English KS4

The Animals' War
Lessons 1 & 2: *All Quiet On The Western Front*

Fiction text A: Full text extract from *All Quiet On The Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque (chapter 4, pages 36-45)

We've been ordered up the line on wiring duty. The trucks turn up for us as soon as it starts to get dark. We scramble aboard. It is a warm evening, the twilight is like a blanket wrapped around us, and we feel comforted by this protection. It brings us closer together; even Tjaden, who is usually a bit stingy, gives me a cigarette and lights it for me.

We stand next to one another, packed tightly, and no one can sit down. We aren't used to sitting down anyway. At last Müller is in a good mood again; he is wearing his new boots.

The engines rev up, the trucks rattle and clatter. The road surfaces are worn out and full of holes. No lights are allowed, and so we run into the holes and all but get thrown out of the truck. That possibility doesn't bother us much. What would it matter – a broken arm is better than a hole through the belly, and plenty of us would actually welcome a chance like that to get sent home.

Alongside us, long columns of munition trucks are moving up. They are in a hurry and keep on overtaking us. We shout out jokes to the men and they answer us.

We make out a wall, which belongs to a house set a little way back from the road. Suddenly I prick up my ears. Can it be true? Then I hear it again, perfectly clear. Geese! A glance towards Katczinsky; a glance back from him; we understand each other.

'Kat, I think I hear a candidate for the cooking-pot –'

He nods. 'We'll do it when we get back. I know my way around here.'

Of course Kat knows his way around. I bet he knows every drumstick on every goose for miles.

The trucks reach the firing area. The gun emplacements are camouflaged with greenery against air reconnaissance, and it all looks like a military version of that Jewish festival where they build little huts outdoors. These leafy bowers would look peaceful and cheerful if they didn't have guns inside them.

The air is getting hazy with smoke from the guns and fog. The cordite tastes bitter on the tongue. The thunder of the artillery fire makes our truck shake, the echo rolls on after the firing and everything shudders. Our faces change imperceptibly. We don't have to go into the trenches, just on wiring duty, but you can read it on every face: this is the front, we're within reach of the front.

It isn't fear, not yet. Anyone who has been at the front as often as we have gets thick-skinned about it. Only the young recruits are jumpy. Kat gives them a lesson. 'That was a twelve-inch. You can hear that from the report – you'll hear the burst in a minute.'

But the dull thud of the shell-bursts can't be heard at this distance. Everything is swallowed up in the rumble of the front. Kat listens carefully. 'There'll be a show tonight.'

We all listen. The front is restless. 'Tommy's already firing.' says Kropp.

You can hear the guns clearly. It is the British batteries, to the right of our sector.

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They are starting an hour early. Ours never start until ten on the dot.

'What's up with them?' calls out Müller. 'Are their watches fast or something?'

'There'll be a show, I tell you. I can feel it in my bones.'

Kat shrugs his shoulders.

Three guns thunder out just behind us. The gunflash shoots away diagonally into the mist, the artillery roars and rumbles. We shiver, happy that we'll be back in camp by tomorrow morning.

Our faces are no more flushed and no paler than they usually are; they are neither more alert nor more relaxed, and yet they are different. We feel as if something inside us, in our blood, has been switched on. That's not just a phrase – it is a fact. It is the front, the awareness of the front, that has made that electrical contact. The moment we hear the whistle of the first shells, or when the air is torn by artillery fire, a tense expectancy suddenly gets into our veins, our hands and our eyes, a readiness, a heightened wakefulness, a strange suppleness of the senses. All at once the body is completely ready.

It often seems to me as if it is the disturbed and vibrating air that suddenly comes over us with silent force; or as if the front itself is sending out its own electricity to put those unconscious nerve endings on to the alert.

It is the same every time. When we set out we are just soldiers – we might be grumbling or we might be cheerful; and then we get to the first gun emplacements, and every single word that we utter takes on a new sound.

If Kat stands in front of the hut and says 'there's going to be a show' then that is his own opinion, nothing else. But if he says it out here, then the same words are as sharp as a bayonet on a moonlit night, cutting straight through the normal workings of the brain, more immediate, and speaking directly to that unknown element that has grown inside us with a dark significance, – 'There's going to be a show'. Perhaps it is our innermost and most secret life that gives a shudder, and then prepares to defend itself.

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For me, the front is as sinister as a whirlpool. Even when you are a long way away from its centre, out in calm waters, you can still feel its suction pulling you towards it, slowly, inexorably, meeting little resistance.

But the power to defend ourselves flows back into us out of the earth and out of the air – and most of all it flows out of the earth. The earth is more important to the soldier than to anybody else. When he presses himself to the earth, long and violently, when he urges himself deep into it with his face and with his limbs, under fire and with the fear of death upon him, then the earth is his only friend, his brother, his mother, he groans out his terror and screams into its silence and safety, the earth absorbs it all and gives him another ten seconds of life, ten seconds to run, then takes hold of him again – sometimes for ever.

Earth – earth – earth – !

