From Youthful Vision to Hard Reality

Part A.

Read the following passages, and answer the questions.

At the beginning, soldiers had no idea of the reality of war.

A Young British Soldier in 1915, about to Go off to War

Secretly he was experiencing much the same feelings of excitement and solemnity as he had known on his first day at school not so many years before. He was on the threshold of what the illustrated papers at home in England called “The Great Adventure,” and to this youth of eighteen, who found himself, after six months training on his way to join a battalion in the field, the War was a great adventure. It was the great adventure.¹

A Young German Soldier in 1914, about to Go off to War

Once it was different. When he went to the district commandant to enlist, we were a class of twenty young men, many of whom proudly shaved for the first time before going to the barracks. We had no definite plans for our future. Our thoughts of a career and occupation were as yet of too unpractical a character to furnish any scheme of life. We were still crammed full of vague ideas which gave to life, and to the war also an ideal and almost romantic character.²

1. What are the attitudes of these young men?

2. Do you think they will keep those attitudes for long? Why or why not?

²Erich Maria Remarque, All Quiet on the Western Front (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1929), 20.
By mid-1916, the war had settled into a grinding struggle of trench warfare. At this point, the men’s image of war had changed.

From *Description of a Charge by a French Soldier in 1916*

Then he flung out the order with the full power of his voice, that terrible irrevocable order, "Advance!"

There stood the Lieutenant, facing his men, his back exposed to the enemy. Favigny was wedged in among them, riveted indissolubly to his fellows. Vibrating in every part, like a clock that has just ceased striking, a living clock that still throbbed with every spent emotion that once could move mankind ... racked, exhausted, and unstrung, he looked out beyond . . .

His section rose in an uplifted line, like one man. They stuck their rifles in the ground above them, their knees bent to their chin as they scrambled up. Against the bulky missapen kit-bags the cans and the bayonets emitted a spectral gleam in the wan daylight.

"They're going over the top, they're going over the top!" A ferocious exultation, a savage joy divorced from all human feeling, transported him as he yelled aloud, "They're going over the top!"

The gulph of shadow stretched across them, blotting out their dim, dehumanised faces, as, welling up with them from the trenches, a hideous, obscene clamour arose. It swelled and drowned even the sound of the machine-guns; a ferous retch of fathomless horror, as though afar off, away from their empty bodies, they were vomiting forth their broken, tortured lives. "Ah ... ah ... ah ... ah ... ah ... ah . . . hi!"

In a sudden bound of sanity, remembering his orders in the overwhelming confusion, Favigny tried to cry out, "Keep the line there, keep the line!"

Two, three, four men crumpled up suddenly, their faces striking the earth, but he could not recognise them.

"Ah ... ah . . . ah ... ah ... ah ... ah . . . ah!"

The surging howl continued, triumphant over all.

Two yards ahead of him the ground heaved suddenly, clouds of earth were tossed up and scattered, then on the right Favigny saw the Lieutenant. Ah, how well he remembered him, that tall, spare figure. But now he was swaying feebly, his arms flapping uselessly up and down; then he collapsed into a flabby, supine heap. Where his head had been there was a bleeding, gaping hole.

And over above the inarticulate roaring Favigny's lament arose: "The Lieutenant is dead; they've killed our Lieutenant."

It was the last thing he was ever to know or see or feel.

Overwhelmed, unheeded, forgotten even of himself, he was swept forward in the flood. His screaming unheard in his deafened ears, his consciousness abandoned, he ran on and on, taking refuge in that cry . . .

"Ah . . . ah . . . ah . . . ah . . . ah . . . ah . . . ah! . . . .

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*Jean Bernier, "The Sacrifice," in Great Short Stories of the War, ed. Minchin, 319-20.*

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From a German Soldier in 1916
Who Has Taken Refuge from Enemy Shelling

The earth bursts before us. It rains clods. I feel a smack. My sleeve is torn away by a splinter. I shut my fist. No pain. Still that does not reassure me: wounds don't hurt till afterwards. I feel the arm all over. It is grazed but sound. Now a crack on the skull, I begin to lose consciousness. Like lightning the thought comes to me: Don't faint! I sink down in the black broth and immediately come up to the top again. A splinter slashes into my helmet, but has travelled so far that it does not go through. I wipe the mud out of my eyes. A hole is torn up in front of me. Shells hardly ever land in the same hole twice, I'll get into it. With one hunch, I shoot as flat as a fish over the ground; there it whistles again, quickly I crouch together, claw for cover, feel something on the left, shove in beside it, it gives way, I groan, the earth leaps, the blast thunders in my ears. I creep under the yielding thing, cover myself with it, draw it over me, it is wood, cloth, cover, cover, miserable cover against the whizzing splinters.

I open my eyes—my fingers grasp a sleeve, an arm. A wounded man? I yell to him—no answer—a dead man. My hand gropes farther, splinters of wood—now I remember again that we are lying in the graveyard.

But the shelling is stronger than everything. It wipes out the sensibilities, I merely crawl still farther under the coffin, it should protect me, though Death himself lies in it.4

3. What has happened to the attitudes of the soldiers by this time in the war?

4. What do you think about what the German soldier did to protect himself? Would you do the same?

5. Would you have gone "over the top" with the French soldier? Do you think that this tactic would work? Why or why not?

4Remarque, All Quiet on the Western Front, 56-67.
Part B.

Answer the following questions.

1. Why do you think there is a change in attitudes from the beginning of the war and the middle of the war?

2. What sort of attitude is developing during the middle of the war? Why do you think that the soldiers are feeling this way?

3. How would you have adapted to surviving trench warfare? Do you think that you might have felt much the same way as these men did? Explain.