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Hst 202
Midterm

Passage #3 Over the Top

The passage from *Over the Top*, depicts how casual the state of war becomes to a soldier, and it also shows what war can do to a soldier's perception of everything around him. The passage starts out with a typical beginning or end of the day activity—"...you could almost read a newspaper..."—very typical, and very normal type of activity for anyone. But it only takes a second for the reader to realize that the narrator is reading a newspaper in a war trench, using the light from the flares of the shell-bursts. Not so typical or normal. But the narrator, throughout the passage, makes several observations about what goes around him in what can only be described as "normal". As he describes the "Ladders of Death", he goes on to describe how British soldiers didn't like to be wished the best of luck. As he describes how he passed through No Man's Land, he goes on to describe how if he survived, he would brag about it to the nurse later. When he had a rifle in his face, he thought back to his bayonet instructor- remembering how to put a bayonet into an enemy soldier would be a very useful thing to remember, and very much relevant, but the narrator talks about how he *couldn't* remember how to get the bayonet into the German soldier. When the narrator comes across a Persian soldier taking on three British soldiers, he remarks about how it was a "funny sight to see them [British soldiers] duck the swinging butt and try to jab him [Persian]..." Somehow, when these soldiers went through the training, and went through hours of boredom in the trenches, these soldiers came out seeing everything in a different light.

Another interesting observation the narrator makes is about his fellow soldiers. When they were hit, they didn't simply fall, they "pitched forward" or "pitched head down". It is as if to say that even as these soldiers were going down, they were aggressive. He could've chosen other words like "fell", "collapsed", "dropped", but instead he uses the word "pitched". The narrator is subtly conveying that these soldiers, even as they were dying, were fighters. There is almost nobility in the way these soldiers are depicted when they die. Of course, on the opposite side of the spectrum is how the narrator describes the three aforementioned British soldiers fighting the Persian soldier- they "looked like pigmies". The word pigmy does not have a threatening, or even a noble tone- it's almost silly. He could have described them as "gnomes" who are known for their meanness, but instead he describes them as pigmies. All this goes back to how these soldiers had altered perceptions of things around them. How could seeing his three fellow soldiers take on this "six feet four inches...a fine specimen of physical manhood" be funny?

A few conclusions can be drawn from this passage: America has high tolerance for violence; and in war, no one's actually fighting for their countries, but for their own survival. The high tolerance for violence can be a subjective point of view, as Gandhi probably has different ideas about what is violent compared to Hitler. But from reading the passage, it is obvious the narrator is not much disturbed by the violence he sees on the battlefield. Much of the passage is rather surreal in describing the way he is running towards the Germans—the way violence is almost void in the passage shows that violence wasn't a pressing issue to him. It's impossible to imagine a blood-free battlefield, probably because it is highly unlikely, especially with all the bullets and shrapnel crossing the narrator's path. There is one violent scene that is mentioned, and that is when the Prussian soldier is killed. What the narrator notes about the scene is that he "will never forget the look of blank astonishment that came over his [Prussian soldier's] face". Not how the bayonet protruding out of a human neck nauseated him. Of course the generalizability of this tolerance of violence probably is not very high. Except a show of extreme violence makes it seem as though perhaps it is highly generalizable- the Philippines war, oftentimes forgotten and left out of history books, was a highly violent one. Another example of

extremely high tolerance to violence was seen in Guantanamo bay with the Iraqi prisoners. The treatment of the Iraqi prisoners by the prison guards were so horrifying, it was all over the news for weeks. The fact that it actually was seen all over the news suggests that perhaps America is not so tolerant, but those who are directly related to war doesn't seem to have changed.

When soldiers are shipped off to foreign countries to fight, they go out there to fight for their countries. But from the passage, it shows that perhaps when these soldiers are in battle, they're not fighting for their country, but for their own survival. This is a rather obvious statement, as everyone's instinct should be to live, not die. When the narrator is running towards the German side, and his fellow soldiers fall, he doesn't stop to check on them, to maybe even save their lives. He keeps running—because that's what he's supposed to do, because if he were to stop, he would probably die too. Not once in the entire passage does the narrator mention feelings of patriotism, or loyalty towards his country (not that he isn't patriotic, or loyal towards his country), but he is more occupied with talking about his dead fellow soldiers, and how he kept running. It's such a sharp contrast of the living and the dead, because the dead just pitch forward, while the living runs forward. When the Germans were defeated at Stalingrad and Kursk, the defeated soldiers simply started living in Russia. If they felt such intense feelings of loyalty to Germany, it would have made more sense for them to just kill themselves, or walk back to Germany and die along the way. But that would be illogical, as what sane person would opt to kill themselves simply out of loyalty for their country (certainly there are exceptions). This is not to say that people make bad soldiers, because in the end their intentions are selfish, but that soldiers are still human. As a civilian, it will simply be impossible to really understand what goes through a soldier's mind during battle. It also goes to show that it's one thing to learn about fighting, and it's a whole other story to actually fight and kill someone-- the narrator couldn't remember how to get the bayonet into the German soldier, when he actually came face to face with one. It just goes to show how incredible human, and therefore incredibly vulnerable, soldiers really are.