David W Fletcher, September 2001

Ernst Juenger, *The Storm of Steel: From the Diary of a German Storm-Troop Officer on the Western Front*, tr. from *In Stahlgewittern* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1929; paperback rpt., New York: Howard Fertig, Inc., 1996), 319 pages, preface by the author, no index.

About the Author

> "Ernst Juenger was born in 1895. At the outbreak of the First World War the ninteen-year-old Juenger enlisted in the 73rd Hanoverian Fusiliers and fought in this regiment for over four years–during much of the time commanding platoons of shock troops in the bloody trench warfare of Northern France and Flanders. Wounded seven times, he was decorated with the highest German military award, the *Pour le merite*. His war journal *The Storm of Steel*, first published in 1920, brought Juenger immediate acclaim for its unflinching honesty and graphic narrative force. Stamped with truth, it remains among the half-dozen most memorable books in the literature of the First World War." [From Book Jacket].

Contents

Preface to the English Edition. The author describes his precise location on the Front in relation to the English (e.g., between the ruins of Monchy and Berles-au-Bois, ix). He speaks of the "extreme mystery" of the white tom-cat who made "his headquarters" in No-man's-land and the "charm of mystery" that spread "over all that belonged to the other side, to that danger zone full of unseen figures" (x). He contrasts the "primeval Africa" landscape with the serenity of the cry of the partridges, the song of the lark, and the "song of an outlying post waiting for the night relief" (xii). He discusses the progression of the war as "raids undertaken to get a glimpse of the enemy's lines" became "less frequent and more exacting as the volume and mass of war material increased" (xi). He clearly states his purpose.

> Today there is no secret about what those trenches concealed, and a book such as this may, like a trench-map years after the event, be read with sympathy and interest by the other side. But here not only the blue and red lines of the trenches are shown, *but the blood that beat and the life that lay hid in them*. [xii; emphasis mine, DWF].

He also gives as his thesis his personal observation: "Time only strengthens my conviction that it was a good and strenuous life, and that the war, for all its destructiveness, was an incomparable schooling of the heart" (xii). He further highlights a sub-thesis: "Warlike achievements are enhanced by the inherent worth of the enemy. Of all the troops who were opposed to the Germans on the great battlefields the English were not only the most formidable but the manliest and the most chivalrous" (xiii). Around these themes, Juenger romanticizes his Great War experience.

Orainville. Juenger here receives his initiation in the trenches. He and other young Germans, by means of "a few weeks' training," become "one corporate mass inspired by the enthusiasm of one thought . . . to carry forward the German ideals of '70" (1). His company, the 9th of the 73rd Fusiliers, operates on the Front as most others, with little sleep, inadequate rations,

and shabby uniforms. They struggle through the depression of a wet, cold climate and the weariness of war with a lot of beer drinking and their imaginations of beneficent noble courage, vestiges of an earlier *kriegsfuehrung* of the Romantic Era.

> The war was our dream of greatness, power, and glory. It was a man's work, a duel on fields whose flowers would be stained with blood. There is no lovelier death in the world . . . anything rather than stay at home, anything to make one with the rest. [1].
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> The notion that a soldier becomes hardier and bolder as war proceeds is mistaken. What he gains in the science and art of attacking his enemy he loses in strength of nerve. The only dam against this loss is a sense of honour so resolute that few attain to it. [4].
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> After a short while with the regiment we had pretty well lost the illusion with which we had set out. Instead of the dangers we had hoped for, only mud and work and sleepless nights had fallen to our lot, and the conquest of these called for a heroism that was little to our taste. . . . The immense number of posts and the continual digging were for the most part unnecessary and even harmful. Trenches are not the first thing, but the courage and freshness of the men behind them. "Battles are won by iron hearts in wooden ships." [9].

In a lively fashion, with keen and incisive psychological description,[1] Juenger allows the reader to feel, even relive, his trench experience. But his early naivete–for example, the novices are taken advantage of by the old soldiers "in every possible manner," at least until both had been "under fire together" (7, 8) and Juenger's carelessness in allowing a senior officer to confiscate his rifle which results in a dangerous "penalty patrol" near the French trench posts (10)–gives way to mature reflection that proves his experience of initiation useful.

> That month, the hardest of the whole war for me, was a good schooling all the same. It made me thoroughly familiar with the whole round of trench duties and fatigues in their severest form. This experience stood me in good stead later, when without it I might as an officer have demanded the impossible of my men. [11].

