

## 2.3A Fighting in the war

The Great War was fought mainly in Europe. The areas where the armies fought each other were called 'fronts'. The longest was the **Western Front** (in Belgium and France) where French, Belgian and British soldiers tried to stop the Germans advancing to the coastline of northern France. But how did they do this? And what was it like fighting under these conditions?

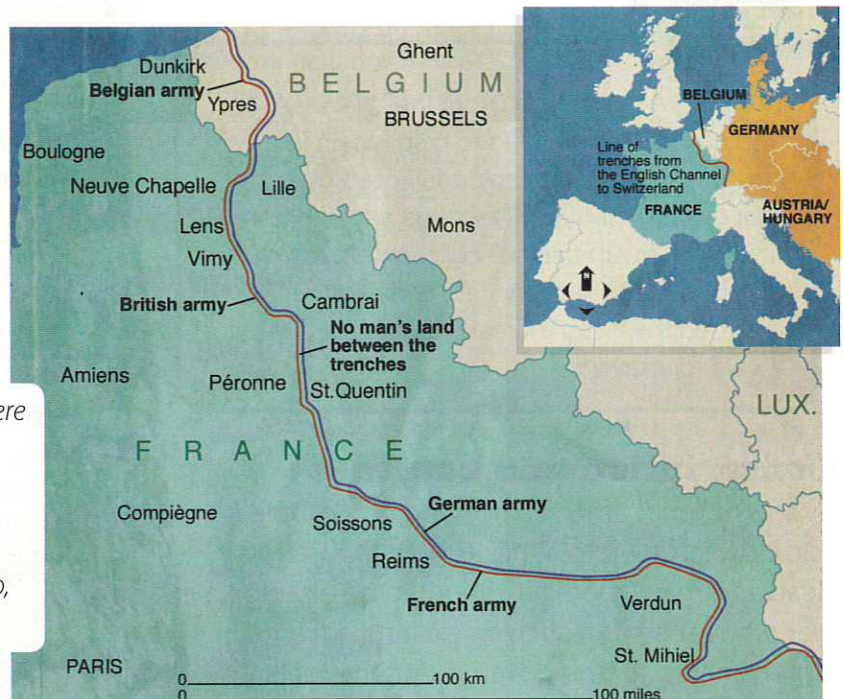
### Mission Objectives

- Describe the typical experience of a soldier in the trenches.
- Identify the main areas of conflict and the main features of trench warfare.

### Digging in

As enemy soldiers faced each other they dug holes in the ground to protect themselves. These soon turned into deep trenches as they dug deeper. Soon, long lines of trenches stretched for over 640 kilometres between the English Channel and Switzerland (see **Source A**).

**SOURCE A:** This map shows the Western Front. There was fighting in the east too (the Eastern Front), where Russians faced Germans and Austrians, and in Turkey (Turkey was on Germany's side). Italy (which joined Britain's side) fought Austria-Hungary on the Italian border and the war spread to Africa and the Pacific too, as Germany's colonies were attacked by Allied forces.



**SOURCE B:** These British soldiers are in a German trench, which was dug into the earth to give protection against enemy fire.



### Trench warfare

Most of the fighting was done by foot soldiers (**infantry**), who spent their days in the trenches they had built in the earth to protect themselves (see **Source B**). The trenches were protected with sandbags and barbed wire. They were defended by men with rifles, **bayonets**, machine guns, and **hand grenades**. A few hundred metres away, the enemy did the same. In between was an area called **no man's land**, a dead world full of bomb craters and rotting human remains.

## Attack!

Occasionally, the soldiers would try to capture each other's trenches. The attackers would run across no man's land towards the enemy trenches and the defenders would try to pick them off with rifle fire and machine guns. For the loss of 50,000 men (yes, 50,000 human beings!), one side might move forward for a week or two and gain a few hundred metres of muddy, useless ground (see **Sources C** and **D**). A week later, for the loss of even more men, they might be pushed back to their original trenches. Unbelievably, despite the loss of millions of men, the Western Front didn't move more than a few miles either way in over four years of war! This was **stalemate** – a complete inability to move forward and a solid determination not to be pushed back. In 1914 Lord Kitchener summed up the stalemate when he said, 'I don't know what is to be done... but this isn't war'.

