

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

The Great War - 1915

- 1) What was the problem at the start of 1915?
- 2) 1915 was a disaster for which side?
- 3) Complete the work section on page 11:
  - a) \_\_\_\_\_
  - b) \_\_\_\_\_
- 4) Describe life in the trenches.
- 5) List and describe the new weapons in World War I.

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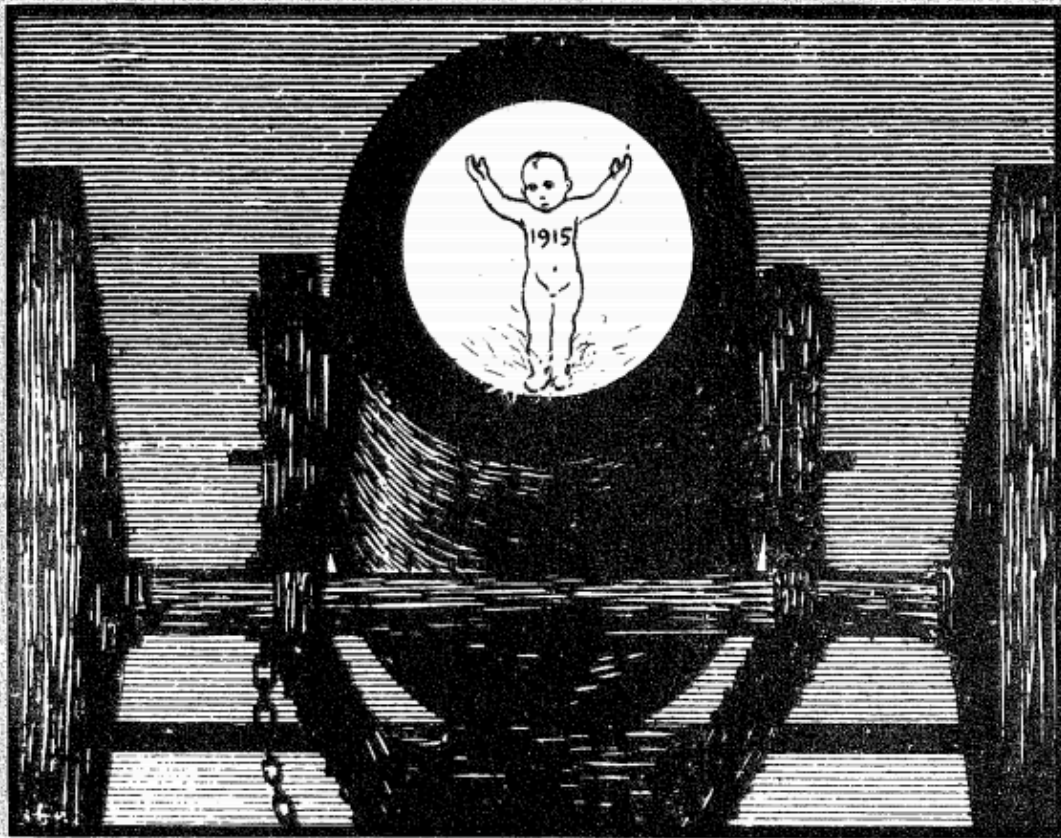
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# TWO

## NINETEEN FIFTEEN



*A French cartoon published at the start of 1915.  
What point do you think the cartoonist was trying to make?*

At the start of 1915, the war which should have been 'over by Christmas' was nowhere near an end. Britain's war leader, Lord Kitchener, said 'I don't know what is to be done. This isn't war'.

The problem was that none of Europe's war leaders knew how to end the stalemate in France. They had made their plans for a quick war between fast-moving armies, but now their armies were at a halt, digging trenches to stop the other side from advancing. They tried using new kinds of powerful weapons and they thought up new methods of attack. But both sides simply strengthened their trenches to deal with these, making the deadlock even harder to break.

