

Trench Warfare in World War I

Overview

Much of the fighting during World War I was done from the trenches, a grueling and horrific experience for soldiers. In this lesson, students will participate in an experiential activity based on trench warfare and have their interest peaked regarding this period of history with the macabre yet realistic details of war life. Students will further learn about World War I through examination of the poem "The Rear-Guard" by Siegfried Sassoon.

Grade

8

North Carolina Essential Standards

- 8.H.2.1 - Explain the impact of economic, political, social, and military conflicts (e.g. war, slavery, states' rights and citizenship and immigration policies) on the development of North Carolina and the United States.
- 8.H.3.2 - Explain how changes brought about by technology and other innovations affected individuals and groups in North Carolina and the United States (e.g. advancements in transportation, communication networks and business practices).

Essential Questions

- What weapons (previously used and new inventions) were used in fighting World War I?
- What was the experience of a soldier fighting in WWI?
- What were conditions like in WWI trenches and tunnels?

Materials

- 50-100 sheets of balled-up paper in two different colors
- War sound effects (optional)
- Images of WWI Trench's, examples attached
- Excerpts of WWI Letters from Soldiers, examples attached
- *The Rear-Guard*, a poem by Siegfried Sassoon, attached
- *The Rear-Guard* Response Sheet, attached

Duration

60 minutes

Teacher Preparation

For the opening experiential activity, desks need to be turned on their sides and pushed into two straight lines, one on each side of the room so that a large open space is available in the middle of the classroom. If this is not possible, teachers should arrange to use an alternate space in the school or outside. Ball the colored paper up and divide into two piles by color, one pile behind each set of desks.

Student Preparation

Students should have a basic knowledge of World War I.

Procedure

In the Trenches: Allied Powers v. Central Powers

1. As students enter class, divide them into two groups, one representing WWI's **Allied powers** and the other the **Central powers**. Send them to sit with their group between one of the two rows of desks on either side of the classroom.
2. Once all students are assigned to a side, tell students to think back to everything they've learned thus far about World War I and to imagine that they are soldiers currently on the battlefields in a trench. Turn off the lights, turn on loud war sounds (if available) and project images of WWI trenches for students to examine (examples attached.) Instruct students to lay down and crouch behind the desks and to imagine they are currently in one of those trenches. Facilitate student's imaginations by setting up the scene in the trenches as creatively as possible:
 - Over 40 million **casualties** resulted from World War I, many occurring in the trenches, where you currently are. As a World War I soldier in the trenches, your daily life can be quite rough. During battle, you risk losing your life, which can be stressful and terrifying. Yet, life can also be incredibly boring and even depressing during the periods when you sit waiting for battles to ensue. Regardless, at all times, you have to worry about rats, catching diseases, shellfire, and body lice. Food is sometimes in short supply also. When soldiers are injured, it can take a while until they are treated. And, if you have an open wound, lying in the unsanitary, dirty and infested trenches can result in a serious infection. Some injuries are so bad that soldier's limbs have to be amputated. Also, if you disobey your commander's orders, you run the risk of being executed. Imagine that this is your reality, and has been your reality for weeks. Every movement could be a disease infested rat or an enemy approaching. It's 20 degrees out and you are freezing, exhausted, and all you want to do is go home.
3. Next, the teacher should assume the personality of a military commander and yell at students to stay down, keep their bodies low, or risk being killed. Remind them that at any moment, an attack may occur. Direct student attention to their "artillery" (the pile of colored paper on their side) and allow some students on each side to attempt an attack on their enemies. This might involve firing from the trench or crossing "**no man's land**", the name for vast space between enemy trenches, often full of mud and difficult to walk through. For those students who are hit by a paper ball, whether the enemies or their own team's ("friendly fire") – they are dead and must lie during the rest of the simulation. (Teachers may want to ask one student to monitor this on each side.)
4. Allow students to wage battle for a few minutes, then stop the action and explain to students that much of a soldier's time was spent waiting for the command to fight. Teachers may want to have the students sit in silence for a bit, still making the students "killed in battle" lie in place. Allow students to get antsy, force them to remain silent then secretly direct one side to attack. Again, after a few moments of fighting, cease the battle.

5. Continue flavoring the experience by reading letter excerpts from WWI soldiers (examples attached). Teachers may read the letters out loud or pass them out to various students to read in between the “battles.”

