

## Is Private Peaceful a reliable interpretation of World War I?

### *Life in the Trenches*

#### **Today I will practise:**

- How to **research** to find information to answer an historical question
- Deciding how **reliable** and useful an interpretation is

The next night we were marching up into the trenches again with hundreds of others, to stiffen the line they told us. That could only mean one thing: an attack was expected and we would be in for a packet of trouble. As it turned out, Fritz was to give us a couple of days' grace – no attack came, not yet.

Charlie came instead, just strolled into our dugout as if he'd been gone five minutes. "Afternoon, Tommo. Afternoon all," he said, grinning from ear to ear. His arrival gave us all new heart. With Sergeant Hanley still on our backs, always on the prowl, we had our champion back, the only one of us who had ever faced him down. As for me, I had my guardian back, my brother and my best friend. Like everyone else I felt suddenly safer.

I was there when Sergeant Hanley and Charlie came face to face in the trench. "What a nice surprise, Sergeant," Charlie chirped. "I heard you'd joined us."

"And I heard you'd been malingering, Peaceful," Hanley snarled. "I don't like malingerers. I've got my eye on you, Peaceful. You're a troublemaker, always have been. I'm warning you, one step out of line. . ."

"Don't you worry yourself, Sergeant," said Charlie. "I'll be good as gold. Cross my heart and hope to die."

The sergeant looked first nonplussed, then explosive.

"Nice weather we're having Sergeant," Charlie went on. "It's raining in Blighty, you know. Cats and dogs." Hanley pushed past him, muttering to himself as he went. It was a little enough victory, but it cheered all of us who witnessed it to the bottom of our hearts.

That evening Charlie and I sat drinking our tea over a guttering lamp and talked quietly together for the first time. I was full of questions about everyone at home, but he seemed unwilling to say much about them. I was taken aback by this, hurt even, until he saw I was and explained why.

"It's like we're living two separate lives in two separate worlds, Tommo, and I want to keep it that way. I never want the one to touch on the other. I didn't want to bring horrible Hanley and whizzbangs back home, did I? And for me it's the same the other way

round. Home's home. Here's here. It's difficult to explain, but little Tommo and Molly, Mother and Big Joe; they don't belong in this hell hole of a place, do they? By talking about them here, and I don't want to do that. You understand, Tommo?"

And I did.

We hear the shell coming and know from the shriek of it that it will be close, and it is. The blast of it throws us all to the ground, putting out lamps and plunging us into pungent darkness. It is the first shell of thousands. Our guns answer almost at once, and from then on the titanic duel is almost constant as the world above us erupts, the roar and thunder pounding us remorselessly all day, all night. When the guns do let up it is all the more cruel, for it gives us some fragile hope it might at last be over, only to snatch that hope away again minutes later.

To begin with we huddle together in the dugout and try to pretend to ourselves it isn't happening, and even if it is, that our dugout is deep enough to see us through. We all know in our heart of hearts that a direct hit will be the end of all of us. We know it and accept it. We just prefer not to think about it, and certainly not to talk about it. We drink our tea, smoke our Woodbines, eat when food comes – which isn't often – and go on living as best we can, as normally as we can.

It doesn't seem possible, but on the second day the bombardment intensifies. Every heavy gun the Germans have seems to be aimed at our sector. There is a moment when the last fragile vestiges of controlled fear give way to terror, a terror that can be hidden no longer. I find myself curled into a ball on the ground and screaming for it to stop. Then I feel Charlie lying beside me, folding himself around me to protect me, to comfort me. He begins to sing *Oranges and Lemons* softly in my ear, and soon I am singing with him, and loudly too, singing instead of screaming. Before we know it the whole dugout is singing along with us. But the barrage goes on and on and on, until in the end neither Charlie nor *Oranges and Lemons* can drive away the terror that is engulfing me and invading me, destroying any last glimmer of courage and composure I may have left. All I have now is my fear.

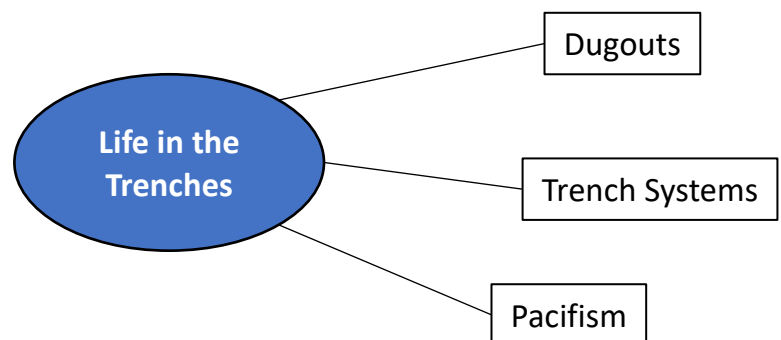
When their attack comes, in the pearly light of dawn, it falters before it even gets near our wire. Our machine gunners see to that, knocking them down like thousands of grey skittles, never to rise again. My hands are shaking so much I can hardly reload my rifle. When they recoil and turn and run we wait for the whistle and then go out over the top. I go because the others go, moving forward as if in a trance, as if outside myself altogether. I find myself suddenly on my knees and I don't know why. There is blood pouring down my face, and my head is wracked with a sudden burning pain so terrible that I feel it must burst. I feel myself falling out of my dream down into a world of swirling darkness. I am being beckoned into a world I have never been to before where it is warm and comforting and all-enveloping. I know I am dying my own death, and I welcome it.

**TASK:** This is an **independent study lesson on trench life in World War I**. Use the PowerPoint to create a mind map **by hand** on life in the trenches.

You will then use this information to assess how reliable Private Peaceful is in terms of its portrayal of trench life.

- Write at least two bullet points on each of the following themes.

- Dugouts
- Trench Systems (different types of trenches)
- No Man's Land
- Pacifism
- Trench Foot
- Rations
- Lice
- Gas
- Tanks
- Casualties



**Challenge Box:** add to your mind-map by recording information from the following websites.

- [www.iwm.org.uk/exhibitions/iwm-london/first-world-war-galleries](http://www.iwm.org.uk/exhibitions/iwm-london/first-world-war-galleries)
- [www.bbc.co.uk/history/0/ww1/25768752](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/0/ww1/25768752)
- [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/greatwar/](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/greatwar/)
- [www.nam.ac.uk/microsites/ww1/stories/](http://www.nam.ac.uk/microsites/ww1/stories/) (National Army Museum)
- [www.footballandthefirstworldwar.org/](http://www.footballandthefirstworldwar.org/)
- [www.bl.uk/world-war-one](http://www.bl.uk/world-war-one) (British Library)