'At noon we went over the top. After less than 100 yards we came up against an almost concrete wall of whistling and whining machine gun bullets. The company commander had his face shot away; another man yelling and whimpering held his hands to his belly and, through his fingers, his stomach protruded [stuck out]. A young boy cried for his mother, bright red blood pouring out from his face.'

▲ **SOURCE C:** A German soldier's description of a British attack. 'Over the top' was the expression used when soldiers left their trenches and ran towards the enemy.

## Wise Up Words


bayonet censor hand grenade  
infantry no man's land stalemate  
trench foot Western Front


**SOURCE D:** This painting shows Canadian soldiers (who were fighting on Britain's side) taking part in the Battle of Ypres on 8 May 1915. Look for: i) the different weapons used; ii) the Germans charging across no man's land; iii) the commanding officer shouting orders; iv) the dead or wounded soldiers lying on the ground.



## Work

- 1 Work out which of the following sentences are true and which are false. Copy out all the sentences, correcting each false one as you write.
  - a A 'front' is an area where fighting takes place.
  - b All the fighting took place in Europe.
  - c The longest front was the Eastern Front.
  - d The Western Front stretched for 300 kilometres through France and Belgium from the English Channel to Swaziland.
  - e 'Stalemate' is the word used to describe the situation for many soldiers during the Great War – neither side could move forwards and neither side wanted to retreat.

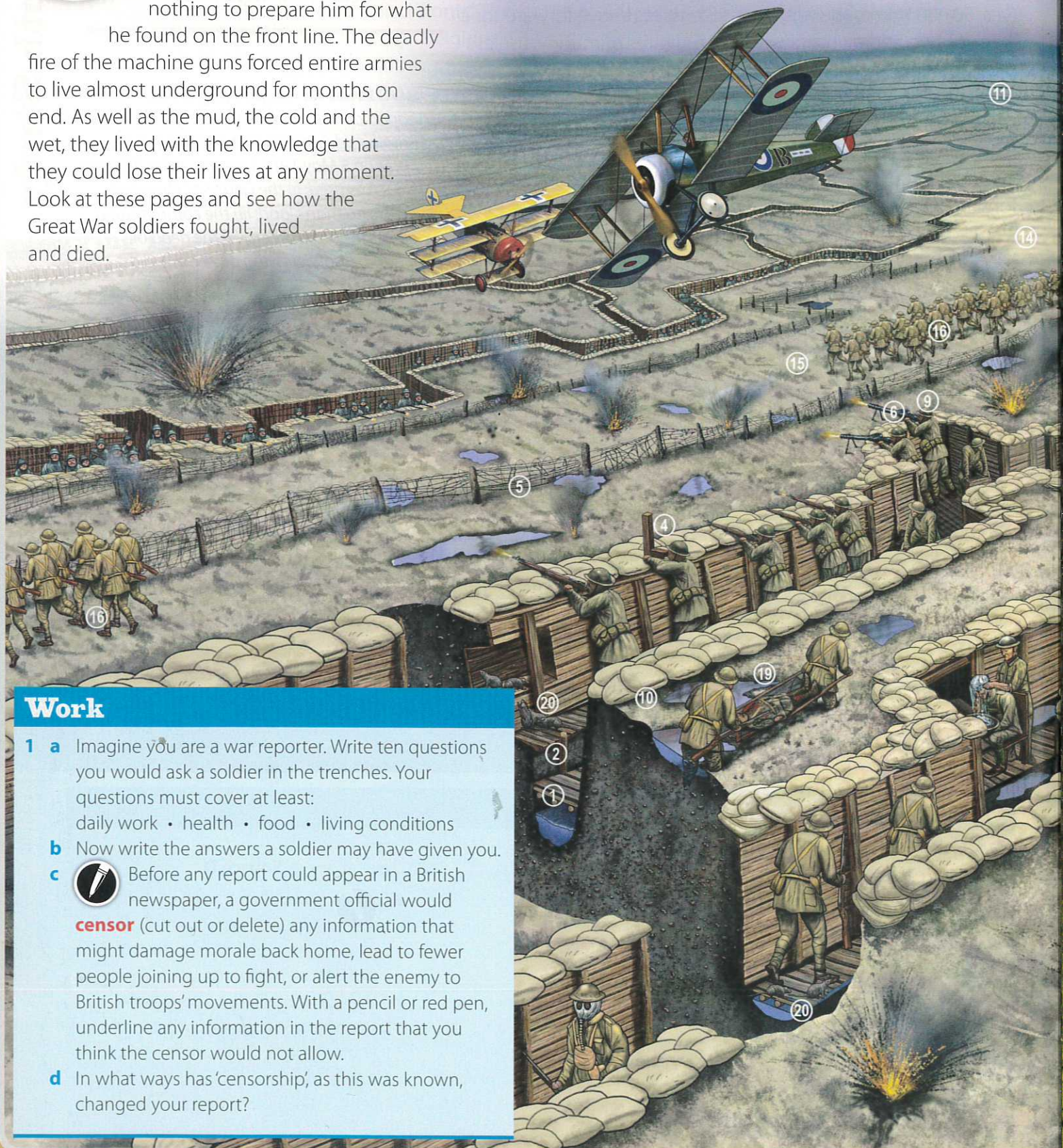
- 2  Look at **Source D**.