Medical Attention in World War I

6. At the end of the experiential exercise, draw attention to the students who are lying still due to having been “killed in battle.” Tell students the following regarding WWI medical services and conditions:
 - Due to the intensity of World War I trench warfare, 10% of the fighting soldiers were normally killed. What percentage of each of your sides has been killed in our fighting today? For those of you injured, understand that medical services were not as advanced as today, and life-saving medicines, procedures, and antibiotics had not yet been discovered. A minor injury in the trenches could kill you, since it was likely that infection or gangrene could set in. **Gangrene** is when your body tissue begins to decay due to the introduction of bacteria. (To intensify the description, teachers can choose to show a picture of gangrene, such as the one attached.) The Germans recorded that 12% of leg wounds and 23% of arm wounds resulted in death, mainly through infection. The Americans recorded that 44% of casualties who developed gangrene died.
 - As in many other wars, World War I's greatest killer was disease. Sanitary conditions in the trenches were quite poor, and common infections included dysentery and cholera (both involve severe diarrhea and stomach ache; 8th graders generally respond to the description “death by diarrhea”) and typhus (disease caused by the bacteria lice carry). Many soldiers suffered from parasites (worms that live inside and feed of your body, making you severely ill) and related infections. Poor hygiene also led to fungal conditions, such as trench mouth and trench foot. Another common killer was exposure, since the temperature within a trench in the winter could easily fall below zero degrees Celsius (32 °F). Burial of the dead was usually a luxury that neither side could easily afford. The bodies would lie in no man's land until the front line moved, by which time the bodies were often unidentifiable.
(Source: *wikipedia.com*)

Debriefing the Activity and Connecting it to Realities of WWI

7. Close the experiential activity with a discussion:
 - What did that experience feel like? Imagine the weapons you were throwing were real, or that you had been in the trenches for two weeks. What would this experience have been like then?
 - What do you think was the worst aspect of the trenches for WWI soldiers and why?
 - You were told that soldiers were often in the trenches for weeks, much of that time spent on edge as they waited for an attack. How do you imagine this affected them?
 - Based on what we have discussed in terms of war in general and WWI in particular, and based on this activity, what do you imagine life for a soldier after the war would have been like?
 - How would you characterize conditions in the trenches based on the letters you heard?
 - What other warfare was used in fighting WWI? How did these weapons and strategies affect battles, as well as individual soldiers?
 - The use of trenches represents how people use or change land during a war. What are other examples of the effects of war on land, the environment, water, etc., past and present?

- In what ways have advancements in technology changed the experience of soldiers fighting in today’s wars? What aspects do you think remain the same or similar between soldiers today and during World War I?

“The Rear Guard”

8. Next, hand out the attached poem about WWI, *The Rear Guard*. Either individually or in partners, instruct students to read the poem and complete the attached worksheet. Once students are finished, discuss the answers as a class.

Additional Activities

- Divide students into small groups who will examine various aspects of World War I to present to the class. Students can research and complete one or more of the following activities:
 - Recreate the trench system in a visual format, particularly noting the placement of trenches on the western and eastern fronts and evaluating the impact of trench warfare on the outcome of the war.
 - Gather and analyze primary source documents reflecting firsthand soldier experiences, and then, in the voice of a soldier, write several first-person journal entries reflecting personal experiences.
 - Create a chart representing the hazards soldiers faced (trench warfare, disease, malnutrition, psychological distress, etc.) and its impact on their lives, including casualties.
 - Strategically analyze WWI's stalemate and propose other battle strategies that may have ended the war sooner, with fewer casualties.
 - Assume the roles of key WWI military leaders and write briefs that discuss how trench warfare has impeded military strategy and recommendations they have for strategies that will eradicate trenches in order to make military advances toward victory for their respective nations.
 - Research the role of women and minorities during WWI.
 - Write a creative story titled, “If the Central Powers Had Won,” and discuss how history may have changed had the Allies not defeated the Central Powers. The story must show an understanding of WWI’s actual events.
 - Discuss the formation of the League of Nations, why it was created, why it is important, and its role throughout history since its formation.
- Complete an activity from PBS’s *The Great War*, available at: <http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/resources/lesson.html>

Resources

- North Carolinians and the Great War Collection: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/wwi/index.html>

Image 1 of a WWI Trench



Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:WW1_TitlePicture_For_Wikipedia_Article.jpg

Image 2 of a WWI Trench



Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:WW1_TitlePicture_For_Wikipedia_Article.jpg

Excerpts of WWI Letters from Soldiers

The soldiers at the front need more rest. While in the trenches the water is over our knees most of the time. The war is going to last some time yet, and might be another twelve months before it is over. The war has only just begun and its going to be a war of exhaustion. After the regular armies have done their work it means that all the young lads at home being trained and disciplined and will take our place in the field. The sooner people understand this, the better, it will be for the nation.