On the Allied side, some war leaders thought they knew what was to be done, but there was

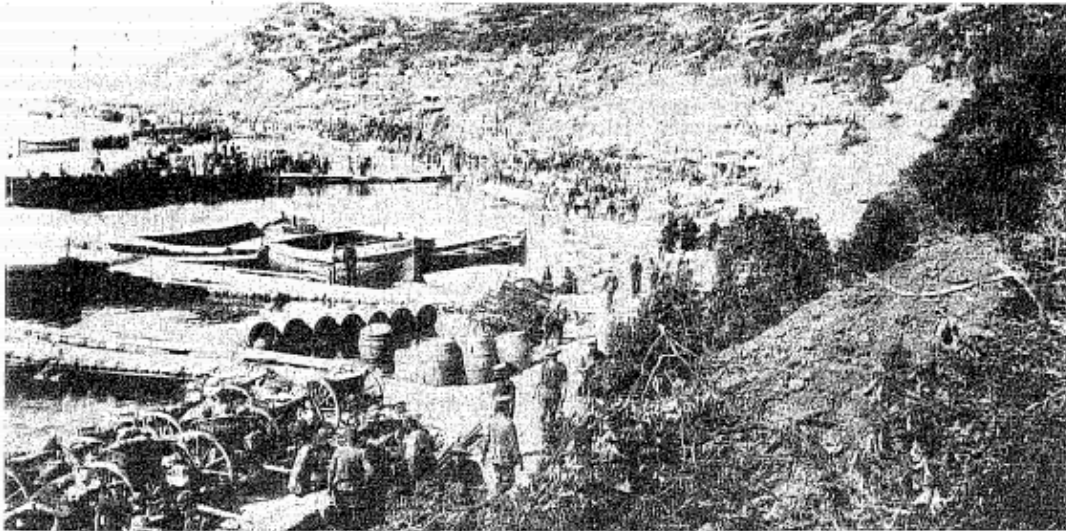
disagreement. The generals wanted to pour millions more men into the trenches for an all-out assault on the German lines. Some politicians were not convinced, saying that the war could never be won on the Western Front. They wanted to attack Germany and her allies from a different direction – from Turkey in the east of Europe.

Both the 'westerners' and the 'easterners', as the arguing war leaders were known, had their chance to try out their ideas in 1915. The 'easterners' attacked Gallipoli in Turkey, while the 'westerners' launched massive attacks on the Western Front, hoping to deal Germany a knock-out blow.

Both were proved wrong. As we shall see, 1915 was a year of disasters for the Allies.



# THE GALLIPOLI CAMPAIGN



*Allied troops landing at Anzac Cove in the summer of 1915. The barrels on the beach contain water: all the troops' supplies has to be brought in to them by sea*

When Turkey joined the war on Germany's side and became one of the Central Powers, it was a serious blow to the Allies. The Turkish navy closed the **Dardanelles**, the narrow straits linking the Mediterranean with the Black Sea. This cut off the supply of food and arms to Russia just at the time when she most needed them.

## Churchill's plan

To help their Russian allies, the British planned a bold invasion of Turkey. Winston Churchill, First Lord of

the Admiralty and one of the 'easterners', said that the Royal Navy could capture the Gallipoli peninsula, north of the Dardanelles. One politician later said that Churchill's plan was 'the only imaginative conception [idea] of the war'. The two maps below show just how imaginative it was.

The first map shows the difficult position that the Allies were in at the start of 1915 – stalemate on the Western Front, Russia under attack from all the Central Powers and cut off from supplies by the closure of the Dardanelles.

