

GENERALS DIE IN BED

by **Charles Yale Harrison**

Genre Fiction, novel

- Themes**
 - Choices affecting others
 - Class differences
 - Coming of age/loss of innocence
 - Courage/bravery
 - Death/loss
 - Fiction vs reality
 - Friendship
 - War and peace

Reading Level Grades 9+

Summary

Drawing on his own experiences in the First World War, Charles Yale Harrison tells a stark and poignant story of a young man sent to fight on the Western Front. It is an unimaginably harrowing journey, especially for one not yet old enough to vote.

In sparse but gripping prose, Harrison conveys a sense of the horrors of life in the trenches. Here is where soldiers fight and die, entombed in mud, surrounded by rats and lice, forced to survive on insufficient rations.

Generals Die in Bed brings to life a period of history through the eyes of a twenty-year-old narrator, who reminds us that there is neither glamour nor glory in war.

wooden pathways—duckboards—had to be laid for men and mules to walk on, and wooden roads built to move guns. Even the dry ground of the Somme battlefield was like a deeply plowed field. In these circumstances the defender could bring in soldiers by train to build new trench lines before the attacker could advance with his artillery to repeat the shelling process. Hence most battles were drawn out and gained very little new ground.

Each side tried a technological solution to this problem. The Germans were first. They decided to obliterate the defenders by flooding them with poison gas. In the beginning the gas was released from canisters and carried by the wind over the opposing front lines. Later, artillery shells were filled with gas and detonated in the opposing trench system. With the defenders dead or incapacitated, and the ground intact, soldiers could break through the opposing lines with ease. Poison gas became ineffective, however, when each side quickly developed gas masks.

The British came up with a bulletproof, self-propelled vehicle, called a tank. It ran on caterpillar tracks and could move over chewed-up ground, shell holes, and trenches, and through barbed wire. Tanks were equipped with two small artillery guns, and were large, very slow, and mechanically unreliable. To keep them secret, the first ones sent to France were covered in tarps and called water tanks. The response to tanks was the development of artillery to disable them.

At the outbreak of World War I the Canadian army was very small, about 3,000 regular soldiers and approximately 60,000 in militia units. A call for volunteers in August 1914 brought forth 33,000 recruits. After initial training, they, the First Contingent (see glossary entry), went to Britain in one large convoy in October 1914. After further training they were organized into the 1st Canadian Division and went to the front in France, in early 1915. The Canadian government insisted that the Canadian soldiers fight as all-Canadian units rather than be distributed as reinforcements among British units. This was the result of growing Canadian nationalism. However, few Canadians were trained as higher-level officers (generals) or as staff officers, and so for the first three years of the war the Canadian army borrowed officers from the British army. The Canadian soldiers participated in many of the important battles and were present at many of the historic “firsts” of the First World War.

The trench stalemate had solidified by November 1914 with the failure of the Germans to capture the city of Ypres (First Battle of Ypres). In April 1915 the 1st Division took over a section of the front line in the Ypres salient, only days before the Second Battle of Ypres began. This battle, on April 22, 1915, marked the first major use of poison gas on the Western Front by the Germans as a means of breaking the trench deadlock. Chlorine gas was used on the French divisions and on their neighbors, the Canadians. The 1st Division stood firm in the midst of the disaster. After a week of grim fighting, the British and French high commands were forced to admit defeat, and the front



attacks. In August the experienced and trained American divisions were formed into the First American Army. Their first major offensive was the Battle of the St. Mihiel Salient, September 12–16. This was a success, and an American victory. The Second American Army was formed in October 1918 and took part in the Battle of the Meuse-Argonne, an offensive that lasted up to the ceasefire on November 11, 1918.

RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS

 **F** **Sac c**, National Film Board of Canada. 40 minutes.

A tour of the Canadian war cemeteries of the two world wars, this film uses available newsreel footage to show the original battle, juxtaposes it with footage of the present (the 1960s), and includes a brief commentary about the battle or cemetery. The first time I showed this film in class, the period ended before the film did and the class refused to leave. They sent the most persuasive student to apologize and beg forgiveness of the teacher for their next class. The film ends with a visit to Vimy Ridge, culminating in a zoom up to the Vimy Ridge Memorial. Stunning! I used it in my classes for years to mark November 11, until the school decided to feature it in the Remembrance Day assembly.