- a  Write a paragraph to describe this painting. You must write more than 20 words, but do not use more than 100 words.
- b Use this painting and your own knowledge to explain why trench warfare made it difficult for either side to advance.


## 2.3B Fighting in the war

### On the front line

A soldier's basic training did nothing to prepare him for what he found on the front line. The deadly fire of the machine guns forced entire armies to live almost underground for months on end. As well as the mud, the cold and the wet, they lived with the knowledge that they could lose their lives at any moment. Look at these pages and see how the Great War soldiers fought, lived and died.



### Work

- 1 a Imagine you are a war reporter. Write ten questions you would ask a soldier in the trenches. Your questions must cover at least:  
daily work • health • food • living conditions
- b Now write the answers a soldier may have given you.
- c  Before any report could appear in a British newspaper, a government official would **censor** (cut out or delete) any information that might damage morale back home, lead to fewer people joining up to fight, or alert the enemy to British troops' movements. With a pencil or red pen, underline any information in the report that you think the censor would not allow.
- d In what ways has 'censorship', as this was known, changed your report?



- 1: Duckboards: These were placed on the ground to stop troops sinking in the mud
- 2: Fire step: Soldiers stood on these to look and fire 'over the top'
- 3: Dugouts: Rooms dug out of the back wall of trenches. Orders received by telephone here
- 4: Periscope: Enabled troops to see 'over the top' without risk of being shot
- 5: Barbed wire: Slowed down attacking troops; millions of miles of barbed wire were used
- 6: Machine gun: Rapid-firing gun that mowed down attacking troops
- 7: Concrete bunker: Reinforced underground bunker
- 8: Artillery: Huge guns that fired enormous explosive or poisonous shells for miles
- 9: Machine gun nest: Protected the machine-gunner from enemy fire
- 10: Sandbags: Reinforced the walls, muffled explosions and soaked up moisture
- 11: Aeroplanes: Helped spot targets for artillery, dropped bombs on the enemy and shot down enemy planes
- 12: Communication trench: Linked the front line trench to the reserve trenches
- 13: Reserve trenches: Soldiers went here to rest or to wait to go to the front line
- 14: Gas bell: Would be rung to tell troops to put on gas masks
- 15: No man's land: a muddy wasteland between the two lines of trenches; around 50 to 200 metres wide
- 16: Soldiers split their time between facing the enemy on the front line and recovering in the reserve trenches behind the main ones
- 17: Soldiers didn't fight all the time; as well as guard duty, they collected food, wrote letters, cooked, cleaned their weapons, and repaired the trenches
- 18: The soldiers would be boiling hot in the summer... and freezing cold and wet in winter; many suffered ill health – ulcers, boils, pneumonia, dysentery, and bronchitis
- 19: Spending days knee deep in water could lead to **trench foot**, a painful condition where the foot swells up and develops open sores – it can even rot away
- 20: Keeping clean was tough, so soldiers were infested with lice, and rats roamed the trenches!
- 21: Food was basic – stew, bread and hard biscuits; bacon, cheese and jam were treats but the water tasted of chlorine (used in swimming pools), which killed germs

## Be a Top Historian

Top historians realize that their History studies are full of new words, phrases and ideas. The term 'censor' is an example of this. The spellings and meanings of these words will have to be learned as there is every chance you will use them again when studying history at a higher level.



