



The Trenches of Hell

The Somme Offensive

July 1-November 19, 1916

Historical Background Notes

In December of 1915, at the Allies' conference in Chantilly, plans were made to launch a series of major offenses on the Germans that would weaken their defenses and "wear them out." In February of 1916, though, the Germans launched their own offensive at Verdun, thus effectively tying down the French. It fell, then, to the British to carry out the bulk of the offensive, which would occur along the Somme River, north of Verdun, at the point where the French and the British lines met. It was hoped that the attack planned for the summer would not only penetrate Germany lines, but would also divert German troops from Verdun and provide needed relief for the French armies there.

The Somme Offensive would be the Baptism of Fire for the "Kitchener Army" made up primarily of the volunteer Pal Brigades. These inexperienced soldiers had responded to the call for volunteers to fill the ranks of the British Army with great enthusiasm. Now, they were seeing their first real combat. Leading them would be General Rawlinson, Commander of the Fourth Army. It fell to him to prepare plans for the attack.

The Commander-in-Chief of the British Army, Haig, disagreed with the plans submitted to him by Rawlinson in April. Haig envisioned a breakthrough operation that would be swiftly followed by the use of cavalry to take advantage of the gaps in the German lines. Rawlinson, on the other hand, wanted a "bite and hold" action that would begin with a massive artillery barrage to weaken the German lines, use the infantry to seize parts of those weakened lines, hold them, and wait for reinforcements to arrive that would help to hold-off a counter-attack. It was decided that a combination of the strategies would be used. Rawlinson's idea in along the southern lines, Haig's plan along the center and in the north.

At 7:30 am, July 1, following a five-day bombardment of the German lines, the first British soldiers went over the top. Wave after wave of khaki-clad men attempted to cross open ground in continuous lines running parallel to the trenches. And wave after wave were cut down by German machine gun fire. The barrage had failed to soften German defenses thanks to their extensive bunkers dug into the chalky ground. Enormous craters created by the shelling made crossing no-man's land virtually impossible in some places. But still they marched on. And still they died.

By the end of the day, 60,000 British soldiers were casualties, nearly 20,000 of those, dead. It was the worst day of the war for any army and the bloodiest day in the history of the British army.

The Battle of the Somme failed to produce the breakthrough that Haig had hoped for but did achieve the desired effect of pulling German troops away from Verdun, thus providing relief for the French that were fighting there. It also resulted in a tremendous loss of German soldiers and officers that could not be replaced.

Lesson Plans

Trenches of Hell

Lesson Objectives

- __ Explain the significance of the Battle of the Somme and describe its effect on the progress of the war.
- __ Describe life in the trenches for soldiers on the Western Front and explain why the German trench system was much stronger in most places than the Allies'.
- __ Explain the impact of new weapons such as machine guns, chlorine gas, flame throwers, and hand grenades on trench warfare.
- __ Describe the treatment of prisoners as portrayed in the film.
- __ Identify the historical significance of Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves and Charles de Gaulle.

Standards Addressed/Thematic Strands

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|---|-------------------------------------|
| __ Culture | __ Power, Authority and Governance |
| __ Time, Continuity and Change | __ Science, Technology, and Society |
| __ Individuals, Groups and Institutions | __ Global Connections |

Resources and Materials

- | | |
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| __ Copy of <i>Trenches of Hell</i> | __ Historical Background Notes |
| __ Student Handouts 1-5 | __ Notes on Historic Figures |

Focus Activity

Have students carefully examine the images of the trenches on Student Handout 3 and have them list everything that they see. Having finished their observations, have students describe what they think life in the trenches would be like. As students watch the film, have them look for anything that may support or refute their answers.

