

**World War I****LITERATURE READING****Battlefield Prose**

During World War I, Boyd Cable published stories about the battlefield. He later collected some of these into a 1916 book—Action Front. The selection below is from “The Fear of Fear,” a short story in this book. Private Everton, an inexperienced soldier, was a member of the Hotwaters, an infantry company. The following excerpt describes Everton’s struggle to face his fear when he was asked to leave the safety of his trench and join in on a raid against the enemy. As you read the selection, think about times when you were afraid of something.

The memory of that phrase came back to Private Everton, tramping down the dark road to the firing-line. Just because he had no knowledge of how he himself would behave in this baptism of fire, just because he was in deadly fear that he would feel fear, or still worse, show it . . . in front of his mind . . . he repeated: “If you go back you *will* die, if you go back you *will* die,” over and over.

When he came to the trenches, at last, and filed down the narrow communication-trench and into his Company’s appointed position . . . he remembered with unpleasant clearness that instinctive [reflexive] start and thought of taking cover. By that time he had actually been under fire, had heard the shells rush over him and the shattering noise of their burst; had heard the bullets piping and humming and hissing. . . . He had not felt any great fear then . . . there was little to be afraid of there in the shelter of the deep trench. It was what he would do and feel when he climbed out of cover on to the exposed and bullet-swept flat before the trench that he was in doubt.

Crouching low in the bottom of the trench, half deafened by the uproar, the men waited for the word to move. The concentrated fire on this portion of front indicated clearly to the Germans that an attack was coming; and where it was to be expected. . . . Everton lay and listened to the appalling clamor; but when the word was passed round to get ready, he rose to his feet and climbed to the firing-step without any overpowering sense of fear.

The guns had lifted their fire farther back as the Hotwaters emerged from their trench, and the rush and rumble of their shells was still passing overhead as the line advanced.

Everton was one of the first to reach the forward trench. . . . The Hotwaters swarmed into the broken ditch, shooting and stabbing the few who fought back, disarming the prisoners who had surrendered with hands over their heads and quavering [shivering] cries of “Kamerad” [comrade]. Everton rushed one man who appeared to be of two minds whether to surrender or not, fingering and half lifting his rifle and lowering it again, looking round

over his shoulder, once more raising his rifle muzzle. Everton killed him with the bayonet.

There was a stout barricade of wire in front of the next trench, and an order was shouted along to halt and lie down in front of it. The line dropped, and while some lay prone [fully reclined] and fired as fast as they could at any loophole or bobbing head they could see, others lit bombs and tossed them into the trench. This trench also had been badly mauled by the shells, and the fire from it was feeble. Everton lay firing for a few minutes, casting side glances on an officer close in front of him, and on two or three men along the line who were coolly cutting through the barbed wire with heavy nippers. Everton saw the officer spin round and drop to his knees, his left hand nursing his hanging right arm. Everton jumped up and went over to him.

The officer . . . had been hit rather badly in the arm. He had made light of the wound, and remained in the trench with the covering party; but when he came to retire [retreat], he found that the pain and loss of blood had left him shaky and dizzy. Everton helped him to climb from the trench; but as they ran back he saw . . . that the officer had slowed to a walk. . . . It ended up by Everton and the officer being the last men in, Everton half supporting, half carrying the other.

From *Action Front* by Boyd Cable, 1916.

UNDERSTANDING WHAT YOU READ After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions in the space provided.

1. What phrase does Private Everton repeat to himself?

2. What does Private Everton do when he goes into the trenches?

3. What clue do the Germans have that the Hotwaters are going to attack?

4. What do the Germans do when the Hotwaters invade their trench?

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5. Describe in your own words how you think Everton feels at the beginning of the passage and then at the end of the passage. What do you think causes this change in his feelings?

ACTIVITY

Imagine that you are an American soldier stationed in France during World War I. Create a postcard to send to your family back in the United States. On one side of the postcard, draw a scene of what your life is like in France. On the other side, explain what you have drawn.