6.24 Battle of Somme (1916)

Background: The Battle of the Somme in northern France was the largest battle of World War I. Fought between July 1 and November 18, 1916, it pitted the armies of Great Britain and France against Germany and involved more than three million soldiers. Both sides were deeply imbedded in trenches and one million men were killed or wounded during a series of attacks and counter-attacks. Somme is also one of the first battles to involve airplanes and tanks, although they were still primitive in design. While the battle itself is considered a stalemate, it so depleted German troops, munitions, and supplies that it led to the eventual defeat of Germany. The following descriptions of trench warfare are from diaries kept by soldiers who fought in the battle of Somme. Many came face to face with their enemies in the terrifying "no man's land" between the trenches.

Sources: Peter Stearns, Donald R. Schwartz, Barry K. Beyer, *World History: Traditions and New Directions* and http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/FWWsomme.htm.Grenadier Emil Kury, 109th

Questions

- 1. Based on the descriptions in these diary excerpts, why do you think the area between enemy lines was called "no man's land"?
- 2. What do the diary excerpts reveal about trench warfare in World War I?
- 3. Based on these diary excerpts, what can be said about the soldiers' attitudes toward the war and the effect that the war had upon them? Support your answer with evidence from the text.

Reserve Regiment (German): "I told my comrades, 'We must be prepared; the English will attack soon.' We got our machine-gun ready on the top step of the dug-out and we put all our equipment on; then we waited. We all expected to die. We thought of God. We prayed. Then someone shouted, 'They're coming! They're coming!' We rushed up and got our machine-gun in position. We could see the English soldiers pouring out at us, thousands and thousands of them. We opened fire."

Private H.C. Bloor, Accrington Pals (British): "Eventually I took shelter in a shell hole with two other men from the battalion; we were all wounded. I looked over the edge and could see the Germans in their trench again. I suddenly became very angry. I had seen my battalion mowed down by machine-guns and one of them trapped in the war. I thought of my particular pal who had been killed a few days before by a shell. I thought how we were all doomed; I just couldn't see how any of us would get out of it alive and, so far, I hadn't done anything to the Germans. I made up my mind to get one of them, at lest, before I was killed."

Private George Morgan, Bradford Pals (British): "There was no lingering about when zero hour came. Our platoon officer blew his whistle and he was the first up the scaling ladder, with his revolver in one hand and a cigarette in the other. "Come on, boys," he said, and up he went. We went up after him one at a time. I never saw the officer again. His name is on the memorial to the missing which they built after the war at Thiepval. He was only young but he was a very brave man."

German machine-gunner: "The officers were in the front. I noticed one of them walking calmly carrying a walking stick. When we started firing we just had to load and reload. They went down in their hundreds. You didn't have to aim, we just fired into them."

Private G.R.S. Mayne, 11th Royal Fusiliers (British): "I then went on to the second-line trench and jumped in, to see a German soldier lying on the parapet. With fixed bayonet I approached, then I saw his putty-colored face which convinced me he was mortally wounded. The German brought up an arm and actually saluted me. I understood no German but the poor chap kept muttering two words 'Wasser, Wasser, and 'Mutter, Mutter,' ('Mother, Mother'). It took me a minute or so to realize he wanted a drink of water. The second I could not cotton on to. I am glad to this day that I gave him a drink of my precious water."

Clare Tisdall, nurse at a Casualty Clearing Station (British): "During the Somme we practically never stopped. I was up for seventeen nights before I had a night in bed. A lot of the boys had legs blown off, or hastily amputated at the front-line. These boys were the ones who were in the greatest pain, and I very often used to have to hold the stump up in the ambulance for the whole journey, so that it wouldn't bump on the stretcher. The worse case I saw - and it still haunts me - was of a man being carried past us. It was at night, and in the dim light I thought that his face was covered with a black cloth. But as he came nearer, I was horrified to realize that the whole lower half of his face had been completely blown off and what had appeared to be a black cloth was a huge gaping hole. It was the only time I nearly fainted."