Private H. F. Leppard in a letter to his mother on December 19th, 1914



We have just come out of the trenches after being in for six days and up to our waists in water. While we were in the trenches one of the Germans came over to our trench for a cigarette and then back again, and he was not fired at. We and the Germans started walking about in the open between the two trenches, repairing them, and there was no firing at all. I think they are all getting fed up with it.

Private Stanley Terry in a letter to his family in November, 1915



We started away just after dawn from our camp and I think it was about an hour later that we encountered the enemy. They were on the opposite side of the valley and as we came over the brow of the hill they opened on us with rifle fire and shrapnel from about 900 yards. We lost three officers and about 100 men killed and wounded in that half hour. I do not want any more days like that one. (this section censored) Anyway we drove the Germans back and held them there for eight days. I cannot tell you all I should like to, as it would never reach you.

Private James Mitchell in a letter to his father on October 17th, 1914.



I have not written to you for a long time, but I have thought of you ... It is, indeed, not so simple a matter to write from the war, really from the war; and what you read ... in the papers usually <shows a> lack of understanding that does not allow a man to get hold of the war, to breathe it in although he is living in the midst of it.

The further I penetrate its true inwardness the more I see the hopelessness of making it comprehensive for those who only understand life in the terms of peacetime, and apply these same ideas to war in spite of themselves. They only think that they understand it. It is as if fishes living in water would have a clear conception of what living in the air is like. When one is hauled out on to dry land and dies in the air, then he will know something about it.

So it is with the war. Feeling deeply about it, one becomes less able to talk about it every day. Not because one understands it less each day, but because one grasps it better. But it is a silent teacher, and he who learns becomes silent too.

Rudolf Binding, letter (April, 1915)



I have an old platoon roll before me; three pages of names, numbers, trades, next-of-kin, religions, rifle numbers, and so forth. Faces come back out of the past to answer to these barren details, the face of this man dead, of that vanished for ever. Here and there rise memories of their habits, their nicknames, the look of one as he spoke to you, the attitude of another shivering in the night air, as he leaned over the parapet, watching with tired bloodshot eyes. Some of the faces have disappeared. did I know you? I censored your letters, casually, hurriedly avoiding your personal messages, your poignant hopes.

Guy Chapman account of his experiences in 1930s



Towards morning, while it is still dark, there is some excitement. Through the entrance rushes in a swarm of fleeing 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 this outburst. Faces are distorted, arms strike out, the beasts scream; we stop just in time to avoid attacking one another.”

Erich Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*



Source: <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/FWWletters.htm>

Image of Gangrene



Source: www.humanillnesses.com

'The Rear-Guard' by Siegfried Sassoon

Groping along the tunnel, step by step,
He winked his prying torch with patching glare
From side to side, and sniffed the unwholesome air.

Tins, boxes, bottles, shapes too vague to know,
A mirror smashed, the mattress from a bed; 5
And he, exploring fifty feet below
The rosy gloom of battle overhead.

Tripping, he grabbed the wall; saw someone lie
Humped at his feet, half-hidden by a rug,
And stooped to give the sleeper's arm a tug. 10

"I'm looking for headquarters." No reply.
"God blast your neck!" (For days he'd had no sleep.)
"Get up and guide me through this stinking place."

Savage, he kicked a soft, unanswering heap,
And flashed his beam across the livid face 15
Terribly glaring up, whose eyes yet wore
Agony dying hard ten days before;
And fists of fingers clutched a blackening wound.

Alone he staggered on until he found
Dawn's ghost that filtered down a shafted stair 20
To the dazed, muttering creatures underground
Who hear the boom of shells in muffled sound.

At last, with sweat of horror in his hair,
He climbed through darkness to the twilight air,
Unloading hell behind him step by step. 25

Name: _____

The Rear-Guard Response Sheet

1. Where is the rear-guard? What is going on above him?
2. Describe the conditions in the tunnel/trench. Pick out some of the words or phrases which help describe the tunnel.
3. The rear-guard meets a sleeper in the tunnel. What does he look like? What do you think has happened to him?
4. At the end of the poem the rear guard leaves the tunnel. What is the tunnel compared with in the last line? This last line uses imagery to make a powerful point. What kind of imagery is this?
5. What do you predict happens to the rear guard next?
6. Visualize the rear guard, the tunnel, the war itself, etc. Create an illustration or other form of visual art that represents this poem.