The second map shows what Churchill aimed to do



*The position of the Allies in early 1915*



*The possible results of Turkey's defeat*

*Allied troops landing at Anzac Cove in the summer supplies had to be brought in to them by sea*

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*The position of the Allies in early 1915*

*The possible results of Turkey's defeat*



by attacking Gallipoli: first to capture the Turkish capital, Constantinople, and so knock Turkey out of the war; second to re-open the supply route to Russia. Churchill also hoped that the defeat of Turkey would have other important effects. The neutral countries close to Turkey – Greece, Romania and Bulgaria – would then join the Allies, allowing them to surround Austria for an all-out attack. Austria's defeat would leave Germany isolated and unable to continue fighting. In short, the Gallipoli campaign would be the beginning of the end of the war.

## Attack on Gallipoli

A fleet of British and French ships began the attack on Gallipoli in February 1915. The Turks, however, had put mines in the water and three battleships were blown up when they sailed into the Dardanelles. The rest of the fleet rapidly retreated.

Although Winston Churchill claimed that the whole operation could be carried out by the Navy, the Allies now decided to send an army to Gallipoli. A force of British and Anzac troops was gathered together and put under the command of Sir Ian Hamilton. None of them had ever practised landing on an enemy coast before and Sir Ian Hamilton was sent to Turkey without proper maps for planning his invasion. He was also very slow in making his preparations when he got there.

When the Anzacs finally landed in **Anzac Cove** on 25 April the Turks were ready for them. Thousands were mown down by machine-gun fire as they left their landing craft. Those who made it through the blood-stained sea were pinned down on the beaches by shell-fire from the cliffs above.

The Allies attacked again in August at **Sulva Bay** but this attack was as disastrous as the first. The historian, A.J.P. Taylor, has written about it in these words:

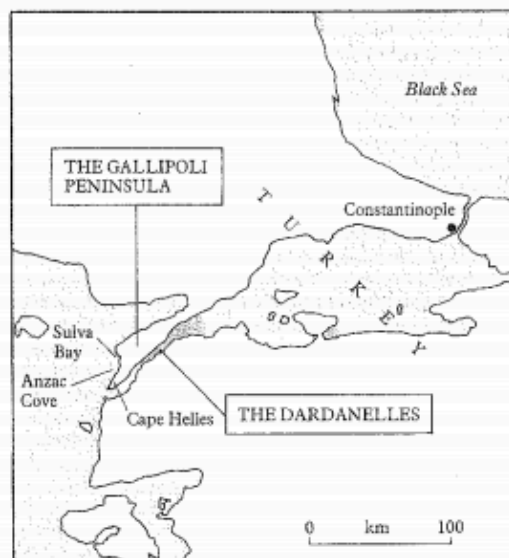
'20,000 men were put ashore almost without loss; only a thousand Turks, without machine guns, barred their way. Here Stopford was in command. He did not go ashore. Instead he congratulated the men on their successful landing and settled down for his afternoon nap. On shore

the men were told to relax; they went off to bathe, with no Turks between them and victory.'

When the order to advance was given two days later, the Turks had brought up reinforcements and halted the attackers. Both sides dug trenches and, as on the Western Front, there was stalemate. In their trenches, the Allies were plagued by disease, insects, water shortages and hunger.

In Britain, many people criticised the generals leading the campaign, and Sir Ian Hamilton was sacked. A new commander, Sir Charles Monro, realised that he could never conquer Gallipoli and decided on a complete withdrawal. During the last weeks of 1915 every single Allied soldier was evacuated from Gallipoli. This was the only successful part of the campaign for they escaped without the loss of a single life.

The Gallipoli campaign had cost the Allies 200,000 casualties and the Dardanelles were still closed to Russian ships. Russia now faced the prospect of slow starvation.



## Work section

A. Study the photograph on the opposite page. Make a list of the difficulties that the Allies seem to be facing in this scene.

