

Primary Source: *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Passage)

The following passage is taken from Erich Maria Remarque's novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), the most famous literary work to emerge from World War I. Remarque was a veteran himself, serving in trenches during WWI. His writing was inspired by the slaughter he witnessed firsthand.

The novel follows a young German man as he leaves his home to fight in the war. As most young men in Europe, he and his friends believed they were embarking on a glorious adventure. They were eager to serve their countries and demonstrate personal courage. But in the trenches, where unseen enemies fired machine guns and artillery that killed broadly and relentlessly, their romantic illusion about combat vanished.

In the following passage the narrator, a young German soldier, describes his experience as the enemy attacks.

We wake up in the middle of the night. The earth booms. Heavy [artillery] fire is falling on us. The dug-out heaves, the night roars and flashes. We look at each other in momentary flashes of light, and with pale faces and pressed lips shake our heads. Every man is aware of the heavy shells tearing down the parapet, rooting up the embankment and demolishing the upper layers of concrete. When a shell lands in the trench we note how the hollow, furious blast is like a blow from the paw of a raging beast of prey. Already by morning a few of the recruits are green and vomiting. They are too inexperienced. . .

The bombardment does not diminish. It is falling in the rear too. As far as one can see spout fountains of mud and iron. The attack does not come, but the bombardment continues. We are gradually benumbed. Hardly a man speaks. We cannot make ourselves understood. Our trench is almost gone. At many places it is only eighteen inches high, it is broken by holes, and craters, and mountains of earth. A shell lands square in front of our post. At once it is dark. We are buried and must dig ourselves out.

Towards morning, while it is still dark there is some excitement. Through the entrance rushes in a swarm of fleeting rats that try to storm the walls. Torches light up the confusion. Everyone yells and curses and slaughters. The madness and despair of many hours unloads itself in the outburst. Faces are distorted, arms strike out, the beast scream; we just stop them in time to avoid attacking one another. . . Suddenly it howls and flashes terrifically, the dug-out cracks in all its joints under a direct hit, fortunately only a light one that the concrete blocks are able to withstand. It rings metallically, the walls reel, rifles, helmets, earth, mud and dust fly everywhere. If we were in one of those light dug-outs

that they have been building lately instead of this deeper one, none of us would be alive. But the effect is bad enough even so. Then it shrieks again, I fling myself down and when I stand up the wall of the trench is plastered with smoking splinters, lumps of flesh, and bits of uniform.

Suddenly, the nearer explosion cease. The bombardment has stopped, and a heavy barrage now falls behind us. The attack has come.

No one would believe that in this howling waste there could still be men; but steel helmets now appear on all sides of the trench. . . We see the storm-troops coming. Our artillery opens fire. Machine-guns rattle, rifles crack. The [enemy] charge works its way across. We recognize the smooth distorted faces, the helmets; they are French. They have already suffered heavily when they reach the remnants of the barbed wire entanglements. A whole line has gone down before our machine-guns.

The moment we are about to retreat three faces rise up from the ground in front of us. Under one of the helmets a dark pointed beard and two eyes that are fastened on me. I raise my hand. . . and my hand-grenade flies through the air and into him.

We have become wild beasts. We do not fight, we defend ourselves against annihilation. It is not against men that we fling our bombs, what do we know of men in this moment when death is hunting us down – now, for the first time in three days we can see his face, now for the first time in three days we can oppose him; we feel a mad anger. No longer do we lie helpless, waiting, we can destroy and kill, to save ourselves, to save ourselves and be revenged.

Our guns open in full blast and cut off the enemy attack. They can advance no farther. The attack is crushed by our artillery. . . It does not come quite to hand-to-hand fighting; they are driven back. The fight ceases. We lose touch with the enemy. . . We lie for an hour panting and resting before anyone speaks. We are so completely played out that in spite of our great hunger we do not think of the provisions. Then gradually we become something like men again.

1. In the passage, soldiers from which two countries are fighting?

- a. Germany and America b. Germany and France
c. Austria-Hungary and Russia d. Austria-Hungary and Great Britain

2. What happens to the narrator at the end of the attack?

- a. He is killed by an artillery shell explosion.

- b. He dies during a poison gas attack
- c. He is wounded by an enemy machine gun
- d. He survives without suffering any serious wounds.

Use complete sentences

3. List three ways to describe what it is like to survive an artillery bombardment.

4. Why do young men lose their eagerness for war when they reach the trenches?

5. Why do you believe the enemy uses heavy shelling before the attack?

6. According to the narrator, what happens to provide some excitement towards morning, while it is still dark?

7. How does the narrator escape the man with the pointed beard with two eyes fixed on him?

8. What does the narrator mean when he says, "Then gradually we become something like men again"?