From Bazancourt to Hattonchatel. Juenger attends an O.T.C. course at Recouvrence which offers the "strange mixture of the rigours of military training and the freedom of a

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[1]Juenger denies any intent to deal with the psychology of war in his *Storm of Steel*. He refers to another work of his, *War as an Inward Experience*. See the footnote on page 22.

university" (12). He mingles here with his comrades, who come "from the same social class," and the Belgians (a mix of Flemish and Walloons), who are "surprised that common [German] soldiers . . . spoke French more or less fluently" (14). He celebrates his twentieth birthday on March 29th, 1915, and he passes the time enjoyably (e.g., he celebrates Easter Sunday with the Belgian owner of an estaminet, he goes for walks in the "delightful and well-watered country," and he indulges in "ragging" with the men, 16-18). The night before he goes to the Front, he experiences "a confused dream in which a death's-head played the leading part." His fellow, Priepke, "hoped the skull was a French one."[2]

Les Eparges. During his first taste of battle at Les Eparges, Juenger enters "the battle-tossed empire of the infantry" (20) and faces the harsh reality of war–"putrid flesh . . . empty eye-sockets . . .the few wisps of hair on the black and weathered skull . . . dozens of corpses, putrefied, calcined, mummified, fixed in a ghastly dance of death" (21-22). For the young Juenger, "it was hard to understand . . . it gave [him] a shudder that all through the war [he] never quite lost" (22). He describes "this first glimpse of horrors" as "a moment so important in the experience of war . . . a part of that irresistible attraction that drew us into the war." He notes that "a long period of law and order, such as our generation had behind it, produces a real craving for the abnormal . . ." (23). But this real craving and the astonishment that it produces soon deteriorates into something that every combat veteran feels–desensitization.

> At our first glance of horror we had a feeling that is difficult to describe. . . . The eye alone can make nothing of it . . . [so] we had to stare again and again at these things that we had never seen before, without being able to give them any meaning. It was too entirely unfamiliar. We looked at all these dead . . . as though we walked in a dream through a garden full of strange plants, and we could not realize at first what we had all

[2]Page of quotations do not change from those previously cited unless so noted.

> round us. *But finally we were so accustomed to the horrible that if we came on a dead body anywhere on a fire-step or in a ditch we gave it no more than a passing thought and recognized it as we would a stone or a tree*. [23; emphasis mine, DWF].

Juenger talks about the spoils of battle, his confusion during shelling, and his lack of fear or what he calls "the courage of ignorance" (25). "The battle seemed to me to proceed as strangely and disconnectedly as though it went on upon another planet." One lesson he learns is that "an officer should never be parted from his men in the moment of danger on any account whatever" (27). This dictum he reasons from his romantic thinking, "Danger is the supreme moment of his career, his chance to show his manhood at its best. Honour and gallantry make him the master of the hour. What is more sublime than to face death at the head of a hundred men?" Juenger himself suffers a wound in the battle, which unravels his "courage of ignorance" ("the trench was frightful . . . it was blocked with severely wounded and dying men . . . my nerve broke down utterly," 28-29), but he gets himself to a dressing-station, from which he is taken the next day across the Grande Tranchee to the chief dressing-station, then to the church of the village of St. Maurice, and finally by train to Heidelberg.

In retrospect, Juenger feels disappointed with his experience at Les Eparges.

> It was not at all what I had expected. I had taken part in a great military operation without coming within sight of the enemy. It was later that I experienced hand-to-hand fighting, that supreme moment of warfare when the infantryman comes into the open and when the chaotic vacancy of the battlefield has its murderous and decisive interludes. [30].

Rightly so that Juenger, a believer in the old ways of warfare, should seem disheartened, since he is almost taken out of the war and he has yet to personally face the enemy, at least alive. That for him would have been unthinkable and the worst insult for an honorable military man.