Earth, with your ridges and holes and hollows into which a man can throw himself, where a man can hide! Earth – in the agony of terror, the explosion of annihilation, in the death-roar of the shell-bursts you gave us that massive resurgence of reconquered life.

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The madness, the tempest of an existence that had practically been torn to shreds flowed back from you into our hands, and so we burrowed deep into you for safety, and in the speechless fear and relief of having survived the moment, our mouths bit deeply into you!

With the first rumble of shellfire, one part of our being hurls itself back a thousand years. An animal instinct awakens in us, and it directs and protects us. It is not conscious, it is far quicker, far more accurate and far more reliable than conscious thought. You can't explain it. You are moving up, not thinking of anything, then suddenly you are in a hollow in the ground with shrapnel flying over your head; but you can't remember having heard the shell coming or having thought about taking cover. If you had relied on thought, you would have been so many pieces of meat by now. It was something else, some prescient, unconscious awareness inside us, that threw us down and saved us without our realizing. But for this, there would long since have been not a single man left alive between Flanders and the Vosges.

We set out as soldiers, and we might be grumbling or we might be cheerful – we reach the zone where the front line begins, and we have turned into human animals.

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We move into a rather scrappy wood. We pass the field kitchens. Just beyond the wood we climb down from the trucks and they go back. They will be picking us up again before first light tomorrow.

Mist and smoke from the artillery is chest-high over the meadows. The moon is shining on it. Troops are moving on the roadway. The steel helmets give a dull reflection in the moonlight. Heads and rifles stick out from the white mists, nodding heads and swaying rifle barrels.

Further on, the mist clears. The heads turn into whole figures – tunics, trousers and boots come out of the mist as if from a pool of milk. They form into a column. The column marches, straight ahead, the figures become a wedge, and you can no longer make out individual men, just this dark wedge, pushing forwards, made even more strange by the heads and rifles bobbing along the misty lake. A column – not men.

Light artillery and munition wagons move in from a side road. The backs of the horses shine in the moonlight and their movements are good to see – they toss their heads and their eyes flash. The guns and the wagons glide past against an indistinct background like a lunar landscape, while the steel-helmeted cavalrymen look like knights in armour from a bygone age – somehow it is moving and beautiful.

We make for the equipment dump. Some of our men load the angled, sharpened iron uprights on to their shoulders, the rest stick straight iron bars through rolls of barbed-wire and carry them away. They are awkward and heavy loads.

The terrain gets more pitted. Reports come back to us from up ahead: 'Watch where you're going, there's a deep shell hole on the left' – 'Mind the trench' –

We keep our eyes wide open, and test the ground with our feet and with the bars before we put all our weight down. The column stops suddenly; you bang your face into the barbed-wire roll that the man in front is carrying, and you swear.

A couple of shot-up trucks are in the way. A new order comes: 'Pipes and cigarettes out!' We are close to the front-line trenches.

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In the meantime it has gone completely dark. We skirt around a little copse and our sector is there before us.

There is an indistinct reddish glow from one end of the horizon to the other. It changes constantly, punctuated by flashes from the gun batteries. Verey lights go up high above it, silver and red balls which burst with a shower of white, red and green stars. French rockets shoot up, the ones with silk parachutes that open in the air and let them drift down really slowly. They light up everything as clear as day, and their brightness even reaches across to us, so that we can see our shadows stark against the ground. The lights hang in the sky for minutes at a time before they burn out. New ones shoot up at once, everywhere, and there are still the green, red and blue stars.

'Going to be a bad do,' says Kat.

The thunder of the guns gets stronger until it becomes a single dull roar, and then it breaks down again into individual bursts. The dry voiced machine-guns rattle. Above our heads the air is full of invisible menace, howling, whistling and hissing. This is from the smaller guns; but every so often comes the deep sound of the big crump shells, the really heavy stuff, moving through the dark and landing far behind us. They make a bellowing, throaty, distant noise, like a rutting stag, and they go far above the howl and the whistle of the small shells.

Searchlights begin to sweep the black sky. They skim across it like huge blackboard pointers, tapering at the bottom. One of them pauses, shaking a little. At once another is beside it, they cross and there is a black, winged insect trapped and trying to escape: an airman. He wavers, is dazzled and falls.

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We ram the iron posts in firmly at set intervals. There are always two men holding the roll while the others pay out the barbed-wire. It is that horrible wire with a lot of long spikes, close together. I am out of practice at paying it out, and rip my hand open.

After a few hours we have finished. But there is still some time before the trucks are due. Most of us lie down and sleep. I try to as well, but it is too cold. You can tell that we are not far from the sea, because you are always waking up from the cold.

At one point I do fall into a deep sleep. When I wake up suddenly with a jolt, I have no idea where I am. I see the stars and I see the rockets, and just for a moment I imagine that I have fallen asleep in the garden at home, during a fireworks party of some sort. I don't know whether it is morning or evening, and I lie there in the pale cradle of dawn waiting for the gentle words which must surely come, gentle and comforting – am I crying? I put my hand to my face; it is baffling, am I a child? Smooth skin – it only lasts for a second and then I recognise the silhouette of Katczinsky. He is sitting there quite calmly, old soldier that he is, smoking his pipe – one of those with a lid over the bowl, of course. When he sees that I am awake he says, 'That made you jump. It was only a detonator, it whizzed off into the bushes over there.'