B. Compare these two comments on the Gallipoli campaign made by British historians:

'The Gallipoli Campaign of 1915 was the most imaginative... and the most important single operation in the whole course of the two world wars' (Alan Moorehead)

'It was a massive failure, ruining reputations and wasting lives' (R.R. James)

1. Judging by what you have read, which of these two opinions do you most agree with? Explain your answer.
2. Why do you think historians have such different opinions about the Gallipoli campaign?
3. Re-read A.J.P. Taylor's account of the attack on Sulva Bay. What does his opinion of the Gallipoli campaign seem to be?

by attacking Gallipoli: first to capture the Turkish capital, Constantinople, and so knock Turkey out of the war: second to re-open the supply route to Russia. Churchill also hoped that the defeat of Turkey would have other important effects. The neutral countries close to Turkey - Greece, Romania and Bulgaria — would then join the Allies, allowing them to surround Austria for an all-out attack. Austria's defeat would leave Germany isolated and unable to continue fighting. In short, the Gallipoli campaign would be the beginning of the end of the war. '

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THE GALLIPOLI PENINSULA

# TRENCH WARFARE

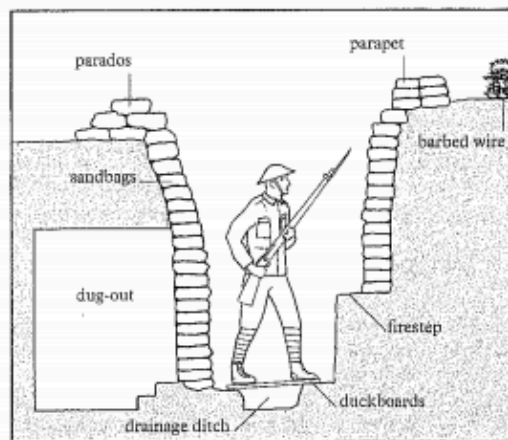
After the failure of the Gallipoli campaign the 'westerner' generals were even more certain that the war could only be won on the Western Front. They pinned their hopes on breaking the stalemate by making massive assaults on the German trench lines. Before reading the story of these assaults, you need to find out about the lives that soldiers on both sides were leading in the trenches, and about the weapons they were using against each other.

## Building trenches

Trenches were built wherever the enemy was found, no matter what was in the way. A German soldier wrote:

'Part of our trench went through a cemetery. We cleared out the contents of the family vaults and used them to shelter ourselves from artillery fire; hits from heavy shells would hurl the coffins and semi rotted corpses high into the air.'

The diagram and photographs here show how trenches were built. A trench was usually at least 2 metres deep and 2 metres wide, and was dug in a zig-zag so that the blast from an exploding shell would be confined to only a small section of the trench. There were normally three lines of trenches on each side of the 'no-man's land' that divided the enemy armies. In the front line, trenches were built with firing steps and elbow rests to help the soldiers shoot over the top. Behind these were the support trenches and behind those were the reserve trenches.



*Cross-section of a trench*

Connecting the three lines were communication trenches. There were also 'blind alleys' to confuse the enemy in case of a successful attack, and 'saps' which were shallow trenches leading to look-out posts or machine-gun nests.

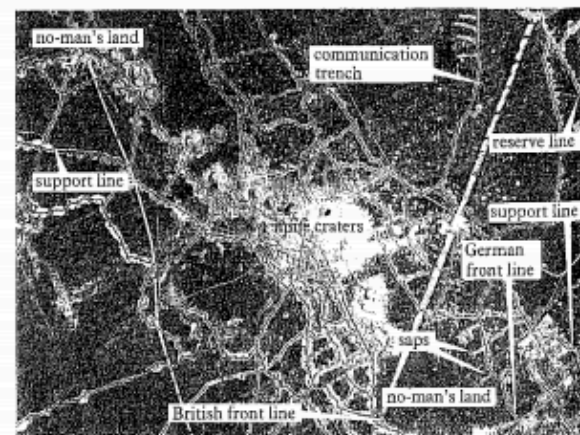
## Life in the trenches

The following accounts show us that for most soldiers life in the trenches was a horrifying experience. What every soldier feared most was 'going over the top'. This meant climbing over the parapet and charging at the enemy trenches in an attempt to capture them. A young German tells us what often happened:

'At noon we went over the top. After less than a hundred yards we ran up against an almost concrete wall of whistling and whining machine-gun bullets. My 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. A young boy cried for his mother, bright red blood spurting out from his face.'