## 2.4 Weapons of war

In the years leading up to the Great War, there had been great advances in science, design and invention. The technology to build motor cars and aeroplanes had been invented and there had been breakthroughs in physics and chemistry. Sadly, lots of these new ideas would be used to create new weapons that could kill and injure millions of people!

### Mission Objectives

- Explain why the weapons used in the Great War were so deadly.
- Judge which weapons were most effective.

### Rifle



Range = 45%

Killing power = 55%

Defensive ability = 40%

A long gun called a rifle was given to all soldiers. It was lightweight so could be carried easily and was accurate up to 600 metres. A 40cm knife, called a bayonet, was fitted onto the end, which could be used if a soldier's bullets ran out. Highly trained soldiers could fire between 15 and 20 bullets per minute.

### Poison gas



Range = 10%

Killing power = 30%

Defensive ability = 5%

The first ever major poison gas attack was on 22 April 1915. The Germans released gas from cylinders and allowed the wind to carry it over French soldiers on the front line. The French panicked and ran. A six-kilometre gap opened up in the French lines but the Germans didn't have enough men to mount a serious assault. An opportunity like this never happened again but gas proved its worth as a weapon of terror. Soon both sides were using gas. There were two main types:

**Chlorine gas** – this suffocated the lungs and left the victim gasping for air.

**Mustard gas** – rotted the body – skin blistered, eyes bulged. A victim would cough up the lining of his lungs in clots. The pain was so intense that victims often had to be tied down!

Later in the war, gas became less of an effective weapon because gas masks protected troops from the worst effects of the poison.

### Grenade

Range = 15%

Killing power = 55%

Defensive ability = 25%



Grenades are small, hand-held bombs that could be thrown about 40 metres into enemy trenches. They exploded a few seconds after a pin was removed and the outer case would shatter into razor-sharp fragments, causing horrific injuries.

### Machine gun



Range = 45%

Killing power = 85%

Defensive ability = 90%

Invented in around 1862, the machine gun became recognized as one of the Great War's deadliest weapons. They could fire up to ten bullets per second. In the first 12 days of fighting, the French reported losses of over 200,000 men, mostly through machine gun fire. According to British estimates, machine guns caused about 40% of all wounds inflicted on British troops during the whole war.

### What Happened When?

In the same year that the Great War broke out, the British government first passed a law to allow Ireland to rule itself (Home Rule). However, Home Rule for Ireland was postponed because of the war (until 1920).



### Be a Top Historian

Top historians are able to explain why something is important or **significant**. At GCSE level you are required to do this a lot. This double page challenges you to assess the significance of some of the developments in weaponry during the Great War.



## Tank

Range = 45% (if it didn't break down)

Killing power = 60%

Defensive ability = 65%



A British invention, tanks were bulletproof vehicles that could travel over rough terrain, crush barbed wire and cross trenches. At first they were called 'landships' but were code-named tanks in an attempt to convince the Germans they were water tanks and so keep the invention a secret. The name stuck! Although they caused panic and terror on the battlefield, they were very slow (4mph) and unreliable.

All sides saw potential and built their own tanks, but it wasn't until the next world war that tanks became battle-winning weapons.

## Wise Up Words

shell shell shock shrapnel

## Artillery

Range = 100%

Killing power = 75%

Defensive ability = 20%



Artillery is another word for the large, heavy guns that could shoot bombs (**shells**) over long distances. It was common to bombard the enemy trenches for several hours before an attack in the hope you might kill lots of soldiers as they sheltered in their dugouts. In 1915, 400,000 shells (some as big as soldiers) were fired every month on the Western Front. Some big guns could fire shells over a distance of 21 kilometres. When they exploded, the red-hot metal splinters (**shrapnel**) would cut an enemy to pieces. The noise damaged men's brains and made their ears bleed. It caused **shell shock**, a condition similar to a 'nervous breakdown'.