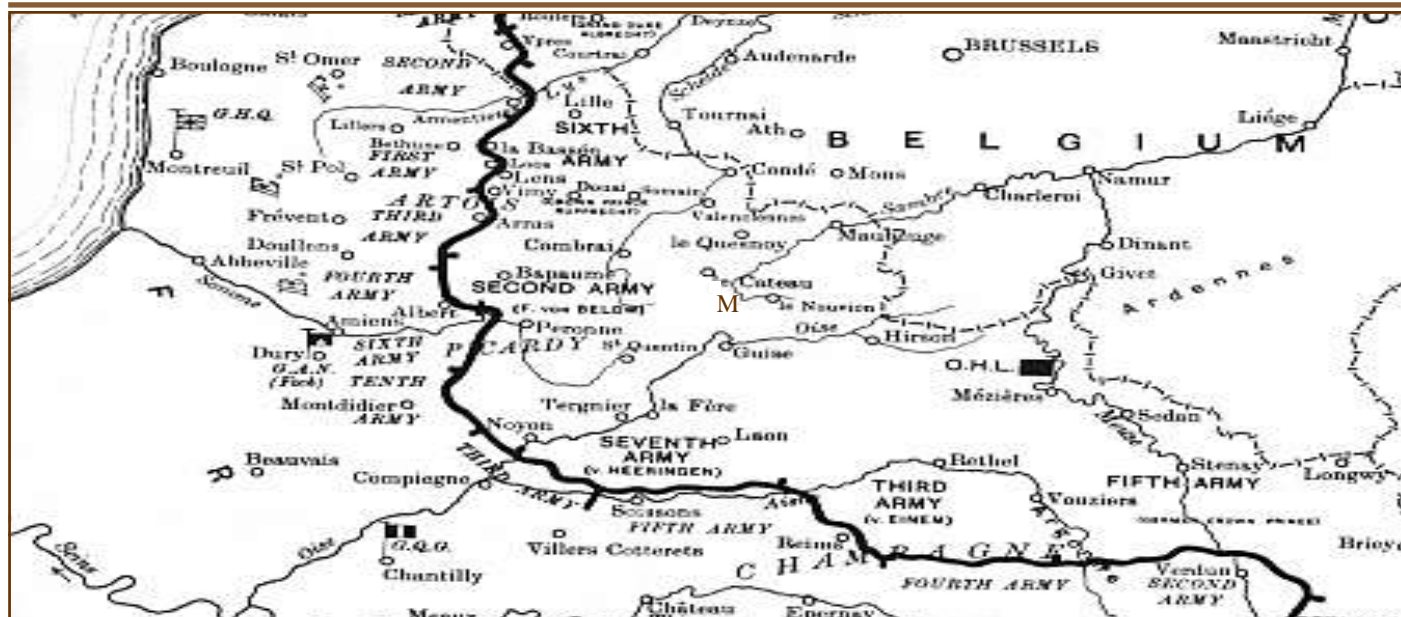
Instruction

- __ Using the “Historical Background Notes” supported by your chosen text, explain to students the significance of the Battle of the Somme; describe the Allied objectives, the major events, and results.
- __ Review questions on the “Viewing Guide” with students and have them answer the questions while watching the film; review answers to “Viewing Guide” following the film
- __ Using “Notes on Historic Figures”, explain to students the significance of Sassoon, Graves, and de Gaulle.
- __ For further study, have students read “Working with Primary Sources” and complete questions.

Enrichment Activities

- __ Write a letter to a loved one as a soldier stationed at the front in either an Allied or German trench. Be as descriptive as possible, including the sights, sounds, and smells of the trench as well as daily routines and combat.
- __ Compose a poem that captures the feelings of a soldiers stationed at the front.
- __ Create a model of a trench network. Label all major components and describe the role that each plays in defense or attack.
- __ Research conditions prison camps used by both the Allied and Central Powers. Compare and contrast the treatment of prisoners, including such things as housing, feeding, access to medical treatment, etc.

The Somme Offensive



Fast Facts

Date of Battle: June 24–November 19, 1916

Location: primarily fought along a twenty-five mile front, north and south of the River Somme in Northern France

Armies Involved: Allies--Britain, France, Belgium; Central Powers--Germany

Commanding Officers: Field-Marshal Sir Douglass Haig (Britain), General Joseph Joffre (France), General Erich von Falkenhayn (Germany)

Casualties: Britain and France—620,000; Germany—450,000

Results: The Battle of the Somme was a costly victory for the Allies; a victory only in terms that ground was gained from the Germans. That ground, however, was little more than five miles (8 km) at its deepest point which fell well short of the hoped for breakthrough. The British themselves gained approximately two miles and lost about 420,000 soldiers in the process, meaning that a centimeter cost about two men.

Chronology of War: 1916

February 21 (to Dec. 18)

Battle of Verdun: German attack fails

April 24-29

Easter Uprising in Dublin against the British

April 26

Germany agrees to transfer of sick and wounded POWs to Switzerland

May 31-June 1

Battle of Jutland between UK and Germany

June 5

Arabs begin revolts against the Turks

July 1-November 19

Battle of the Somme: failed Allied attack against German lines

November 7

Wilson is reelected in US

November 25

German army establishes air force as separate military division

Adventures in Learning with Indiana Jones

Young Indiana Jones and the Trenches of Hell

Student Handout 2: Working with Primary Sources

Name _____

Dreamers

SOLDIERS are citizens of death's gray land,
Drawing no dividend from time's to-morrows.
In the great hour of destiny they stand,
Each with his feuds, and jealousies, and sorrows.
Soldiers are sworn to action; they must win
Some flaming, fatal climax with their lives.
Soldiers are dreamers; when the guns begin
They think of fire lit homes, clean beds, and wives.
I see them in foul dug-outs, gnawed by rats,
And in the ruined trenches, lashed with rain,
Dreaming of things they did with balls and bats,
And mocked by hopeless longing to regain
Bank-holidays, and picture shows, and spats,
And going to the office in the train.



