

World War One Combat

Central Historical Question:

In 1578, an English poet wrote “the rules of fair play do not apply in love and war,” does this idiom justify the method of “total war” used in World War One?

Document #1 Private W. Hay, Scottish Army, Battle of the Somme, July-Dec 1916

We were sent in broad daylight in the face of heavy machine-gun fire and shell fire. It was criminal to send men into machine-gun fire without any cover. There was no need for it, but we had to carry out our orders. There were men everywhere, heaps of men, not one or two men, but heaps of men everywhere, all dead. After our attack, other battalions went up and they got the same! They went on and on. They just seemed to be pushing men in to be killed and no reason. The only possible way was if the Germans ran out of ammunition. We couldn't take it against machine-gunners, it was just ridiculous.

Lyn MacDonald *Voices and Images from the Great War* 1988

Document #2 Robert Sherriff describing a WW1 battle, *No Leading Lady*, 1968

The whole thing became a drawn-out nightmare. The shelling had destroyed everything. The bombs explosions were unearthing and tossing up the decayed bodies that were buried on the battlefield. They flew through the air and disintegrated. In the old German trench we came upon a long line of men, some sprawled on the ground, some standing and leaning against the trench wall. They were British soldiers - all dead or dying. Their medical officer had set up a first-aid station here, and these wounded men had crawled to the trench for his help. But the doctor and his orderlies had been killed by a shell that had wrecked his station, and the wounded men could only sit or lie there and die. There was no conceivable hope of carrying them away.

Document #3 Wilfred Owen "Dulce et Decorum Est " Title translation: **It is glorious and honorable to die for one's country** describes death from gas attack.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! -- An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And floundering like a man in fire or lime.
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.
In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, --
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old lie: "**Dulce et decorum est Pro patria mori.**"