Before soldiers were sent over the top, the enemy trenches were bombarded with shells from heavy guns to try to kill the front-line troops and to tear gaps in the barbed wire defending them. A British sergeant wrote this about the effects of shelling:

'It was on May 2nd that . . . this single high explosive shell killed 7 and wounded 18 – yet the



*Line of trenches as seen on an aerial photograph taken in France in 1915*

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*Line of trenches as seen on an aerial photograph taken in France in 1915*



A deep, well-built British trench protected by barbed wire. Can you spot the periscope covered with sacking which the sentry is using to watch the German front line?

day before 400 shells came over and dropped behind the trench and no one was hurt. The trench after the dead and wounded were removed presented a ghastly sight – it was red with blood like a room papered in crimson.'

The very noise of shells exploding gave many men 'shell-shock'. This is how a young British soldier from Wiltshire was affected:

'His steel hat was at the back of his head and his mouth slobbered, and two comrades could not hold him still. These badly shell-shocked boys clawed their mouths ceaselessly. Others sat in the field hospitals in a state of coma, dazed as though deaf, and actually dumb.'

When they were not fighting or being bombarded, soldiers in the trenches lived a miserable life. When it rained they often spent days knee-deep in water or mud, and this could lead to 'trench foot':

'Your feet swell up two or three times their normal size and go completely dead. You could stick a bayonet into them and not feel a thing. If you are fortunate enough not to lose your feet and the swelling begins to go down, it is then that the . . . agony begins. I have heard men cry and even scream with the pain and many had to have their feet and legs amputated.'

Then there were the rats and the lice. A pair of rats can produce 880 offspring in a year, and even dry, clean trenches swarmed with them. A British officer wrote:

'There are millions! Some are huge fellows, nearly as big as cats. Several of our men were awakened to find a rat snuggling down under the blanket alongside them.'

Most soldiers got lice because they often had to go without washing or changing their clothes for weeks at a time. For George Coppard, the result was that:

'The things lay in the seams of trousers, in the deep furrows of . . . woolly pants. A lighted candle applied where they were thickest made them pop like Chinese crackers. After a session of this, my face would be covered with small blood spots, from extra big fellows which had popped too vigorously.'

In theory, soldiers in the trenches had plenty to eat. Judge for yourself from this list made by a British soldier in his notebook:

List of army rations: 1 man per diem (day)

Meat (bully beef)	1 lb	[453g]
Bread (or biscuits)	1 1/4 lb	[567g]
Bacon	1/4 lb	[113g]
Tea	1/2 oz	[14g]
Sugar	2 oz	[56g]
Jam	2 oz	[56g]
Cheese	1 oz	[28g]
Butter	3/4 oz	[21g]
Potatoes	3/4 lb	[340g]
Salt	1 oz	[28g]
Pepper	1/36 oz	[0.7g]
Mustard	1/20 oz	[1.4g]

But cooking in the trenches was difficult. A soldier from Hull describes a typical meal of

' . . . bully beef [corned beef] and biscuits, and plum and apple jam and biscuits, washed down with tea flavoured from the previous meal, cooked in the same container as the water was boiled, onion being predominant.'

At the end of his day in the trench, a soldier might be able to get a few hours sleep in his dug-out and, if he was not exhausted, perhaps dream of home and hope that next day he would 'catch a blighty one' – a wound that would not kill or maim him, but serious enough to get him sent back to 'Blighty' – Britain.

## Work section

- Copy or trace the photograph of trenches seen from above. Label your diagram to show all the following kinds of trenches: front-line, support, reserve and communication trenches, blind alleys and 'saps'.
- Use the evidence in this chapter to write a diary of a soldier's experiences during one week in a front-line trench.