I sit up; I feel terribly alone. It is good that Kat is there. He looks thoughtfully at the front and says, 'Lovely fireworks. If only they weren't so dangerous.'

A shell lands behind us. A couple of the new recruits jump up in fright. A few minutes later another shell comes over, closer than before. Kat knocks out his pipe. 'Here we go.'

It has started. We crawl away as fast as we can. The next shell lands amongst us.

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Some of the men scream. Green rockets go up over the horizon. Dirt flies up. Shrapnel buzzes. You can hear it landing when the noise of the blast has long gone.

Close by us there is a recruit, a blond lad, and he is terrified. He has pressed his face into his hands. His helmet has rolled off. I reach for it and try to put it on to his head. He looks up, pushes the helmet away and huddles in under my arm like a child, his head against my chest. His narrow shoulders are shaking, shoulders just like Kemmerich had.

I let him stay there. But to get some use out of his helmet I shove it over his backside, not as some kind of a joke, but deliberately, because it's the most exposed area. Even though the flesh is solid, a wound there can be bloody painful, and besides, you have to lie on your stomach for months in a military hospital, and afterwards you are pretty certain to have a limp.

There's been a direct hit somewhere not far off. Between the impacts you can hear screaming.

At last it calms down. The shellfire has swept over us and moved on to the back line of reserve trenches. We risk a look out. Red rockets are shimmering in the sky. Probably there will be an attack.

It stays quiet where we are. I sit up and shake the recruit by the shoulder. 'It's all over, old son. We got through again.'

He looks around in bewilderment. 'You'll get used to it,' I tell him.

He notices his helmet and puts it on his head. Slowly he comes to himself. Then suddenly he blushes scarlet and his face has a look of embarrassment. Cautiously he puts his hand to his rear end and gives me an agonized look. I understand at once: the barrage scared the shit out of him. That wasn't the precise reason that I put his helmet where I did – but all the same I comfort him. 'No shame in that, plenty of soldiers before you have filled their pants when they came under fire for the first time. Go behind that bush, chuck your underpants away, and that's that –'

He clears off. It gets quieter, but the screaming doesn't stop. 'What's up, Albert?' I ask.

'A couple of the columns over there got direct hits.'

The screaming goes on and on. It can't be men, they couldn't scream that horribly.

'Wounded horses,' says Kat.

I have never heard a horse scream and I can hardly believe it. There is a whole world of pain in that sound, creation itself under torture, a wild horrifying agony. We go pale. Detering sits up. 'Bastards, bastards! For Christ's sake shoot them!'

He is a farmer and used to handling horses. It really gets to him.

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Fiction text B: Full text extract from *All Quiet On The Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque (chapter 4, pages 36-45)

And as if on purpose the firing dies away almost completely. The screams of the animals become that much clearer. You can't tell where it is coming from any more in that quiet, silver landscape, it is invisible, ghostly, it is everywhere, between the earth and the heavens, and it swells out immeasurably. Detering is going crazy and roars out, 'Shoot them, for Christ's sake, shoot them!'

'They've got to get the wounded men out first,' says Kat.

We stand up and try to see where they are. If we can actually see the animals, it will be easier to cope with. Meyer has some field glasses with him. We can make out a dark group of orderlies with stretchers, and then some bigger things, black mounds that are moving. Those are the wounded horses. But not all of them. Some gallop off a little way, collapse, and then run on again. The belly of one of the horses has been ripped open and its guts are trailing out. It gets its feet caught up in them and falls, but it gets to its feet again.

Detering raises his rifle and takes aim. Kat knocks the barrel upwards. 'Are you crazy?'

Detering shudders and throws his gun on to the ground.

We sit down and press our hands over our ears. But the terrible crying and groaning and howling still gets through, it penetrates everything.

We can all stand a lot, but this brings us out in a cold sweat. You want to get up and run away, anywhere just so as not to hear that screaming any more. And it isn't men, just horses.

Some more stretchers are moved away from the dark mass. Then a few shots ring out. The big shapes twitch a little and then become less prominent. At last! But it isn't over yet. No once can catch the wounded animals who have bolted in terror, their wide-open mouths filled with all that pain. One of the figures goes down on one knee, a shot – one horse collapses – and then there is another. The last horse supports itself on its forelegs, and moves in a circle like a carousel, turning around in a sitting position with its forelegs stiff – probably its back is broken. The soldier runs across and shoots it down. Slowly, humbly, it sinks to the ground.

We take our hands away from our ears. The screaming has stopped. Just a long-drawn-out, dying sigh is still there in the air. Then, just like before, there are only the rockets, the singing of the shells, and the stars – and it feels almost eerie.

Detering walks about cursing. 'What have they done to deserve that, that's what I want to know?' And later on he comes back to it again. His voice is agitated and he sounds as if he is making a speech when he says, 'I tell you this: it is the most despicable thing of all to drag animals into a war.'