Siegfried Sassoon
1886-1967

Primary Sources: Eyewitness to War

Gas Attacks

I wish those people who write so glibly about this being a holy war could see a case of mustard gas...could see the poor things burnt and blistered all over with great mustard-colored suppurating blisters with blind eyes all sticky...and stuck together, and always fighting for breath, with voices a mere whisper, saying that their throats are closing and they know they will choke.

Vera Brittain

Going "Over the Top"

Before them raged a storm. Bullets fell like hail. Shells shrieked through the air, and burst in all directions. The storm raged without any abatement.... A man went into hysterics, a pitiable object.... A whistle blew. The first platoon scrambled to their feet and advanced at the double. What happened no one could see. They disappeared. The second line followed, and the third and the fourth. Surely no one could live in that hell. No one hesitated. They went forward mechanically, as men in a dream. It was so mad, so unreal....

Donald Hankey

Crossing No-Man's Land

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.

German Machine Gunner at the Somme

British Newspaper Account of the First Day

1st July, 1916: At about 7.30 o'clock this morning a vigorous attack was launched by the British Army. The front extends over some 20 miles north of the Somme. The assault was preceded by a terrific bombardment, lasting about an hour and a half. It is too early to as yet give anything but the barest particulars, as the fighting is developing in intensity, but the British troops have already occupied the German front line. Many prisoners have already fallen into our hands, and as far as can be ascertained our casualties have not been heavy.

The Daily Chronicle (3rd July, 1916)

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Student Handout 3: Working with Primary Sources

Name _____

Analyzing Primary Sources: Sassoon's *Dreamers*

After reading the poem, answer the following questions.

1. What is the tone of Sassoon's poem? What words help to set that tone?
2. What words would you use to describe the soldier who narrates the poem?
3. What questions come to mind when you are reading the poem, either about the subject matter or its author? What are the next steps that should be taken to find answers to those questions?

Analyzing Primary Sources: Eyewitness to War

After reading the eyewitness accounts, answer the following questions.

1. How does the description of gas victims compare with the gas attack scene in the film? Do both incidents portray the same type of gas? How can you tell?
2. Does the "British Newspaper Account of the First Day" support the descriptions of the fighting found in "Going 'Over the Top'" and "Crossing No-Man's Land?" Which accounts may be more reliable?
3. What is the tone of each account? What words help to set that tone?
4. What questions come to mind when you are reading these accounts, either about the subjects or the authors? What are the next steps that should be taken to find answers to those questions?

Adventures in Learning with Indiana Jones

Young Indiana Jones and the Trenches of Hell

Student Handout 1: Viewing Guide

Name _____

Poison gas and prison camps bring home the true horror of war to Indiana Jones in this powerful, dramatic film. As a young soldier in the Belgian Army, Indy learns firsthand the savagery of warfare while participating in the Battle of the Somme. Almost succumbing to despair as his life becomes an endless round of artillery barrages, nerve gas attacks and decaying corpses, Indy fears that death will be his only way out. Then he is captured by the Germans and confined to a POW camp where he and fellow prisoner Charles de Gaulle hatch a daring scheme to win their freedom in true "Great Escape" style.

IDENTIFY

After viewing the film, research the following items and explain their significance.

Battle of the Somme	chlorine and phosgene	barbed wire
Flanders	hand grenades	Siegfried Sassoon
flame throwers	box respirator	Robert Graves
trench mortars	machine guns	Charles de Gaulle



VIEWING QUESTIONS

Part One: The Attack on Chateaux La Masionette

Explain why Indy is in charge of his company when they arrive at the Somme.

Describe the attitudes between the Belgian and the French soldiers. How might this affect their ability to fight the enemy?

Why does Indy not trust Jacques? Is there just cause for his mistrust?

Who does Siegfried Sassoon blame for the continuation of the war?

List three of the "new" weapons that the Germans use to counter the advance of the French and Belgians and explain which one you feel was the most effective and why.

Part Two: The Great Escape

How does Indy come to acquire the papers of a French officer?

Why is Indy sent to a maximum security POW camp?

How do the allied prisoners discover that Indy is not a German spy?

What do the Russians want Indy to do for them?

How do the Russians provide an opportunity for Indy and De Gaulle to escape?

Discussion Question

Often we judge others harshly because they are different than ourselves or because we assume something about them that may not be true. How does this affect our relationship with that person or group of people? Explain how these inaccurate views can be changed.