For eighty-five years there has been debate about who or what was responsible for the horrendous casualty tolls and general horrors of the war. Initially, several influential military writers (B.H. Liddell-Hart and J.F.C. Fuller in the 1920s and 1930s) put the blame on stupid and callous generals. This viewpoint tends to see the trench stalemate as a static situation, whereas in reality the defense reacted to changes in the tactics and technology of the attackers. For most of the war the defense adapted more quickly than the offense. In the last twenty years there has been much research by military historians, and a more balanced view is beginning to emerge.

Alan Clark, **T. D** (London: Hutchinson, 1961).

This is an example of the traditional view written by an established military historian. It is highly readable, although one-sided.

Robin Neillands, **T. G a Wa G a , W F 1914' 18** (London: Robinson, 1999).

This is a revisionist view, attempting to show how each general reacted to the changing situation. It is a long book, so I would suggest looking at the following pages: chapter 1, pp. 1–20; chapter 14, pp. 309–311; chapter 19, pp. 409–38, on the first large-scale use of tanks—the Battle of Cambrai; pp. 487–96 for the Battle of Amiens; and chapter 23, pp. 507–26, for a summary.

John Ellis, *They Were There: The Trenches, 1914-1918* (London: Croom Helm, 1976).

A British military historian, Ellis focuses on the life and routines of ordinary soldiers in World War I. An honest and brutally realistic description of war in the trenches, it puts the emphasis squarely on the hell of war.

Desmond Morton, *Why Not: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War* (Toronto: Random House, 1993).

A Canadian military historian, Morton takes a wider view of his topic, exploring the process from recruitment, training, fighting, and being taken prisoner, to returning to Canada after the war's end.

Desmond Morton and J.L. Granatstein, *MacArthur: Canadian War, 1914-1919* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1989).

There are literally thousands of histories of the Great War. This summarizes the Canadian war contribution both in the trenches and at home.

L. Stallings, *The Diary of an AEF Soldier* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963). This shows the war from the point of view of the American soldier. It is an anecdotal description of the fighting and the battles rather than a description of everyday life in the trenches.

I.M. Parsons, ed. *My War: MacArthur's Poems, First World War* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1968).

This is my favorite collection of First World War poetry.

GLOSSARY

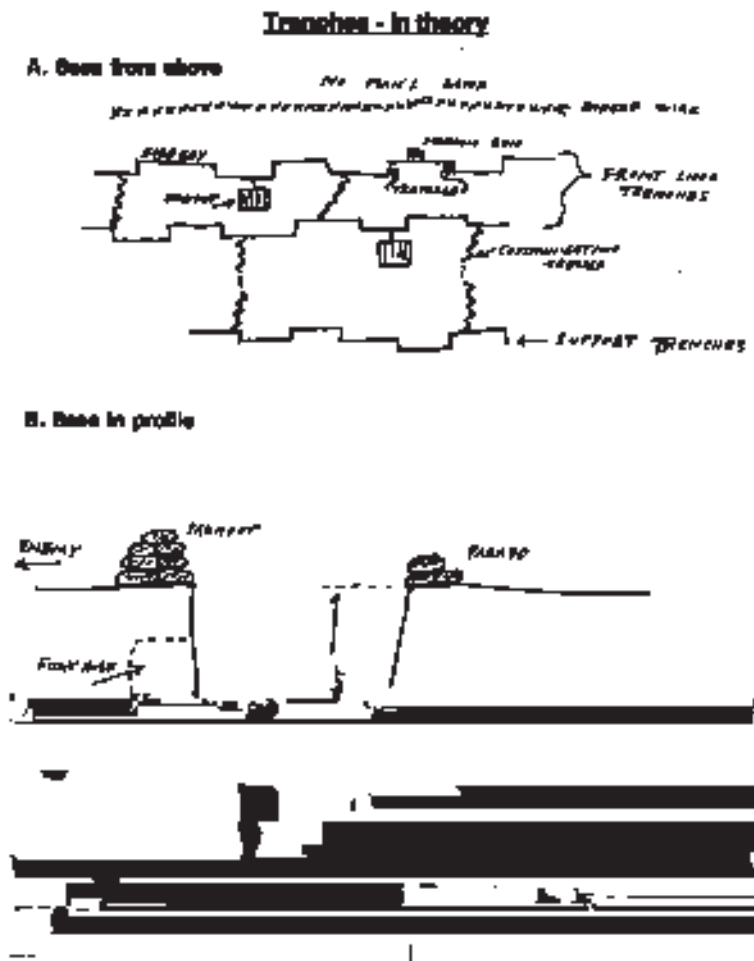
Wound A non-fatal wound that would take the soldier out of the front lines permanently. With luck, the wound would not cause permanent disfigurement or disability.