Douchy and Monchy. After fourteen days, Juenger returns to the conflict. He relishes Douchy, the HQ of the 73rd, as a place of rebirth with "many innocent recreations" (32). Such periods of rest benefit combat capability, since "the security of a position depends on the freshness of its defenders and their fighting spirit, not on the length of the communication trenches and the depth of the firing line." He eloquently portrays the destructive transformation of the Monchy landscape over the course of a year's time–"the face of the earth was dark and fabulous, for the war had expunged the pleasant features of the country-side and engraved there its own iron lines that in a lonely hour made the spectator shudder" (36). He takes up his position with the 6th Company, C Sector of Monchy West, "the most exposed of the whole of our front" (37). With a great deal of verisimilitude, he relates the soldier's experience during a "normal" day in the trenches (37-45). He notes beginning routines, rat-hunts, talkativeness, passing time, wool-gathering (day-dreaming?), noises and nervousness, explosions, the ration party, the relief of retiring, the problem of sleep, the diversity of chores, the action, and death. And he vividly relives one particular episode that is filled with trauma.

> One of a post suddenly collapses in a stream of blood, shot in the head. His fellows tear the field-dressing from his tunic and bind him up. 'There's no use in doing that now, Wilhelm.' 'He's still breathing, man.' Then the stretcher-bearers come and take him to the dressing-station. The stretcher bumps heavily against the corners of the fire-bays. Scarce gone . . . and all is as it was before. Somebody throws a shovelful of soil over the red patch and every one goes about his business. One has got callous. Only a new recruit leans, whitefaced, against the revetting of the trench. He is trying to see the hang of it all. It had been so sudden, such a terrible surprise, such a brutal and unspeakable assault. It can't be possible, can't be real. Poor fellow, there's something quite different in store for you. [42-43].

Finally, the men receive visits in "the quiet morning hours" from the staff officers who "behave as though the trenches exist only to display their special tasks"–the divisional general, the pioneer officer, the trench-construction officer, the drainage officer, the artillery observation

officer, the officer in charge of entrenching detachments, and later on, the gas officer, and the carrying party (44-45). "So it is that–at least in quiet times–there's an everlasting coming and going, till at last the dwellers in the dugout are tempted to sigh, 'If only they'd shell a bit and then at least there'd be some peace.'"

Trench Warfare Day by Day. Despite the wearying monotony of the trenches, Juenger confesses that "there were many pleasant hours even in the line" (46). One pleasantry, no doubt, is his "conscientious chronicle of C sector [that] took shape as part of [his] diary." "On every foot's-breadth a drama had been enacted. . . . . Yet all of us felt a strong attachment to our sector and had almost grown to be a part of it." Juenger relates tidbits of events at Monchy from October 1915 into April 1916, as "the way to Monchy from the Altenburg Redoubt cost, all told, a profusion of blood" (54). Two parts of this narrative once again highlight Juenger's belief in the chivalry of warfare. First, when British and German soldiers fraternize in order to exchange schnaps, cigarettes, uniform buttons, and so forth, and an unexpected shot kills one of Juenger's men, he asks for audience with one of the British officers. Juenger describes the conversation, which is mostly in French, as "sportsmanlike," and he comments:

> It has always been my ideal in war to eliminate all feelings of hatred and to treat my enemy as an enemy only in battle and to honour him as a man according to his courage. . . . It depends, of course, on not letting oneself be blinded by an excessive national feeling, as the case generally is between the French and the Germans. [52].

Second, Juenger muses about the benefits of relaxation and reflection and says:

> It is not danger, however extreme it may be, that depresses the spirit of the men so much as over-fatigue and wretched conditions. People who have leisure can afford themselves every luxury, even that of heroic feelings. This is true for the people as a whole. Its moral worth can only reach its full height when the pressure of work is not crushing upon any section of it. [60].

The Overture to the Somme Offensive. After an officer's training course at Croisilles in Spring 1916, Juenger recounts his involvement in the summer's Somme Offensive. His intense rehearsal of chaotic events follows his own unique perspective and leaves the reader at a disadvantage. In sweeping fashion, with much to be read in-between the lines in order to supply contextual information, Juenger carries the willing reader through artillery bombardment, infiltration maneuvers, routine trench duty, repeated mortar operations, and a series of gas attacks (68-85). With almost superhuman ability, Juenger eludes a suspicion of espionage, cheats death during a hazardous night operation, avoids harm when "the trench [is] shot all to bits . . . and [is] almost impassible," miraculously evades shell bursts during a chlorine gas attack, survives a "storm of shrapnel . . . showers of bullets, splinters, and fuses [that] whistle through the air," and escapes any negative effect from "heavy shelling without cover," since he enjoys "the confidence at the back of [his] head that things will soon be better." Juenger is a brave and fortunate soul, like the soldier from Lower Saxony, who "can be relied upon so implicitly to do his duty simply and without fuss" (86).