## Flame thrower

Range = 10%

Killing power = 60%

Defensive ability = 2%



A canister was strapped to a soldier's back which forced oil through a nozzle at enemy soldiers. The oil was ignited by a spark to create a sheet of flame that could travel up to 15 metres. Hand-held flame throwers were deadly in small spaces, like dugouts, and caused panic if one was spotted during an attack. Defending soldiers would try and shoot the canister of oil before it got anywhere near. One British soldier who saw a German flame thrower in action said that men who were caught in the blast of the flame 'were never seen again'!

## Fighter and bomber planes

Range = 100%

Killing power = 25%

Defensive ability = 10%



Aeroplanes had first appeared in 1903. When fighting began, the planes were very slow, clumsy and unreliable, and were used for keeping an eye on what the enemy was doing and spotting artillery. At first, pilots fired pistols and even threw bricks at each other, but soon 'fighter' planes armed with machine guns were developed. Not long after, 'bombers' were made to fly over enemy trenches and attack them from the air.

## Work



1 a Copy and complete a larger version of this chart in your book.

| WEAPON: List the eight major weapons. | RANGE: Short, medium or long range? | KILLING POWER: Low, medium or high? | Is it used mainly for attack, defence or both? |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|
|                                       |                                     |                                     |  |

- b In your opinion, which was the Great War's most deadly weapon and why? Back up your opinion with facts and figures.
- c In general, did the weapons used in the Great War make it easier for an army to attack or defend?

## 2.5A Was it right to shoot Harry Farr?

The sheer horror of trench warfare was too much for some soldiers to cope with. The constant danger of death, the relentless noise of shelling and witnessing close friends being killed in terrible ways all took their toll on the men at the front line. More and more men were diagnosed with a condition called shell shock. Some shook uncontrollably, others became paralysed despite suffering no physical injury. Many had panic attacks, cried constantly or were unable to speak. The British soldier in **Source A** would lie perfectly still for hours on end – not responding to any visitors or questions. However, whenever he heard the word ‘bomb’, he would fly into a panic and hide. So how did the British army cope with this problem? What would shell shock be called today? And what were the consequences for Private Harry Farr?

### Mission Objectives

- Define ‘shell shock’ and what it would be called today.
- Decide whether Harry Farr was a coward or the victim of cruel injustice.

### A shocking diagnosis

Shell shock was first diagnosed as an illness in 1915, but doctors struggled to find a way to cure it. They tried rest, hypnosis, counselling, and even electric shocks through the brain. Many men just needed time away from the front line to recover. Unfortunately, when they did get better, they were often sent straight back to fight. Their symptoms soon returned and they sometimes ran away – unable to handle the situation any longer. Commanding officers were keen to maintain discipline, and when these men were caught they were charged with **desertion** or **cowardice**. These were just two of the ‘crimes’ that men could be shot for during the war (see **Source B**). In total, Britain shot 306 of its own soldiers for cowardice and desertion during the Great War. The French shot 600, but the Americans and Australians shot none of their own men. Official figures show that the Germans shot fewer than 50.

- Being a coward (cowardice)
- Leaving their trench or position (desertion)
- Disobeying orders
- Falling asleep on guard duty
- Going on strike
- Throwing away a weapon

**SOURCE B:** The sort of ‘crimes’ for which British soldiers could go on trial (with the possibility of being shot).

### A step too Farr?

Your task over these four pages is to consider the case of Private Harry Farr (see **Source C**). He was put on trial (known as a **court martial** in the army) charged with cowardice, found guilty and shot dead at 6:00am on 18 October 1916. Was this verdict correct? Was he suffering from shell shock? Should he have been in hospital rather than looking down the barrels of a firing squad?

### Farr’s background

Private Harry Farr, who lived in London with his wife and baby daughter, had been a professional soldier in the army since 1908. He had been fighting in France for nearly two years and, in that time, he had reported sick with his ‘nerves’ three times. Each time he had been sent to hospital – once for five months – and he shook so violently that a nurse had to write his letters home to his wife. But, as he wasn’t physically injured, he was returned to the front line each time he recovered. These adapted notes from his court martial tell the story of what happened on his final return to the trenches.