Trench An underground living and sleeping space built into the trench system. There were usually several feet of earth and sandbags above the roof to give protection from anything but a direct hit by a large-caliber shell. See the diagram at the end of the glossary.

1.1.1.1 An eating and drinking place well behind the lines, where soldiers out of the front lines could go to buy food, drink, and sometimes entertainment. It was somewhat similar to a modern bistro or pub.

1.1.1.2 A military term for work parties of soldiers. The work could involve repairing trenches, digging new trenches, installing barbed wire, or carrying supplies and ammunition up to the trenches.

1.1.1.3 In theory, a trench was deep enough for a soldier to walk upright and still have his head below ground level. In order for a soldier to be high enough to see over the top of the parapet and fire a rifle, there was a step or ledge partway up the forward wall of the trench that he could stand on.



1.1.1.4 The first group of Canadians who came overseas (October 1914) to fight in France or Flanders.

1.1.1.5 A hole or cavity dug out of the side of the trench that was large enough for a soldier to lie in and/or sleep in. It gave protection from the weather and, most important, from shrapnel bursts. See the diagram at the end of the glossary, and the entry for Shrapnel.

Chamberlain A portable submachine gun, it weighed just under 30 pounds (13.5 kg) and its pans of ammunition held 47 bullets. Troops carried this gun into battle because it could be easily set up, particularly for the defense of captured trenches.

Minnenwerfer Sometimes called a minnie—a German trench mortar. These short-range weapons could lob explosives in a high arc, over parapets or obstructions, into opposing trenches. Much of the other artillery fired shells in a straight line, and the shell's speed made a whining sound that warned soldiers of its approach. Veteran soldiers could even tell from the sound if the shell was short, over, or about to hit their position. A *minenwerfer*, by contrast, gave little warning as it did not travel fast enough to make a sound—until it exploded.

Back parapet Similar to the parapet, but on the back side of the trench. See the diagram at the end of the glossary.

Barbed wire The sandbag or earthen wall above the top of the trench on the enemy side, which gave protection from bullets. See the diagram at the end of the glossary.

Front-line trench system These terms refer to a soldier's place of duty in the trench system. *Trenches* means in the front-line trench or trench system. *Supports* refers to the second-line system of trenches, which could be from one hundred yards (90 m) to four hundred yards (365 m) to the rear. Soldiers in trenches or supports would be involved in any raid on their trenches or on the enemy trenches. *Reserves* usually meant a half-mile (0.8 km) to a mile and half (2.4 km) behind the lines. Soldiers in reserves provided immediate reinforcements for counterattacks, replacing casualties and the like.

Shrapnel An artillery shell that, when exploded, threw a large volume of small metal shards in all directions. These shards would wound a soldier unless there was overhead protection. Shrapnel shells could be fused to explode in the air or on contact. Artillery fire, particularly shrapnel, caused about two-thirds of the casualties in the First World War.

Wiring parties Terms for different kinds of fatigues. Wiring parties repaired barbed wire or laid new wire. Sapping was the digging of shallow trenches out into no man's land, sometimes in preparation for an attack or raid, sometimes to provide an observation or sniping position. A carrying party backpacked supplies up to and into the front-line trenches. All of these tasks were usually done at night, to avoid being shot at, machine-gunned, or shelled.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

There are many ways of using this novel in a history or social studies class. An ideal situation would have the class stay together for both the English and history/social studies classes. The novel would then be studied in both classes simultaneously, with history mining the story for the historical content, while the character, plot, setting, and so on would be explored in English.

The reality is that *Generals Die in Bed* will usually be used in one subject area only, and I have a number of suggestions for learning activities in the history class. The experiences described by the author should arouse a powerful curiosity in the students about how people could live in such conditions. They should also wonder how warfare could produce a situation such as this. Beginning activities should start them thinking in these areas. Many of these activities will, coincidentally, be used to develop discussion and writing skills, through small-group discussions and writing of journal entries (keeping a log). I found that getting a short written or verbal summary from each group was most enlightening. It gave me a strong feel for the students' level of knowledge and the nature of their misconceptions. I was often surprised, sometimes dismayed, and occasionally astounded. As a result of my discoveries, I frequently changed the emphasis of what I taught and how I taught it.