> It showed great self-mastery to leave the security of the deep dugout and face the storm of fire during those days in the trenches when the trench-mortar bombs were exploding by the hundred and then the flanking battery swept us with shrapnel and when bits and splinters were hurtling all ways. In the open field there may be some pleasure in showing your courage, but it is another thing to clench your teeth and to go to your post alone in the night and under fire. It is just this quality of courage that I have always marvelled at in those quiet, fair-haired Saxons.

After a brief time on leave at home in early August, Juenger receives a telegram: "Return immediately. Further orders from the town-major, Cambrai" (91).

Guillemont. Here, Juenger's writing compels the reader to a new and ugly vision of the conflict. His language is filled with emotion, ruination, and judgment. He says goodbye to

chivalry in light of what he calls "the soul of scientific war" (109), but he does not abandon his heroic patriotism (107). By late Summer 1916, the situation in the trenches becomes very grim. The soldiers "had been through horror to the limit of despair and there had learnt to despise it. Nothing was left but supreme and superhuman indifference" (92-93). As one of them expresses to the lieutenant, "Where you fall, there you lie. No one can help you. No one knows whether he will come back alive. They attack every day, but they can't get through. Everybody knows it is life and death." Juenger, forever the optimist, thinks, "One can fight with such fellows."

He describes the village of Combles, which is "utterly shot to bits." He details the furniture in dilapidated houses where everything is "all tangled up together in wild confusion" (95, cf. 104-105). He describes the effects of the pounding and relentless artillery which he labels a "carnival of hell."

> Single explosions were no longer audible. There was nothing but one terrific tornado of noise. . . . Innumerable shells . . . thick smoke . . . head and ears ached violently . . . [and] we could only make ourselves understood by shouting a word at a time. The power of logical thought and the force of gravity seemed alike to be suspended. [95-96].

Then, there is the ever-present stench of death–the "nauseous and oppressive scent . . . a surprising landmark, a group of dead bodies . . . [and] the dead were almost touching . . . always this sickly smell . . ." (97-98). Once in the trench lines, his platoon witnesses a ghastly churned-up battlefield. He notes, "Among the living lay the dead . . . we found them in layers stacked one upon the top of another . . . arms, legs, and heads stuck out stark above the lips of the craters" (99). The village of Guillemont barely is recognizable and "distinguished from the landscape around it only because the shell-holes there were of a whiter colour by reason of the houses

which had been ground to powder." The railway station at Guillemont "was smashed to bits like a child's plaything. Delville wood, reduced to matchwood . . ." (99).

Somehow, Juenger and most of his men survive this "orgy of destruction" (101). But for him, this becomes a cause for pride.

> Now and then by the light of a rocket I saw the gleam of helmet after helmet, bayonet after bayonet, and I was filled with pride at commanding this handful of men that might very likely be pounded into the earth but could not be conquered. It is in such moments that the human spirit triumphs over the mightiest demonstrations of material force. The fragile body, steeled by the will, stands up to the most terrific punishment.

Likewise, after their relief arrives, Juenger somehow gets his platoon back to Combles "as though by a miracle" (104). In the process, he is wounded in the leg and is transported to the garrison hospital at Gera. But the experience at Guillemont changes him. He says:

> The days at Guillemont first made me aware of the overwhelming effects of the war of material. We had to adapt ourselves to an entirely new phase of war. . . . Yet the strangest thing of all was not the horror of the landscape in itself, but the fact that these scenes, such as the world had never known before, were fashioned by men who intended them to be a decisive end to the war. . . . Where lately there had been the idyllic picture of rural peace, there was as faithful a picture of the soul of scientific war. In earlier wars, certainly, towns and villages had been burned, but what was that compared with this sea of craters dug out by machines? For even in this fantastic desert there was the sameness of the machine-made article. . . . And it seemed that man, on this landscape he had himself created, became different, more mysterious and hardy and callous than in any previous battle. The spirit and tempo of the fighting altered . . . the German soldier wore the steel helmet . . . a battle was no longer an episode that spent itself in blood and fire; it was a condition of things that dug itself in remorselessly week after week and even month after month. What was a man's life in this wilderness whose vapour was laden with the stench of thousands upon thousands of decaying bodies? Death lay in ambush for each one in every shell-hole, merciless, and making one merciless in turn. Chivalry here took a final farewell. It had to yield to the heightened intensity of war, just as all fine and personal feeling has to yield when machinery gets the upper hand. The Europe of to-day appeared here for the first time on the field of battle. [107-110].