A deep, well-built British trench Protected by barbed wire. Can you spot the periscope covered with

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# 6

## NEW WEAPONS

During 1915 the generals on the Western Front used huge numbers of weapons in an attempt to break the stalemate. Some were recent inventions and more deadly than any of the weapons used in previous wars.

### Heavy artillery

The weapon which most generals liked best was heavy artillery, the big guns. As you know, both sides bombarded each other with explosive shells before starting an attack. The big guns which fired the shells had enormous power. The new howitzers could fire shells which exploded into metal splinters called shrapnel over a distance of 13 kilometres. Soldiers in the front line could tell what sort of shell was coming by the noise it made in the air. The British, for example, called German 77-millimetre shells 'whizz-bangs'.

The effects of heavy artillery fire were horrifying. As one French gunner reported:

'You have no idea of the number of Boches [Germans] blown to bits. What a horrible sight in the woods in which not a single tree has been spared. Human remains, arms or legs, knapsacks, blankets, etc. hung on the spruces. We watched Boches flying up in the air as much as three or four hundred feet.'

The big guns fired huge numbers of shells. In 1915, 400,000 were used every month on the Western Front. The noise made by the constant bombardment was shattering. It damaged men's brains and made their ears bleed, and it also gave them shell-shock. The shells also churned up the land into a sea of muddy

craters that made attacks on the enemy trenches even more difficult.

### Machine-guns

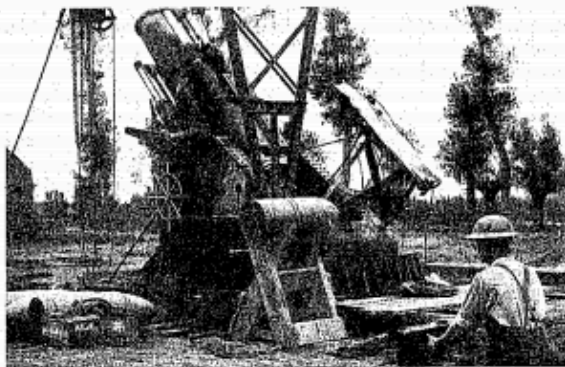
At the start of the war many of the Allied generals did not think the machine-gun was an important weapon. To them it was still a recent and untested invention. The Germans, however, could see its usefulness right from the start. A water-cooled machine-gun like the Vickers gun fired 600 bullets a minute. Soldiers on the attack could be mown down in minutes by a hail of lead, as this German machine-gunner reports:

'The officers were in front. I noticed one of them walking calmly carrying a walking stick. When we started firing we just had to load and re-load. They went down in their hundreds. You didn't have to aim, we just fired into them.'

*A German machine gun crew in 1914*



*A howitzer gun in action during the Ypres fighting, 1917 (see page 31)*



### Tanks

One new weapon of 1915 was invented and built in Britain by a designer of farm machinery. It was an armour-plated tractor which moved at 6 kilometres per hour and was armed with both cannons and machine-guns. For security reasons it was code-named 'the tank'. When tanks were first used in battle in 1916, the Germans were so scared by the sight that they panicked and fled. A British rifleman described seeing tanks for the first time:

'There before our astonished eyes appeared about six of the first Mark 1 tanks, lurching about the country on their caterpillar tracks . . . bursting through hedges, crossing trenches, demolishing walls and even snapping off small trees.'

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*A tank crosses the British trench on the way to an attack in 1916*

## Grenades

For close-range fighting, soldiers were trained to use bayonets – long knives fixed to the ends of their rifles – but it was difficult to use these in attacks on trenches. By 1915 many soldiers preferred to use hand grenades instead. The British used the pineapple-shaped Mills Bomb, while the Germans used stick-shaped grenades known as ‘potato mashers’.