**SOURCE A:** A shell shock victim.



## Wise Up Words

court martial cowardice desertion pardon

**Court Martial at Ville-Sur-Ancre, 2 October 1916****Alleged Offender:** No. 8871 Private Harry T FARR 1st Battalion – West Yorkshire Regiment.**Offence Charged:** Section 4. (7) Army Act: Misbehaving before the enemy in such a manner as to show cowardice.**Plea:** Not Guilty.**SOURCE C:** Private Harry Farr.**THE PROSECUTION** **1st Witness:** Sergeant Major H. HAKING

'On 17 September, at about 9:00am, FARR reported to me well behind the lines. He said he was sick but had left his position without permission. He said he couldn't find his commanding officer. I told him to go to the dressing station [a trench hospital]. They sent him back saying he wasn't wounded. I sent him back to the front lines.

'At about 8:00pm, his commanding officer (Captain BOOTH) told me FARR was missing again. Later on I saw FARR back where I'd first seen him well behind the line. I asked him why he was there. He said, "I cannot stand it". I asked him what he meant and he repeated, "I cannot stand it". I told him to get back to the front line and he said, "I cannot go". I then told BOOTH and two other men to take him back by force. After going 500 metres, FARR began to scream and struggle. I told him that if he didn't go back he would be on trial for cowardice. He said, "I'm not fit to go to the trenches". I then said I'd take him to a doctor but he refused to go saying, "I will not go any further". I ordered the men to carry on but FARR again started struggling and screaming. I told the men to leave

him alone and FARR jumped up and ran back to where I'd first seen him early in the day. He was then arrested.'

**2nd Witness:** Captain J. W. BOOTH

'On 17 September 1916 at 3:00pm I told FARR to get back up to his trench. Later that evening, I could see he was missing without having received permission. At about 9:00pm, I saw him well away from where he should have been. Sergeant Major HAKING ordered me to take him back to his trench under escort. After about 500 metres, FARR became violent and threatened the three of us. FARR was later arrested.'

**3rd Witness:** Private D. FARRAR (one of the soldiers ordered to take FARR back to his trench)

'On 17 September 1916, at about 11:30pm, I was ordered by Captain BOOTH to take FARR back to the trenches. After going 500 metres, he started struggling and saying he wanted to see a doctor. The Sergeant Major said he could see one later. FARR refused to go any further. I tried to pull him along. The Sergeant Major told me to let go and FARR ran off.'

**4th Witness:** Lance-Corporal W. FORM

Lance-Corporal FORM said exactly the same as Private FARRAR, the third witness.

**Work**

- 1 a** Write a sentence or two to explain these terms:
  - shell shock • desertion • cowardice • court martial
- b** How many people did the British shoot for cowardice and desertion during the Great War?

- 2** Up to this point, what is your impression of i) Sergeant Major Haking and ii) Private Harry Farr?

## 2.5B Was it right to shoot Harry Farr?

After the army presented its prosecution case, it was time for Harry Farr to try and defend his actions.

### THE DEFENCE

Harry Farr was not given an opportunity to ask someone to help him with his defence. Instead, he defended himself.

**First witness:** The accused, Private H FARR

'On 16 September 1916, I started to feel sick. I tried to get permission to leave the trenches but couldn't because people were asleep or unavailable. Eventually, I found Sergeant Major HAKING on 17 September at 9:00am and he told me to go to the dressing station. They said I wasn't physically wounded and sent me back to my trench. I started to go but felt sick again so I told an ordinary officer where I was going and went back well behind the front line again.

'When I saw Sergeant Major HAKING, I told him I was sick again and couldn't stand it. He said, "You're a f\*\*\*\*\* coward and you'll go back to your trench. I give f\*\*\* all for my life and I'd give f\*\*\* all for yours so I'll get you f\*\*\*\*\* well shot". I was then escorted back to my trench. On the way, we met up with another group of soldiers and one asked where I'd been. Sergeant Major HAKING replied, "Ran away, same as he did last night". I said to HAKING that he'd got it in for me.