Juenger also changes in another significant way. He attributes the terrible losses to the "old Prussian obstinacy" which pursued "the tactics of the line . . . to their logical conclusion."

Even so, he does not seem to be bitter, since he maintains a sense of national feeling. But something important is lost. He laments:

> The names of the tiniest Picardy hamlets are memorials of heroic battles to which the history of the world can find no parallel. There it was that the dust first drank the blood of our trained and disciplined youth. Those fine qualities which had raised the German race to greatness leapt up once more in dazzling flame and then slowly went out in a sea of mud and blood.

At St. Pierre Vaast. For Juenger, Fall 1916 is a time of transition and even advancement. Back on the Front, he escapes harm from phosgene shell-gas only to succumb to a bullet from an unseen sniper that "passed through [his] right calf and grazed [his] left" (115). He dourly relates his experience at the Valenciennes war hospital–"a funeral procession with muffled drums left the main entrance day after day . . . the whole misery of the war was concentrated in the spacious operating-theatre" (116). But while in recovery, he reads with pride the news about the successful Fusilier attack at St. Pierre Vaast. He returns to duty quickly, but now as an observation officer. He notes, "Every one feels that he is caught in a vortex which draws him on and on and thrusts him with unrelenting precision over the brink of death" (118). The best time for him comes when the regiment enjoys a full month of rest in Fresnoy, where they celebrate Christmas and New Year with much alcohol "in its most concentrated forms" (119). They also engage in relations of "an undesirable familiarity" with the civilian population, whereby "Venus deprived Mars of many servants." From Major-General Sontag, Juenger receives the Iron Cross of the First Class, after which he spends another month at a company commanders' course at Sisonne near Laon.

The Somme Retreat. In Spring 1917, the Germans begin to evacuate the Somme area, and Juenger tells about these days. He speaks of the contrast between the "dreary devastation" and

the "melancholy marsh country" that would "put [him] in a peculiarly sorrowful mood as dark fragments of cloud chased across the moonlit sky" (121). He lauds the bravery of the English, but shoots one of them at long-range all the same (123). Noting that "every village up to the Siegfried line was a rubbish-heap," he questions the "moral justification" of such destruction, for "when thousands of peaceful persons are robbed of their homes, the self-satisfaction of power [i.e., from arm-chair warriors and journalists] may at least keep silence" (126). But he concedes:

> As for the necessity, I have of course, as a Prussian officer, no doubt whatever. War means the destruction of the enemy without scruple and by any means. War is the harshest of all trades, and the masters of it can only entertain humane feelings so long as they do no harm. It makes no difference that these operations which the situation demanded were not very pretty. [127].

And, near the Somme, Juenger escapes yet another close call (127).

In the Village of Fresnoy. After a very happy time of leave, the lieutenant positions with his unit near Fresnoy. He sleeps through the bombing of his observation post (132), watches "a succession of duels to the death in the air" that "ended nearly every time in the defeat of the English," goes through attacks of picric-acid gas, and deals with the "heap of wreckage" (135) both human and materiel by downing a few cherry-brandies, since "the experience I had been through had touched my nerve" (136). In a very deadly retreat from the village, in which his unit, the staffs of two battalions, and two relief detachments are trapped in an "intolerably crowded dugout," Juenger relies on the wonderfully "intoxicating breath of spring" to get him through it all (139). In the midst of such, he feels sympathy with the poet who mused, "Surely the day that God has given has better uses than to kill." After a time of rest, he turns very optimistic and remarks, "Sleeping in a bed after so long a time did us so much good that we woke next morning

in all our 'pristine vigour' . . . [and] we were in excellent trim as we marched to Douai station" (140).

Against Indians. May 1917 brings a front line that crosses "an idyllic meadowland" with "weather so fine that the men slept out on the grass" (143). This beauty-of-nature theme captures the heart of the young officer.

> The neglected fields were scented with wildflowers. . . . It seemed that the war had thrown a heroic and melancholy light over the landscape, and without disturbing its loveliness added a ray to its brightness and a strength to its spell. It is easier to go into the battle in the midst of such beauties of nature than when surrounded by a dead and cold winter landscape. Somehow, it comes to one quite simply that one's existence is part of an eternal circuit, and that the death of a single individual is no such great matter. [144].

