

One of the best-known novels ever written about war is *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque (1898–1970), the story of a young German soldier in World War I. Paul Baumer is not a hero, just an ordinary young man caught up, with his classmates, in the horror of trench warfare. For Germany, the Western Front was a battle line drawn through neutral Belgium, separating German and French troops. ♦ *As you read, notice the sights and sounds of trench warfare. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

Vocabulary Before you begin reading, find the meaning of these words in a dictionary: cur, outstripped, barrage, mortar, din, instantaneous, simulate, convulsed.

All Quiet on the Western Front

In one part of the trench I suddenly run into Himmelstoss. We dive into the same dug-out. Breathless, we are all lying one beside the other waiting for the charge.

When we run out again, although I am very excited, I suddenly think: “Where’s Himmelstoss?” Quickly I jump back into the dug-out and find him with a small scratch lying in a corner pretending to be wounded. His face looks sullen. He is in a panic; he is new to it, too. But it makes me mad that the young recruits should be out there and he here.

“Get out!” I spit.

He does not stir, his lips quiver, his moustache twitches.

“Out!” I repeat.

He draws up his legs, crouches back against the

wall, and shows his teeth like a cur.

I seize him by the arm and try to pull him up. He barks.

That is too much for me. I grab him by the neck and shake him like a sack, his head jerks from side to side.

“You lump, will you get out—you hound, you skunk, sneak out of it, would you?”

His eye becomes glassy, I knock his head against the wall—“You cow”—I kick him in the ribs—“You swine”—I push him toward the door and shove him out head first.

Another wave of our attack has just come up. A lieutenant is with them. He sees us and yells: “Forward, forward, join in, follow.” And the word of command does what all my banging could not.



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History Through Literature *(continued)*

Himmelstoss hears the order, looks round him as if awakened, and follows on.

I come after and watch him go over. Once more he is the smart Himmelstoss of the parade-ground, he has even outstripped the lieutenant and is far ahead.

Bombardment, barrage, curtain-fire, mines, gas, tanks, machine-guns, hand-grenades—words, words, but they hold the horror of the world.

Our faces are encrusted, our thoughts are devastated, we are weary to death; when the attack comes we shall have to strike many of the men with our fists to waken them and make them come with us—our eyes are burnt, our hands are torn, our knees bleed, our elbows are raw.

How long has it been? Weeks—months—years? Only days. We see time pass in the colourless faces of the dying. We cram food into us, we run, we throw, we shoot, we kill, we lie about, we are feeble and spent, and nothing supports us but the knowledge that there are still feebler, still more spent, still more helpless ones there who, with staring eyes, look upon us as gods that escape death many times.

In the few hours of rest we teach them. “There, see that waggle-top? That’s a mortar coming. Keep down, it will go clean over. But if it comes this way, then run for it. You can run from a mortar.”

We sharpen their ears to the . . . hardly audible buzz of the smaller shells that are not easily distinguishable. They must pick them out from the general din by their insect-like hum—we explain to them

that these are far more dangerous than the big ones that can be heard long beforehand.

We show them how to take cover from aircraft, how to simulate a dead man when one is overrun in an attack, how to time hand-grenades so that they explode before hitting the ground; we teach them to fling themselves into holes as quick as lightning before the shells with instantaneous fuses; we show them how to clean up a trench with a handful of bombs; we explain the difference between the fuse-length of the enemy bombs and our own; we put them wise to the sound of gas shells;—show them all the tricks that can save them from death.

They listen, they are docile—but when it begins again, in their excitement they do everything wrong.

Haie Westhus drags off with a great wound in his back through which the lung pulses at every breath. I can only press his hand; “It’s all up, Paul,” he groans and he bites his arm because of the pain.

We see men living with their skulls blown open; we see soldiers run with their two feet cut off . . . a lance-corporal crawls a mile and a half on his hands dragging his smashed knee after him . . . we see men without mouths, without jaws, without faces. . . . The sun goes down, night comes, the shells whine, life is at an end.

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.

Questions to Think About

1. How does Himmelstoss behave in the trench? What makes him move out?
2. How does the arrival of new recruits make experienced soldiers like Baumer (the narrator) feel?
3. **Drawing Conclusions** What reason does the narrator offer for the soldiers’ willingness to endure? Does he really believe in it?
4. **Humanities Link** What details in this passage show the horrors of trench warfare?