**Number 6**

**Psychological Trauma**

Soldiers typically spent three or four days out of every twelve in the front line. Heavy trench digging was done at night under cover of darkness, sentry duty had to be done and relaxed sleep was hard to come by in the poor conditions. Long periods of tiredness were very demoralizing and sleep deprivation led too much reduced powers of concentration and perhaps even mild paranoia. So much so, that exhaustion, with its accompaniments apathy and indifference, was one of the main reasons for the German army’s collapse in 1918.

The essentially defensive nature of trench warfare was in itself stressful. The British generals at the time certainly thought that their men would become demoralized unless they regularly attacked the enemy. Men geared themselves up to attack, they envisaged war as an essentially aggressive endeavor and when for long periods this turned out not to be the case their whole view of themselves could begin to be undermined. Despite the imminent increase in the risk of death or injury, troop morale rose ahead of an offensive, as men saw themselves as active and purposeful rather than passive and bored.

During the attacks themselves, though, soldiers were often confused about what they were doing, or why they were doing it. The primitive communications technology of the time meant that even the generals had very little idea of what was happening in a battle and the troops themselves were in the deepest confusion. The recollections of Somme survivors describe the battle scene as one of almost indecipherable chaos – too much noise to shout, too many bullets to stand up and signal, and too many shells for telephone cables to survive.

The brutal randomness of death, the industrial wasteland of the front line and the lack of control over or even knowledge of their own circumstances often gave men a feeling of acute helplessness in the face of a huge, remorseless machine – particularly as the war dragged on and seemed increasingly no nearer an end. A man was individually wholly insignificant in the face of the “monstrous glacier” of the war. The realization of how unimportant an individual’s ideas, emotions or actions were came as a shock to those who had gone to war with idealistic visions of self-sacrifice and the road to a better, more united society. Instead, it turned out that going to war was like having a really tough, boring industrial job - except with people trying to kill you all the time. So – for the more sensitive types (like war poets and memoirists at least) - disillusionment set in as they realized that the mass of men did not share their high ideals and that in the meat-grinder of the front it did not matter very much anyway.

The sense of powerlessness and isolation often continued when men went home on their rare but keenly anticipated bits of leave (an average of about two to three weeks a year, but very unevenly distributed): “...those who returned from the front were often bewildered about where they fitted in the society of their origins, or were convinced they no longer had a social place to which they might return.” These feeling were aggravated by the naïve nationalism of civilians and their ignorance of the real conditions at the front. And, in the British case at least, by finding that munitions workers, often women, were earning up to ten times what soldiers earned.

1. Summarize a typical experience for a soldier on the Western Front:
2. Describe how defensive tactics made morale worse:
3. Describe what soldiers experienced during an attack: