

TEACHING AMERICAN HISTORY PROJECT

Lesson Title - Trench Warfare

From Lisa Romasanta

Grade – 8th

Length of class period –60 minutes (2-3 day activity)

Inquiry – What was trench warfare like as a soldier?

Objectives

Understand the experiences of a soldier and the reality of trench warfare.

Materials

- PowerPoint (trench visuals-**actual photographs** from WWI)
- Corresponding readings *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque that align with the PowerPoint
- Student Handout (two pages with response questions)

Activities

1. Students are split up into two different groups. (Allied or German trenches)
2. Students enter and see two long rows on desks (without chairs) on opposite sides of the room.
3. Teacher explains that they will need a notebook, pen, and handout for materials.
4. Explain that that the classroom has been transformed into a battlefield on the Western Front. Students are in Verdun, France in late August 1918. Slide 1 has an explanation and visual of the Western Front.
5. Teacher will read excerpts from *All quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque. Visuals of the book and movie covers are in slide 2.
6. Students are directed to sit or lay down on their stomachs

- directly under their desks.
7. Have students respond to the questions after they view the photos from the PowerPoint and listen the readings excerpts.
 8. Open to slide three and start to read the excerpt. Then students write the responses.

SIDE NOTE:

As the students are writing, typically a CD is played of WWI war noises (machine guns, artillery fire, etc.) as loud as possible and the room is darkened for ambience. I downloaded it from a website for a small fee.

How will you assess what student learned during this lesson?

I will assess the journal entries on how realistic and imaginative they respond to the questions. Typically the journals are very successful; *even* the reluctant writers are very willing to write.

Connecticut Framework Grade Level Expectations –

CONTENT STANDARD 1: Historical Thinking

Develop written narratives and short interpretative essays, as well as other appropriate presentations from investigations of source materials

The excerpts below, from “All Quiet on the Western Front” are to be read to students as they view the photos from the PowerPoint.

Photo 1 – Fear and Anticipation-

We see soldiers from the 132nd Regimental Infantry crouching in a trench in a battle position.

Reading

A shell crashes. Almost immediately two others. And then it begins in earnest. A bombardment. Machine-guns rattle. Now there is nothing for it but to stay lying low. Apparently an attack is coming. Everywhere the rockets shoot up. Unceasing.... I lie motionless;- somewhere something clanks, it stamps and stumbles nearer- all my nerves become taut and icy. It clatters over me and away, the first wave has passed. I have but this one shattering thought: What will you do if someone jumps into your shell-hole?- Swiftly I pull out my little dagger, grasp it fast, and bury it in hand once again under the mud. If anyone jumps in here I will go for him. It hammers in my forehead; at once, stab him clean through the throat, so that he cannot call out; that's the only way; he will be just as frightened as I am; when in terror we fall upon one another, then I must be first.

Photo 2-First Bombardment-

This is a French soldier preparing to launch a bomb.

Reading

One lands behind us. Some recruits jump up terrified. A couple of minutes later another comes over, nearer this time..... Then it begins in earnest. We crawl away as well as we can in our haste. The next lands fair amongst us. Two fellows cry out. Green rockets shoot up on the skyline. Barrage. The mud flies high, fragments whiz past. The crack of the guns I hear long after the roar of the explosion It's got someone pretty badly. Cries are heard between the explosions. At last it grows quiet. The fire has lifted over us and is now dropping on the reserves. We risk a look. Red rockets shoot up to the sky. Apparently there is an attack coming. Where we are is still quiet. I sit up and shake the recruit by the shoulder. “All over, kid! It's all right this time.” He looks around him dazedly. “You'll get used to it soon,” I tell him.

Photo 3- Surviving a Gas Attack-

We see British machine gunners in action in 1916 wearing gas helmets for protection from poison gas.

Reading

The dull thud of the gas-shells mingles with the crashes of the light explosives. A bell sounds between the explosions, gongs, and metal clappers warning everyone-Gas-Gas-Gaas. 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 lay 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. .. like a big, soft jelly-fish.....

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, and the veins on my temple are swollen. I feel I am suffocating.

Photo 4- Daily Life-

We see British soldiers huddled in a trench between bombing raids in 1916.

Reading

We must look out for our bread. The rats have been much more numerous lately because the trenches are no longer in good condition..... the rats here are particularly repulsive, they are so fat..... with long, nude tails. They seem mighty hungry. Almost every man has had his bread gnawed. Kropp wrapped his in his waterproof sheet and put it under his head, but he cannot sleep because they run over his face to get at it. Deterring meant to outwit them: he fastened a thin wire to the roof and suspended his bread from it. During the night when he switched on his pocket-torch he saw the wire swinging to and fro. On the bread was riding a fat rat.

At last we put a stop to it. We cannot afford to throw the bread away, because then we should have nothing left to eat in the morning, so we carefully cut off the bits of bread that the animals have gnawed. The slices we cut off are heaped together in the middle of the floor. Each man takes out his spade and lies down prepared to strike. Deterring Kropp and Kat hold their pocket-torches ready. After a few minutes we hear the first shuffling and tugging. It grows, now it is the sound of many little feet. Then the torches switch on, and every man strikes at the heap, which scatters with a rush. The result is good. We toss the bits of rats over the parapet and again lie in wait. Several times we repeat the process. At last the beasts get wise to it, or perhaps they have scented the blood. They return no more. Nevertheless, before morning the remainder of the bread on the floor has been carried off.

Photo 5- Dealing with Boredom-

We see German soldiers passing the time reading and talking in a trench.

Reading

How long has it been? Weeks-months-years? Only days. We see time pass in the colorless faces of the dying, we cram food into us, 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.

Photo 6- Morale-

We see British soldiers huddled in an isolated, exposed trench, bracing for an incoming attack.

Reading

A bomb or something lands close besides me. I have not heard it coming and am terrified. At the same moment a senseless fear takes hold of me. Here I am alone and almost helpless in the dark-perhaps two other eyes have been watching me for a long while from another shell-hole in front of me, and a bomb lies ready to blow me to pieces. I try to pull myself together. It is not my first patrol and not a particularly risky one. But it is the first since my leave and besides, the lie of the land is still rather strange to me.

I tell myself that my alarm is absurd, that there are probably nothing at all there in the darkness watching me, otherwise they would not be firing so low. It is in vain. In whirling confusion my thoughts hum in my brain- I hear the warning voice of my mother

I still continue to lie in the shallow bowl. I look at the time; only a few minutes have passed. My forehead is wet, the sockets of my eyes are damp, my hands tremble, and I am panting softly. It is nothing but an awful spasm of fear, a simple animal fear of poking out my head and crawling on farther.

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World War One: Trench Simulation Activity

Directions: Respond to the following questions in your ISN.

#1 Experiential Questions - Fear and Anticipation

- As you sit in the trench, what do you fear? What dangers do you face?
- How are you preparing yourself—both physically and mentally—to face those dangers?
- Physically put yourself in a position that best prepares you for these dangers. How does it feel to be in that position?

#2 Experiential Questions - First Bombardment

- There has been constant shelling for three days. How does your head feel?
- What destruction do you expect to see around you the next morning? Describe it.
- Did you expect to die? How did you cope with that feeling?
- What do you think the enemy hopes to gain by this constant shelling?

#3 Experiential Questions - Surviving a Gas Attack

- Your gas mask irritates the skin of your face and itches. What can you do to comfort yourself without exposing yourself to the poisonous gas?
- The gas mask makes you feel claustrophobic. What is that feeling like? What can you do to overcome the feeling? Do it now.
- The soldier next to you dies. What are you going to do with the body?

(2)

World War One: Trench Simulation Activity

Directions: Respond to the following questions in your ISN.

#4 Experiential Questions - *Daily Life*

- What methods would you use to get rid of the rats?
- Your ration for the day is a tin of ham and a piece of bread. How will you eat your food so that it lasts for an entire day?
- The rats have nibbled on your bread. Will you still eat it? What do you think might happen if you do?
- Your meat is spoiled and after eating it you feel very sick. What can you do? You develop diarrhea; what problems does this cause in the trenches?

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#5 Experiential Questions - *Dealing with Boredom*

- What do you do to keep from getting bored?
- Your leg has a cramp. How do you get rid of it?
- The soldier next to you has a cold and keeps sneezing and coughing. What can you do to protect yourself from getting sick too?
- Your uniform is wet because you have been sitting in a puddle. What will you do to get more comfortable? Do it now.

#6 Experiential Questions - *Morale*

- Will you sign up to go on patrol tomorrow? Why or why not? How does the constant fear you feel affect your morale?
- As the captain, it is your job to reassure your men. How will you inspire confidence in your troops so that they keep fighting?
- You are feeling homesick and are thinking about writing a letter. What experiences will you relate to your family? Will you spare them any of the details?