

# CHC2P Unit 1: 1914-1919: Forming Identity

## Activity 2: Conditions in World War I

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### Overview

War is filled with the stories and the experiences of victims and victors. This activity focuses on the story of one character in war. The character of Brian Gosling is fictional, but his experiences are based on the reality faced by some Canadian soldiers during World War I

### Lesson

#### *Brian Gosling: From Canada to France*



"My name is Brian Gosling and I'm from Fredericton, New Brunswick. In September, 1914, I got all excited about going over to Europe to fight the Krauts - that's what we called the Germans. Yep, I even lied about my age to get into the army. I was only seventeen and I easily passed for eighteen. Nobody even checked my age, and soon I was on a ship to England for some basic training."

"The way I figured it, I was getting a free trip across the ocean and a chance at some real excitement. Things are pretty boring in Fredericton, me not having a job and all. My ma cried when I left, but I told her the fuss would soon be over and I'd be home by Christmas."

#### *Trench Warfare*



"And then they shipped us over to France, and man, things were not pretty over there. We all sat in these mud holes called trenches, and waited for the Krauts to come charging at us across no-man's land. This no-man's land was a chunk of ground about a kilometer wide between us and the Krauts."

"At night we would be sent into no-man's land to string barbed wire and to pick up our side's dead and dying bodies. God, I hated that job. Some of the wounded I picked up were crying like babies and had their guts hanging out or a leg or arm blown off. The ones that were dead were the lucky ones. After I dragged those bodies back to our trench, I was usually sick for half an hour."

"I was stationed on what they called "the Western Front. This was a line of trenches that snaked from the Atlantic Ocean across the north of France to the mountains of Switzerland. You can check it out on a map."

"Life in the trenches was a living hell. The food was crap, and rats and mice were all over the place feeding on our food and on the corpses that lay rotting in the vicinity. And then there were the cooties or lice. They were in your clothes and your hair. You were often stuck in a trench for one or two weeks before you could get a bath."

"You were supposed to sleep in dugouts near the trenches. But the noise from the big guns would drive you batty. Most days I felt sleepy and wet...and scared. If you think that's bad, wait until you have Germans running at you with guns, or you have to run at the German machine guns! Those machine guns could just cut you to pieces as you charged across no-man's land."



"After a while, I found that those German guys weren't all that bad. They were being forced to do the same thing that I was doing. In fact I met some of them one Christmas Eve in no-man's land and we exchanged cigarettes and rum. But after that it was back to fighting."

"And the fighting is something else. I've lost most of my buddies. I was never religious before I got here. But now I pray to God all the time. Each day could be my last day. I never did get back to see my Ma last Christmas. But I pray that I get back to Canada in one piece for the next Christmas."

## Assignment

1. What is meant by "no-man's land"?
2. What was the "Western Front"?
3. Why do you think that both sides placed barbed wire in no-man's land?
4. During four years of fighting on the Western Front, neither side was able to break through the line of trenches. Germany surrendered in 1918 because they simply had run out of soldiers. Why do you think neither side was able to break through the line of trenches? (Think about weapons and defence.)
5. Brian Gosling says, "I was never religious before I got here. But now I pray to God all the time." Why do you think that Brian is praying so often while he is in the trenches? What was life in the trenches like? Explain your answer.