'I was then taken towards my trench but the men were shoving me. I told them I was sick enough already.

Then Sergeant Major HAKING grabbed my rifle and said, "I'll blow your f\*\*\*\*\* brains out if you don't go". I called out for help but there was none. I was then tripped up so I started to struggle. Soon after, I was arrested. If no one had shoved me I'd have gone back to the trenches.'

**Court question:** Why haven't you been sick since you were arrested?

**Answer by FARR:** Because I feel much better when I'm away from the shell fire.

**Second witness:** Sergeant J. ANDREWS

'FARR has been sick with his nerves several times.'

**Character witness:** Lieutenant L. P. MARSHALL

'I have known FARR for six weeks. Three times he has asked for leave because he couldn't stand the noise of the guns. He was trembling and didn't appear in a fit state.'

**Character Witness:** Captain A. WILSON

'I cannot say what has destroyed this man's nerves, but on many occasions he has been unable to keep his nerves in action. He causes others to panic. Apart from his behaviour when fighting, his conduct and character are very good.'

### What happened next?

The entire court martial took about 20 minutes. Soon after, the judging panel gave its verdict... GUILTY. They said, 'The charge of cowardice is clearly proved and the opinion of Sergeant Major HAKING is that FARR is bad. Even soldiers who know him say that FARR is no good.'

On 14 October 1916 Harry Farr's death sentence was confirmed by Sir Douglas Haig, the man in charge of the British Army. He was shot at dawn on 18 October 1916. He refused to be blindfolded. According to his death certificate, 'death was instant'. He has no known grave and doesn't appear on any war memorials. At first, his widow was told he had been killed in action, but was later told the truth when her war pension was stopped. Widows were not entitled to a pension if their husband had been shot for cowardice.

### The Shot at Dawn campaign

In the years following the war, many relatives of the executed men campaigned to have their names and reputations cleared. They believed it was the army's lack of understanding about shell shock – not cowardice – that had led to many of the men's deaths. In June 2001, a memorial to the 306 British soldiers killed by their own side was unveiled by Mrs Gertrude Harris – the daughter of Private Harry Farr (see **Source B**). In 2006, the British government looked into the cases once more and decided to **pardon** all the men who had been 'shot at dawn'.

### Hungry for More?

Why might Sir Douglas Haig, the man in charge of the British Army, think it was important to execute soldiers like Harry Farr? What do you think he was worried would happen if Farr had been allowed to go home unpunished? Why was it important to make an example out of 'deserters' and 'cowards'?



**SOURCE A:** As a result of the Shot at Dawn campaign, many soldiers whose names had been missing from their local memorials have been added. This soldier, Joseph Bateman, who was 'shot at dawn' for desertion in 1917, was added to the memorial in his home town of Wordsley, West Midlands, in 2008.


**FACT!**

In 1922 a British War Office committee announced that shell shock didn't exist and that it was a collection of already known illnesses. Today, it is recognized as a genuine condition and is called 'post-traumatic stress disorder'.



**Work**

- 1 **a** Write a definition of the word 'contradict'.
- b** In what ways does Harry Farr's version of events on 17 September 1916 contradict Sergeant Major Haking's?
- c** In what ways are the two versions similar?
- d** Why do you think it is difficult for two versions of the same event to agree with each other all the time?

- 2 **a** In your opinion, was Harry Farr a coward or was he suffering from shell shock? You should include details from some of the witnesses in your answer.
- b**  Write two letters. The first should be from Sergeant Major Haking, one of Harry Farr's commanding officers. It was common practice for commanding officers to write home to the family of any dead soldiers in their 'care'. Imagine you are Haking and write a letter to Harry's widow informing her of the situation surrounding his death. The second letter should also be to Harry's widow but from one of Harry's friends, perhaps Captain Wilson.
- c** In what ways are the letters similar and different? Give reasons for your answer.



**SOURCE B:** This memorial at Alrewas, near Lichfield, Staffordshire is based on a young soldier named Herbert Burden. He lied about his age to join up and, when he ran away after seeing all his friends killed in a battle, he was executed. At the time of his death he was 17 years and 10 months old – still officially too young to have been in the army in the first place.