But this cycle-of-life perspective, even the beautiful carpet of red poppies (146), does not negate the human factor and moral obligation.

> I have always observed that the ordinary man whose sole preoccupation is his own danger is surprised by what seems to him an undivided attention to the matter in hand on the part of the officer in command, who among a thousand and one unnerving incidents of battle yet keeps his eye fixed upon the execution of his duty. This surprise makes an officer excel himself and spurs him on to always greater achievements. In this way officers and men call out energies in each other which would otherwise lie dormant. *Indeed the moral factor is everything*. [150; emphasis mine, DWF].

Juenger and his men have yet another opportunity to responsibly execute their duty when they run upon a group of Indians "who had come far over the sea to run their heads against the Hanover Fusiliers in this God-forsaken corner of the earth" (153). Juenger's success over these Indians receives the appropriate praise from superiors, and this leads him to become philosophic (he quotes Nietzsche–"You must be proud of your enemy, and then the enemy's success is your success also," 154). But he hates the sight of his men plundering the spoils of war, yet he refuses to interfere. "What they took was otherwise doomed to waste away, and aesthetic or moral considerations seemed to me to be out of place in this dark meadow-ground over which all the

callous relentlessness of war still brooded" (155). The key issue for Juenger is courage over cowardice by which "the spirit of the brave man merely rises the higher to meet a chain of exciting experiences" (158).

Langemarck. A village of "comfortable bourgeois life" with "over forty millionaires" (161), Cambrai forms the setting for the next stage of Juenger's war duty. He enjoys the comfort of his billet as well as the practicality and satisfaction of his combat experience (164). When he receives orders to storm the front lines and his company commander bolts, he deplores the "consequence of putting officers of another arm of the service in command of front-line troops, only because of seniority" (168). "Let such fetishes be followed when human lives are not at stake." He again shows daring in the midst of grave danger, and he provides the necessary interpretation.

> It is odd that another's danger makes a stronger impression than one's own. . . . The belief that nothing can happen to himself makes each man underestimate the danger. It is only in another's case that one sees how overwhelming it is and how defenceless its victim. [171-172].

He exhibits persistence in the fight, and only when the platoon is surrounded by a ring of fire does he back off and give the order to retire (176).

During another severe attack, he succeeds in "philosophizing [himself] into courage" as well as utilizing ideas from *La Vautour de la Sierra*, a trashy French novel, and the beautiful song from *The Black Whale of Askelon*. In this way, he settles his own inner conflict and notes, "Every one has his own manner of calming his nerves" (179). But, he confesses, these moments are among the worst of the entire war.

> You cower in a heap alone in a hole and feel yourself the victim of a pitiless thirst for destruction. With horror you feel that all your intelligence, your capacities, your bodily and spiritual characteristics, have become utterly meaningless and absurd. While

> you think it, the lump of metal that will crush you to a shapeless nothing may have started on its course. Your discomfort is concentrated in your ear, that tries to distinguish amid the uproar the swirl of your own death rushing near. It is dark, too; and you must find in yourself alone all the strength for holding out. . . . Well, why don't you jump up and rush into the night . . .? Why do you hang on there all the time . . .? There are no superior officers to see you. Yet, some one watches you. There is some one within you who keeps you to your post by the power of two mighty spells: Duty and Honour. You know that this is your place in the battle . . . [So] you clench your teeth and stay. [180].

Juenger once again comes full circle from despair to duty, from horror to honor, because he knows well that "human nature is indeed indestructible" (182). He is the great optimist, and rightly so, since after the fray he reads the following sentence from an official report in the local newspaper–"We succeeded in holding up the attack on the Steenbeek" (183). He naturally applauds his unit's efforts and notes, "It was odd to feel that our apparently confused doings in the depth of night had won a place in history. The enemy offensive, launched with such tremendous force, had been brought to a standstill, and we had a large share in that result." And Juenger is optimistic for another reason. His brother Fritz, whose life is threatened from a combat wound, writes to Juenger while he is recovering in a Gelsenkirchen hospital. With excerpts from this letter, Juenger ends this chapter of his story.

