

Unit 7

World War I: Volunteer & Soldiers' Accounts

GRADES 6-12

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The Great War was a very complex, worldwide conflict, which was dominated by trench warfare. In August 1914 the armies of France and Britain, including their colonial troops, were soon engaged on numerous fronts against armies of the Central Powers of Germany, Austria and the Ottoman Empire. America remained largely isolated from the action until President Woodrow Wilson was finally moved to declare war and called for the enlistment of troops in April of 1917. Yet, there were some Americans who participated as non-combatants as early as 1915 before America had even entered the war, notably those involved with the American Ambulance service headquartered in Paris or who assisted with medical units run by numerous Ivy League universities. No matter the year, the location of events or the social status of the individual writing, original stories from the Great War are fascinating.

PROCESS

Students will examine the diary an American physician in France in 1915 and the autobiography of a Polish-born Jew, who wrote about his experiences in Palestine; they will also read letters written by an Australian and an American soldier in 1916 and 1918 respectively.

OUTCOMES

Through their eyewitness accounts students will be have a better understanding of wartime events and their impact on individuals.

Students may wish to read each of their accounts in their entirety, but specific excerpts are suggested if time is limited.

A. Dr. Orville F. Rogers, Harvard Medical Unit, American Ambulance, Paris in June 1915

Orville F. Rogers, Jr. wrote a fascinating account of his experiences in France in a series of six pocket-size diaries – made of carbon paper and tissue pages—sending copies of these diaries home to his father, who had served as a physician in the Civil War.

Excerpts from Rogers' diary are suitable for understanding conditions along frontline trenches during the early part of World War I. The excerpts should be read in conjunction with a Michelin-style map, which will enable students to visualize the locations of action. For instructional purposes, the subject matter can be selected to focus on either the evacuation or the care of the wounded and/or the artillery action along the front lines.

Social Studies

- For medical care, read diary excerpts (pages 35-36, I), beginning with “We went through Courcelles and on to Acheaux . . .” and ending with the second paragraph on page 36, “The ambulance that I rode in” Continue with another ambulance run on page 39, “About as we finished eating . . .” until near the bottom of the page, “At Levancourt we discharged our wounded. . . .”

Where are Courcelles and Acheaux located? In which battle sector (the Somme, the Marne, or Verdun) are they located?

- Read Roger's eyewitness account describing the countryside and shelling, beginning on page 36 with "I believe that at the present time . . ." through to the first sentence on page 39. The account resumes at the top of page 40 and continues to the top of page 42. *What was a "soixant-quinze"? Why was the sight of French airplanes so unique for Rogers?*

Additional Activities:

- Research and report on trench construction as developed during WWI. *What prompted the use of trenches? What are the disadvantages to this system of warfare?*
- Research the history of the American Field Service (ambulance corps). Rogers refers to 'Norton'. Who was he and why was he significant? For background reading, see *Gentlemen Volunteers* (publisher, date).
- Look up definitions for all the French terms used in his diary.
- Rogers' pocket diaries consisted of graph paper and tissue pages, between which carbon paper could be inserted to make a copy. He tore out the duplicate tissue pages and sent them to his father who was a former Civil War surgeon. Students may wish to assemble their own diary or journal and then they can share pages with a friend or family member.

B. Private George R. Duncan, 59th Battalion, 5th Australian Division of the Australian Expeditionary Forces, 1916

Private Duncan's letters, though few in number, still speak volumes. Duncan traveled from his home in New South Wales, Australia to France in 1916. He writes a letter on July 7th, 1916 from "Somewhere in France". Duncan's letter was written on a number of sheets of stationary. For continuity of thought, this writer employed a special technique – can the students discover what this was when they read the letter aloud? To whom he is writing this letter? Have students read the first letter (pages 44-46, II).