One method increasingly used in schools is having students keep journals, or logs, of their learning experiences. This should lead to reflection by the students on the process of learning. One suggestion is to have students, at the end of the unit on the Great War, reread their journals and write a short summary of the changes in their knowledge and attitudes towards soldiers and war.

One possibility is to use *Generals Die in Bed* as an introduction to the First World War. The class should already have "done" the causes and events leading to the outbreak of the war. Another possibility is to read the novel at the end of the unit on World War I. Having learned how the war was fought, and the important battles and events, the students now get a soldier's-eye view of it. *Generals Die in Bed* will show the overwhelming emotional and psychological impact of the conditions in which men lived and fought.

Many of the following activities are open-ended and definitely not "right-answer" oriented. They offer a series of suggestions to choose from.

BEFORE STARTING THE BOOK:

Activities to build the context and introduce the topic of the book, and to establish prior knowledge and interest and develop predictions of what the text will be about.

Introduce the students to the glossary terms and the diagrams of the trench system. The author assumes that the reader understands these terms.

A1. This activity focuses on the nature of World War I. The ideas of many students are based on current media, particularly Hollywood and made-for-TV war movies. This should not be a long exercise and is probably best done in small groups. Students should make a written summary of their answers to share with the class and as a record for themselves. It might be interesting to look at these writings again after the class has finished studying World War I.

- What do you think would be:
 - the worst difficulties faced by a soldier?
 - a soldier's most memorable wartime experiences?
- How would soldiers live and survive for a week in the presence of the enemy?

WHILE READING THE BOOK

Activities to check on comprehension, stimulate interest, involve readers in reflection as they read, and encourage consideration of other readers' reactions.

B1. This activity focuses on the emotions produced by Harrison's novel. Class discussion or small-group discussion may be used, or this could be the topic for a short writing exercise.

- What feelings or emotions does the novel arouse in you? Why? Give some examples from the text of particularly emotional passages.
- Do you identify with any particular person or group? Why?
- By the end of the novel, what attitude or attitudes do you have towards soldiers of the First World War?
- Will this influence how you treat veterans? How? Why?

B2. This activity focuses on the author's view of war. It may be done in small groups or as individual work. Students should summarize their answers in their notes and journals. The journal should also record the student's reaction to the author's viewpoint.

- What is the author's view of the war? Choose some passages or specific images from the text to support your view.

—Has his point of view changed from the beginning of the novel to the end?

Choose some passages or specific images from the text to support your view.

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—What incidents, scenes, or topics does the author choose to describe?

—How do they show his view of war?

B3. These activities focus on narrow, practical facts of history. They are perhaps best done in small groups. Have students make a summary of their answers for you and the class, and write it in their journal.

Ask students to list and describe the weapons available to the armies of 1914.

—How was the war fought? i.e., How would these weapons be used?

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Ask students to list the personal equipment needed by each soldier to live and fight on a battlefield for a week, i.e., to camp out on a firing range but hide behind the targets. Stress the practical aspects, such as:

—How much would it all weigh?

—How did a soldier avoid losing his equipment?

Note: Students will need help with the second activity, as there is not enough detail in the novel. There are pictures of a soldier's kit and an equipment list for a typical soldier in World War I on pp. 33–36 of Ellis, *Eye-Deep in Hell*.

AFTER READING THE BOOK

Activities to inspire continued reflection and response to the text, bring conclusion to the experience of reading this particular text, and stimulate further extensions.

C1. This is a quick exercise to shift the student's focus from the novelist's perception to the actual history.

—On the basis of the scenes in the novel, where do you think the average soldier spent most of his time during the war?

This information should now be given to the students:

C.E. Carrington, a British infantry officer who served in World War I, wrote of his experiences long after the war (1965). Using his diary, he described his war in 1916. In the entire year he was "in action" (fighting) on only four occasions, and this included the Battle of the Somme. There was one attack, two trench raids, and one defense against a counterattack. He also accounted for his activities for the year as follows:

—65 days in front-line trenches (12 separate tours)

BEFORE STARTING THE BOOK:

Activities to build the context and introduce the topic of the book, and to establish prior knowledge and interest and develop predictions of what the text will be about.

- A1. In groups of three or four, identify some of the wars that are taking place in the world today.
- Who is involved in each war?
 - Why are they fighting?
 - To what extent do these wars affect you? Explain.

If you were to join the military, in which branch would you prefer to serve? Why? Which tasks would be most difficult and dangerous? Explain.

WHILE READING THE BOOK

Activities to check on comprehension, stimulate interest, involve readers in reflection as they read, and encourage consideration of other readers' reactions.