Regnieville. In July 1917, Juenger's unit is positioned near the so-called Commerce Trench along the road from Regnieville. He says that "it was the first time for a long while that we had the French opposite us" (191). Fossils ["I am a passionate entomologist," he writes], poor rations, and wire work catch his attention (192-194). Most of all, he leads a raid on enemy trenches that is designed to capture prisoners. After a self-audience the night before (196), he describes gearing up, identity stripping, and the raid itself–the anticipation, the surprise, the suspense, the nervousness, the lostness, and the joy upon finding their way back to their own trenches (196-198). Juenger unfortunately loses ten of fourteen men during the raid, and to heap

abuse on his disappointment, he must debrief the senior staff at division headquarters. His disdain for staff officers, especially in this circumstance, is clearly expressed. So he chides:

> The general staff officer received me in his office, and tried in vain to impress upon me that I owed the loss of my men to an ill-considered and over-hasty advance. I thought: 'You can tell me a lot, sitting here twenty kilometres behind the line,' and I gave him to understand that in the enemy's front line I had neither a green table nor the packs of cards upon it. Besides that, all the part I had was the fighting itself; as for the plan, that had been thrust on me ready-made, though there was much in it to take exception to. I had asked that the objective should be altered to the well-marked line of the paved road, or at least that coloured lights might be fired from our lines in case any of us lost our way. The reply had been that this would draw the enemy's fire. But what the devil did the enemy's fire matter to me? I was used to it. But I was not an owl to see my way in the dark! [202].

As reward for their effort, Colonel von Oppen gave patrol members iron crosses and granted fourteen days of leave. "The fallen who were brought in were buried in the military cemetery at Thiaucourt" (203). But Juenger would not be so easily pacified. Among his many adventures during the war, "not one," he remarks, "was more uncomfortable. It gives me the blues even now whenever I think of our wanderings through those unknown trenches in the cold light of dawn." Perhaps the French *communique* report did not help. "A German raid near Regnieville failed. We made prisoners." Juenger comments, "It was not stated that the prisoners were taken only because we lost our way in seeking an enemy who had fled before us. Had the French defended their trenches as soldiers of courage do, it would have been a different story." To take captives from those who lacked courage was no success, and in that lay no satisfaction for Juenger.

Flanders Again. In Fall 1917, Juenger serves as intelligence officer with the Fusiliers in Flanders. He feels more at home with the locals here but less at home with the regimental staff, especially one NCO "who made difficulties, not from cowardice, but just because he wanted to"

(209). Predictably, more dangers effect more casualties, as "losses in young officers were again frightfully heavy during these days" (220). Juenger senses some sort of settled opinion against the war, but his commitment to duty and honor is even more settled and resolute.

> Every time afterwards that I heard prejudice and depreciation on the lips of the mob, I thought of these men who saw it out to the bitter end with so little parade and with so fine an ardour. But after all–what is the mob? It sees in everything nothing but the reflection of its own manners. It is quite clear to me that these men were our best. However cleverly people may talk and write, there is nothing to set against self-sacrifice that is not pale, insipid, and miserable.

The Battle of Cambrai. The December 1917 battle at Cambrai pitches English and British storm troops in close combat along Dragon Alley of the Siegfried line. In such a setting, he notes:

> The technique of the storm-troop came into play. A chain of bombs went from hand to hand along the trench. Snipers took up positions behind traverses ready to draw a bead on the enemy bombers; the platoon commanders kept an eye out over the top to see a counter-attack in the nick of time; and the light machine-gun section mounted their guns where there was a good field of fire. [227-228].

The Germans enter Dragon Alley quickly and decisively and with good results–two hundred enemy captured and a trench bristling with arms, equipment, and supplies (229). But early success soon gives way to "an obstinate shooting match" during which "every traverse [is] contested" (232). What follows is "an indescribable carnage" (234).

> Trench warfare is the bloodiest, wildest, and most brutal of all warfare, yet it too has had its men, men whom the call of the hour has raised up, unknown foolhardy fighters. Of all the nerve-racking moments of war none is so formidable as the meeting of two storm-troop leaders between the narrow walls of the trench. There is no retreat and no mercy then. Blood sounds in the shrill cry that is wrung like a nightmare from the breast. [235].

