AWESOME stories

TRENCHES and NO MAN'S LAND

The British Army first used barbed wire, for military purposes, in the Boer War. During WWI, both sides used barbed wire to ward-off infantry attacks and cavalry charges against men in the trenches. In “No-Man’s Land—the area between opposing armies—barbed wire was particularly hazardous. This image depicts such a scene in 1916. National Army Museum, Image 1993-02-376-137, Crown copyright. Image provided here as fair use for educational purposes. Click on the image for a better view.

It is impossible to imagine what it was like to live in the trenches of the Western Front (in France). For one thing, they were a good place for rats.

Because those rodents could feed on dead bodies, which were always plentiful, rats grew as big as cats. Beyond the rats, lice ... a constant companion for troopers ... inflicted about ninety-seven percent of trench-dwelling soldiers.

Robert Graves - a British poet who was also a writer-combatant during World War I - came up with a choice name for the trench-filled Western Front. He called it "the Sausage Machine." Why did he use that description?

> *...because it was fed with live men, churned out corpses, and remained firmly screwed in place.*

Rarely had soldiers been forced to live, for so long, in such deplorably desperate conditions like those existing at the Front Lines of the Western Front. In addition to many other dangers and miseries, "trench fever" also plagued soldiers who had to get used to constant filth and unsanitary conditions.

Beyond their "living" conditions, trench-dwellers saw things which would haunt them for the rest of their lives - if they survived the war. Many of those nightmarish experiences occurred when they went "over the top" - meaning, over the top of the trenches and into the firing power of the other side.

One survivor of the war - a German named Erich Maria Remarque (1898-1970) who'd been injured five times - wrote about his experiences in a novel called *All Quiet on the Western Front*. In one passage, he writes:

> *We see men living with their skulls blown open; we see soldiers run with their two feet cut off ... Still the little piece of convulsed earth in which we lie is held. We have yielded no more than a few hundred yards of it as a prize to the enemy. But on every yard there lies a dead man.* (Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, page 91.)

Then ... there was poisonous gas - in this instance, chlorine - which Germany first used during the second battle for Ypres during April of 1917. Mustard gas, which also damaged horses, was introduced a few months later (in July of 1917).

One soldier relates his gas-attack experiences in *Over the Top*:

> *Suddenly, my head seemed to burst from a loud "crack" in my ear. Then my head began to swim, throat got dry, and a heavy pressure on the lungs warned me that my helmet was leaking.* [It had been damaged by a bullet which ripped through the cloth on the left side - hence the "crack" in his ear.] *Turning my gun over to No. 2, I changed helmets.*
>
> *The trench started to wind like a snake, and sandbags appeared to be floating in the air. The noise was horrible; I sank onto the fire step, needles seemed to be pricking my flesh, then blackness.*
>
> *I was awakened by one of my mates removing my smoke helmet. How delicious that cool, fresh air felt in my lungs.*
>
> *A strong wind had arisen and dispersed the gas.*
>
> *They told me that I had been "out" for three hours; they thought I was dead.* (*Over the Top - and - Tommy's Dictionary of the Trenches*, by Arthur Guy Empey, published by G.P. Putnam's Sons, The Knickerbocker Press, New York - 1918, at page 191.)

The open territory, between Allied and German trenches, was called "No Man's Land." No matter where those spots were located, they were filled with obstacles like barbed wire. A frightened horse, racing through a trench-lined No Man's Land, could easily become tangled in the paraphernalia of war which men used to harm each other.

Then ... abruptly and unexpectedly ... it was over. After four years of misery - with little prior notice to the troops - the war ended when all sides agreed to stop fighting. On the last day - November 11, 1918 - at least 10,000 more men were killed (based on historians' estimates). It took some time for soldiers to realize they could finally put-down their weapons.

As British soldiers thought about boarding homebound transport ships, they wondered about their horses. Were they going home, too?

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/TRENCHES-and-NO-MAN-S-LAND-War-Horse

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/TRENCHES-and-NO-MAN-S-LAND-War-Horse

Questions 2 Ponder

How Could Soldiers Live in a Trench?

In the novel and film “War Horse,” soldiers on both sides of the conflict live in trenches. Beyond many other unpleasantries, trench-dwelling soldiers had to endure bad weather, loud noises, poor food and too-many rats. (Click on this image to get a better view.)

Imagine having to live in a front-line trench. What would be the worst thing about it?

Trench life, and warfare, lasted throughout World War One. How long would be the longest time frame that anyone, today, could live in a trench?

Does Being “Fed-up” Lead to Change?

What might be some of the reasons why the end of World War I occurred so abruptly?

Do you think that people were totally "fed up" with the war and how it was impacting lives in so many countries?

If people get "fed up" with the way things are, is that a sufficient reason - on its own - to make major changes? Explain your answer.

Media Stream

War Horse - British Soldiers Wearing Gas Masks
Photo by Lt. J.W. Brooke, July 1916, Imperial War Museum Photo No. Q-3995 (Collection No. 1900-13). Image online, courtesy Imperial War Museum. Public Domain.
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http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/War-Horse-British-Soldiers-Wearing-Gas-Masks

War Horse - Infantry Wearing Small Box Respirators
Photo by Captain Frank Hurley, 27 September 1917, from the Australian War Memorial, image ID Number E00825.
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War Horse - Joey in No Man's Land

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Erich Maria Remarque - All Quiet on the Western Front

Photo of Erich Maria Remarque, in 1929, online courtesy Bundesarchiv ("German Federal Archive"), Bild ("Picture") 183-R04034.
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