- B1. Keep a log in which you:
- Identify one key event from each chapter and briefly describe your reaction to it.
 - Copy out at least one sentence from each chapter that made a strong impression on you, and, in a sentence for each, explain why.
 - List any words that are new to you, with their meanings.
 - Record, in three or four sentences, your feelings at the end of each chapter.

AFTER READING THE BOOK

Activities to inspire continued reflection and response to the text, bring conclusion to the experience of reading this particular text, and stimulate further extensions.

The following assignments may be done individually or in small groups.

- C1. SETTING (time and place)

The primary setting of the novel is the trenches of the Western Front during the First World War.

- What other locations serve as settings in the novel?
- Write one paragraph in which you describe in your own words the primary setting, and a second paragraph in which you describe one of the other settings.

C2. PLOT

A plot is composed of a series of interrelated events that lead to a major crisis or turning point in the fortunes of the main character. The plot also builds to a climax, the point of highest emotional intensity for the reader. Sometimes the major crisis and the climax occur at the same time.

- Select five key events in the novel, including the major crisis and the climax.
- Explain the importance of each event.
- Justify your choice of major crisis and climax.

C3. CHARACTER

A character sketch includes both physical details and personality traits.

Write character sketches for the main character and two other characters of your choice.

- In the opening sentence of each sketch, identify the character.
- In the second sentence, state three dominant characteristics.
- In the next six to nine sentences, illustrate these characteristics with specific reference to the novel in the form of examples and/or quotations.
- Finally, write a concluding sentence that sums up your overall impression of the character.

C4. POINT OF VIEW

Sometimes an author tells a story in the third person. At other times the author has a character tell the story in the first person, that is from his or her own point of view. In this case the reader sees the world through that character's eyes, and tends to sympathize with him or her. Other characters may view events differently from the one telling the story.

Pretend you are one of the following characters: Captain Clarkcharacter tell

C5. LANGUAGE

Some words are particular to a time and place, and have little meaning for people years later.

—Define the following words that were familiar to soldiers at the time of the First World War:

swagger stick (p.#16)
dugout (p.#43)
sapping party (p.#65)
No Man's Land (p.#21)
parados (p.#43)
shock troops (p.#70)
firing-step (p.#21)
communication trench (p.#43)
MC (p.#71)
Lewis gun (p.##23)
puttee (p.43)
Very light (p.#73)
Minnies (p.#24)
rations (p.#45)
barrage (p.#74)
parapet (p.#24)
the front (p.#47)
greatcoat (p.#84)
Blighty (p.#29)
field dressing station (p.#51)
MO (p.#86)
batman (p.#32)
billet (p.#51)
MM (p.#86)
estaminet (p.#39)
latrine (p.#55)
jumping-off ladder (p.#121)
enfilade fire (p.#42)
fatigues (p.#65)
infiltration (p.#158)

—Identify ten words in common use today that might have little meaning to people fifty years from now.

The author uses comparisons to make his scenes vivid to the reader. He uses similes, for example, "Whips snap like revolver shots over the heads of the struggling beasts" (p.#50). He also uses metaphors, for example, "The road is an inferno" (p.#51). Thirdly, he uses personification: "The trench rocks and sways. Mud and earth leap into the air" (p.#24).

—Choose five striking comparative images and explain why they create a strong sensory impression on the reader.

C6. THEME

There are recurrent themes in literature. These include war, loss of innocence, class differences, friendship, and betrayal.

—What statement is Harrison making about these particular themes in his novel?

—What other themes does he address?

C7. Plan and write an essay of about 500 words on one of the following topics. Create a thesis from the topic you have chosen or that has been assigned. Determine three to five arguments that you would use to support the thesis. For each argument, select three or four examples and/or quotations to illustrate your point.

—Experiences in war dehumanize people. Agree or disagree.

—No matter which side he is on, winning or losing, the common soldier is always a victim. Agree or disagree.

—"Difficult experiences often cause people to become stronger."

To what extent does this statement apply to the main character of the novel?

—The novel *Generals Die in Bed* is relevant to today's reader. Agree or disagree.

C8. Choose one of the following ideas or create your own:

—Interview someone who is currently serving in the military, has previously served in the military, or has experienced war as a civilian. Plan your questions carefully before the interview, but be flexible during it. You may wish to tape it.

—With a partner acting as a news anchor, pretend you are a news correspondent reporting from a war zone.

—Write a poem about war.

—Create a collage that shows either the horror of war or the appeal of military life.