roared. "We can't do anything with this type of fellow."

So we were freed from their attentions and enjoyed the rest of the trip. On the evening of our last night out, our emotions ruled us, turning us to a riot of horseplay. We wrestled and made mock speeches. Then we gradually quieted, each man with his own thoughts. Everyone watched for a chance to leave without having to say farewells.

In my fine sheets I could not sleep and began to forget where I was. I seemed to be in an atmosphere rancid with stale sweat and breathing, the hot grease of candles, the dampness of the underground. I saw cheeks resting on tunics, mud-streaked, unshaven faces. . . men shivering on chicken-wire bunks. Then, from overhead, the machinegun's note louder, higher, sharper as it swept bullets over the shell crater in which I hugged the earth . . . the rumble of guttural voices and heavy steps in an unseen trench just the other side of the black mass of tangled wire beside which I lay. . the long-drawn whine of a coming shell. . its heart-shaking explosion. . the seconds of heavy silence after, then the first low wail of the man down with a blood-spurting wound. It was too much. I got up and dressed, although it was only four o'clock in the morning.

It was cold but I wore my greatcoat, and to my amazement there were other dark figures near the rail. We stood, hunched together, gazing ahead into the darkness. Presently another figure joined us, then another. In an hour there were fourteen of us, and no one had spoken, although we were touching shoulders. The way we stood made me think of a simile. Ah, we were like prisoners. I had seen them standing together, staring over the wire to the field beyond, never speaking. And we were more or less prisoners of our thoughts. Those at home would never understand us, because something inexplicable would make us unable to put our feelings into words. We could only talk with one another.



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All at once the watchers stirred, tensed, craned forward. It was the moment for which we had lived, which we had envisioned a thousand times that held us so full of feeling we could not find utterance. Far ahead, faint, but growing brighter, we had glimpsed the first lights of home!

Glossary

RCR's: Royal Canadian Regiment

Liverpool: a port city in Great Britain

battalion: a formation of some 1000 men

Iron Cross: a German medal for bravery

front-liner: someone who had actually fought at the front lines

Questions

- 1) What problem does the author encounter upon embarking the ship that is to take him home, and how does he solve this?
- 2) Why does the author refer to some of the officers on board as “wonder boys”?
- 3) Compare and contrast the author’s present accommodations with those he experienced in the trenches.
- 4) Why does the author, now only a few hours away from Canada and home, compare himself and other servicemen to prisoners?