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Student Handout 4: Historic Figures

Name _____

NOTES ON HISTORIC FIGURES

Siegfried Sassoon

Played by Stevan Rimkus

British poet and novelist, Sassoon was born in 1886 into a wealthy artistic family. After college, he lived in London leading the life of a gentleman poet and privately published some verse. He enlisted in the Royal Welsh Fusiliers two days before England declared war on Germany and was sent to France with the rank of Lieutenant. He proved to be a brave fighter who earned the name "Mad Jack" for his recklessness and won The Military Cross for rescuing a wounded soldier near German lines under heavy fire. At the Somme, he single-handedly captured a German trench. In July 1916, he became ill and was sent back to England for several months to recuperate, a time during which he came to believe the war was being prolonged by inflexible politicians and war profiteers. His older brother was killed in battle. He returned to the front in late 1916, was wounded severely the following spring and sent home again to convalesce. This time his mental condition suffered as much as his physical wounds. Shell shocked, he had hallucinations of corpses lying all around him. He was back on duty by December 1917, but was shot in the head in 1918, permanently grounding him from further action. After the war, Sassoon actively supported socialist and pacifist ideals and published numerous volumes of verse and memoirs. His collection *Counter-Attack* (see *War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon*) contains his savage anti-war poetry, and his *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* offers one of the best personal accounts of WWI.

Charles de Gaulle

Played by Herve Pauchon

French General, Statesman and President of France (1959-69), de Gaulle was born in 1890 into a family of academic and military prominence. After graduation from a military academy, the young officer served with distinction in WWI. Wounded several times, he was captured at Verdun in 1916. He made escape attempts, but because of his height was always easily captured. Eventually he was sent to the Ingolstadt prisoner of war camp where he spent most of the war. De Gaulle was an accomplished military historian and foresaw the use of mechanized tanks and other modern armaments, which came into use in WWII. During the Second World War he was promoted to Brigadier General. He opposed the French-German armistice and fled to London in 1940, where he organized the Free French and colonial forces to work with the Allies. While in exile he was an inspirational leader to his people during the Nazi occupation and reign of the Vichy government in France. When France was liberated, he became the provisional president of France in 1945, but resigned in 1946. He became the head of a new party of rightist elements in 1947, but retired from politics temporarily in 1953. After the Algerian crisis in France in 1958, he was the only leader considered strong enough to handle the situation and was inaugurated as the first President of the Fifth Republic of France in 1959. He allowed Algeria to become independent in 1962, which angered many French colonialists. Much of his term as president was spent restoring France's stature in world affairs. After being defeated on a referendum for constitutional reform in 1969, he resigned. De Gaulle has written several impressive memoirs.

Robert Graves

Played by Jamie Glover

English poet, novelist and critic, Graves was one of the most versatile and prolific of English writers. He grew up a quiet child who loved to read and write poetry. His early verse dealing with themes of love and war are considered his best. His historic novels *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God* were adapted for public television and critically acclaimed. He wrote many fictionalized reappraisals of history and legend, and is also known for his studies of the mythological origins of poetry as in *The White Goddess*, and his two volume *Greek Myths*. Graves also enlisted in the Welsh Fusiliers at the beginning of the war and served in many capacities during WWI. Having some German relatives, many did not trust him, so he spent most of his time reading and writing poetry. After a nerve gas attack in 1915, he was emotionally shattered for a time. He later became good friends with Siegfried Sassoon, the two sharing their poetry with each other. His first collection of poems was published in 1915. He taught trench warfare for a time in early 1916 and was at the Somme in the summer of that year, but was seriously wounded again and transferred home to England. He attended Oxford after the war and worked as a poet, novelist, critic, autobiographer, essayist and translator for the remainder of his life. His memoir *Good-bye to All That* is another of the finest WWI reminiscences, and he also wrote a biography of Lawrence of Arabia, a good friend.

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Student Handout 5: History Through Art

Name _____



Georges Leroux, *L'Enfer (Hell)*, 1917-18, oil on canvas, 114.3 x 161.3 cm, Imperial War Museum, London.

Georges Leroux (1877- ?) was a veteran of the Great War, serving in a French camouflage unit in northern France and Belgium. Upon returning from a particular reconnaissance mission, Leroux recounted that he observed "a group of French soldiers taking shelter in a great shell-hole full of water." He later painted this scene from a sketch made that same evening, resulting in a powerful work that attempts to represent as accurately as possible the horrific reality of war.

Study the picture carefully then answer the following questions

1. What is the mood of the picture? What words would you use to describe it?
2. What are the colors that stand out to you and why do you think Leroux used them?
3. Does the painting tell a story? If so, what?
4. What is Leroux trying to convey to his audience?