Language Arts & Social Studies

- *What are your impressions of Duncan's writing style? What does his writing tell you about him as a person? What types of words does he use to make the images he is seeing come alive for the reader who is thousands of miles away?*
- *What does Duncan say about other nationalities that he observes? Considering the nearness of the war, what are Duncan's feelings about this? Discuss his emotions. Compare and contrast Duncan's experiences with those of Rogers.*
- Have students read his second letter, dated July 10th (pages 46-47, II). Tell students they will have to "read between the lines." *Has the mood changed? How do we know this? What is meant by the word "premonition"? Does this apply to Duncan?*
- Have a student read the final section, "The Battle of Fromelles," aloud. *What happened to Duncan? What are the implications for his family? What does this event indicate about the nature of trench warfare?*

C. Lieutenant Lee A. Hain, Coast Artillery Corps

A single letter from Lt. Hain to his grandmother is representative of many frontline letters. (See pages 73-76, I). He writes this letter from “Somewhere in France” in August 1918. American Doughboys began arriving in France in late 1917 and continued to swell the American Expeditionary Forces well into 1918. Soldiers engaged in any military activities in Europe were forbidden from revealing their unit’s location as a security measure. Only after the signing of the Armistice on November 11, 1918 were soldiers able to reveal their locations and where they had been in preceding months. For many Americans, coming to Europe was one of many new experiences—whether leaving home, sailing on a ship, living in a foreign land and coping with all unusual customs, and regrettably, experiencing combat. This was especially true for Hain.

Hain’s letter should be read in its entirety. His story lends itself for a close comparison with Erich Maria Remarque’s classic anti-war novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Before reading the letter, have students read some selected excerpts from this novel and/or preview a scene or two from the movie.

Language Arts & Social Studies

- *What are your impressions of Hain’s writing style? What does his writing tell you about him as a person? Might a soldier write a different type of letter depending on for whom it is written? Is there a correlation between level of education or profession and written expression?*
- *Compare and contrast Hain’s impressions of the Western Front with those of the hero, Paul Baumer, in All Quiet on the Western Front.*
- *Is Hain’s account believable? Explain. Why does Hain’s attitude about the war change?*
- *Have students do some additional research on Lee A. Hain and his unit. Where was he located along the front? What is the history of the Coastal Artillery Corps? How was his unit different from infantry (where Duncan and Baumer served)?*

Additional Activity:

Locate newspaper accounts from August 1918 that give details about action along the Western Front. Have students read these accounts and then dramatize a reading from some of them. Compare and contrast their writing style and what they are able to report to what Hain includes in his letter.

D. Private Harold Lester Jones & the Big Guns of the Great War

GRADE SPECIFIC 4-6 & 7-8

Creating a War Memorial

Begin this lesson with a web visit at <http://www.worldwar1.com/pharc005.htm>. Discuss the introductory information and the definitions located on this web page along with the pictures of the big guns. Then have students read Harold Jones’ account beginning on page 45 through the top of 46 (Words of War, Vol. 1). Discuss how the “Big Guns” were used and the job of Jones’ regiment. *How might new technology have changed the tactics of warfare?*

GRADES 4-6

- Introduce students to several tactics used in WWI that were unique to that age: trench, poison gas, psychological and tank warfare, along with air combat.

World War I

- Have each student create a diorama that depicts an aspect of modern war. With each diorama, students will include an explanation of which innovation is being depicted and its importance. (“An Archival Look at WWI,” <http://archives.queensu.ca/wwi/technol.html>).

GRADES 7-8

- Have students become more familiar with WWI through an excellent website provided by the BBC in England. http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/worldwarone/teacher/enquiry1_activities.shtml
- Next, visit a local war memorial to collect information. Find out if the memorial is dedicated to veterans of several wars. Then compare the numbers of participants in WWI to other wars that are represented. *What does this tell you about the significance of this war?* [Optional: Do a web search for photos of WWI War Memorials in Britain, France and the United States. *Based on the findings, what are characteristics of most memorials?*]

Culminating Assignment:

You are a member of Congress and you want to introduce a bill to create a World War I Memorial in Washington, D.C. Explain why you want to accomplish this. *Why it is important to the citizens of the United States and the world to have such a memorial? Where in the city of Washington would you propose that it be located? What it should look like?* Include historical facts, pictures and a design in your presentation.

Selected Bibliography:

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