## Gas

Poison gas was another new weapon used in the Great War. It was first used on 22 April 1915 by German troops at the Second Battle of Ypres. A British officer who was watching from a trench nearby describes the effect of chlorine gas on the French troops:

‘Dusk was falling when from the German trenches in front of the French lines rose that strange green cloud of death. . . . In the gathering dark of that awful night they fought with their terror, running blindly in the gas cloud, and dropping with chests heaving in agony and the slow poison of suffocation mantling their dark faces. Hundreds of them fell and died. Others lay helpless, froth upon their agonised

lips and their racked bodies powerfully sick, with searing nausea at short intervals. They too would die later – a slow and lingering death of unimaginable agony.’

Chlorine gas worked by suffocating the lungs. So did phosgene gas which was invented soon after. Mustard gas was far worse even than this. Its effects did not show for hours after a gas attack. Then it began to rot the body. The victim’s skin blistered and his eyes bulged out. The lining of the lungs was stripped raw. The pain was so great that many victims had to be strapped to their beds.

Fortunately, both sides soon stopped using gas because it was easy to counter its effect with gas masks. In the early days, soldiers breathed through cotton pads soaked either in chemicals or in their own urine. Later, helmets with breathing masks were introduced and by 1917 every soldier had an effective gas mask.

*A soldier prepares to throw a grenade, during the Battle of the Somme. How can you tell he is German?*



## Work section

- A. Test your understanding of this chapter by explaining what all the following words mean: artillery, shells, shrapnel, howitzer, machine-gun, bayonet, grenade, phosgene gas.
- B. Use the information in this chapter to give answers to the following question:
  1. Why, according to the German machine-gunner, was the machine-gun such an effective weapon?
  2. What advantages are suggested by the British rifleman in his account of using tanks on the battlefield?
  3. a) Why do you think it was difficult to use bayonets in trench warfare?  
b) Why did soldiers prefer to use grenades for close-range fighting?  
c) Can you think of any disadvantages involved in the use of grenades?
  4. Two famous historians have written very different things about the use of poison gas at the Second Battle of Ypres:

‘Gas is the least inhumane [cruel] of modern weapons.’  
‘This was not only wicked. It was folly.’

(B. Liddell Hart)  
(A.J.P. Taylor)

Which of these opinions do you agree with? Explain your answer.

## Granades

For close—range fighting, soldiers were trained to use bayonets — long knives fixed to the ends of their rifles - but it was difficult to use these in attacks on trenches. By 1915 many soldiers preferred to use hand grenades instead. The British used the pineapple-shaped Mills Bomb, while the Germans 'used stick-shaped "grenades known as 'potato mashers'.

## Gas

Poison gas was another new weapon used in the Great War. It was first used On 22 April 1915 by German troops at the Second Battle of Ypres. A British officer who was watching from a trench nearby describes the effect of chiorine gas on the French troops:

'Dusk was falling when from the German trenches in front of the French lines rose that strange green cloud of death. . . . In the gathering dark of that awful night they fought with their terror, running blindly in the gas cloud, and dropping with chests heaving in agony and the slow poison of suffocation mantiating their dark faces. Hundreds of them fell and died. Others lay helpless, froth upon their agonised

lips and their racked bodies powerfully sick, with searing nausea at short intervals. They too would die later - a slow and lingering death of unimaginable agony.'

Chlorina gas worked by suffocating the iungs. So did phosgene gas which was invonted soon after. Mustard gas was far worse even than this. Its effects did not show for hours after a gas attack. Then it began to rot the body. The victim's skin biistered and his eyes bulged out. The lining of the lungs was stripped raw. The pain was so great that many victims had to be strapped to their beds.

Fortunately, both sides soon stopped using gas because it was easy to counter its effect with gas masks. In the early days, soldiers breathed through cotton pads soaked either in chemicals or in their own urine. Later, helmets with breathing masks were introduced and by 1917 every soldier had an effective gas mask. '

*A soldier Prepares to throw a grenade, during the B cattle of the Somme. H ow can you tell he is German?*