Cambrai definitely gives Juenger new pride in the accomplishments of his 7th Company, since "a bare eighty of them had taken a long stretch of trench, besides a large quantity of

machine-guns, mortars, and war material, and 200 prisoners" (236). But the deficit toll hit very hard–a fifty percent casualty rate, to include a large number of officers and NCOs. For his part, Juenger receives yet another wound (his fifth), Christmas leave of fourteen days, and the special honor of the Knight's Cross of the House of Hohenzollern. He takes away from Cambrai this latter prize, as well as his perforated helmet, and a silver cup given to him by three company commanders that is inscribed "To the victor of Meuvres" (237). In Juenger's case, as he is one of the living, duty and honor are vindicated.

At the Cojeul River. The Germans spend Winter 1917 getting ready for their Great Offensive. Construction, training, and other preparations accelerate. Juenger reflects:

> After forty-four months of hard fighting, [the officers and the men] threw themselves upon the enemy with all the enthusiasm of August 1914. No wonder it needed a world in arms to bring such a storm-flood to a standstill. In the course of time, when the waves of hatred have subsided, history will recognize that we fought as no people ever fought before. [242].

And he waxes poetic and quotes, "Who knows but that the world to ruin may be hurled? But if it last to-day, to-day's enough!"

The Great Offensive. In Spring 1918, a concerted push by the Germans intensifies the conflict but results in important gains at high cost of life to both sides. Early in the offensive, Juenger's unit takes a direct hit in a shell-hole, "There was a terrific stupefying crash . . . the shell had burst in the midst of us . . ." (245). Like the rest of the men, he feels panic.

> I picked myself up half-unconscious. The machine-gun ammunition in the large shell-hole, set alight by the explosion, was burning with an intense pink glow. It illuminated the rising fumes of the shell-burst, in which there writhed a heap of black bodies and the shadowy forms of the survivors, who were rushing from the scene in all directions. At the same time rose a multitudinous tumult of pain and cries for help. I will make no secret of it that after a moment's blank horror I took to my heels like the rest and ran aimlessly into the night.

As a result, Juenger's one hundred and fifty dwindles to only sixty-three, with over twenty dead and sixty wounded, but "it might have been worse" and "the constant refrain was: 'Thank God, we can only die once'" (248).

In time, the shelling by the German artillery–"this gigantic roar of annihilation from countless guns behind us was so terrific that, compared with it, all preceding battles were child's-play"–heartens the men.

> What we had not dared to hope came true. The enemy artillery was silenced, put out of action by one giant blow. We could not stay any longer in the dugouts. We got out on to the top and looked with wonder at the wall of fire towering over the English lines and the swaying blood-red clouds that hung above it. [250].

The following attack brings intense excitement in its anticipation and execution and even a feverish thirst and hunger for the death and destruction of the enemy.

> The atmosphere of intense excitement was amazing. . . . The roar of the battle had become so terrific that we were scarcely in our right senses. The nerves could register fear no longer. Every one was mad and beyond reckoning; we had gone over the edge of the world into superhuman perspectives. Death had lost its meaning and the will to live was made over to our country; and hence every one was blind and regardless of his personal fate. . . . The turmoil of our feelings was called forth by rage, alcohol, and the thirst for blood as we stepped out, heavily and yet irresistibly, for the enemy's lines. And therewith beat the pulse of heroism–the godlike and the bestial inextricably mingled. . . . I was boiling with a fury now utterly inconceivable to me. The overpowering desire to kill winged my feet. Rage squeezed bitter tears from my eyes. [254-255].

The Germans advance as they are driven by this "impulse of annihilation" (257). The fighting is not easy, and Juenger describes the scene, "For the first time in the war I saw large bodies of men in hand-to-hand fighting. . . . It was a fight to the death" (270). With "a quite improbable degree of recklessness" and "bloodthirsty conduct" (260, 262), Juenger's men push forward. He confesses, however, "It is a strange feeling to look into the eyes of a man whom you have killed with your own hands" (265).

The German advance eventually comes to a halt, and danger lurks all around. For the soldier, Juenger observes, the mind entertains mixed thoughts about certainty, reality, and the meaning of it all.

> At first a few shrapnel broke over us, then light and heavy shells in plenty. We lay as though on a silver salver. Several unquiet spirits drew worse fire by losing their heads and running to and fro instead of lying low in their shell-holes and letting the stuff sweep over their heads. In such situations one must be a fatalist. I took this text to heart as I consumed the really glorious contents of a tin of gooseberry jam that I had carried off as booty. In this fashion the morning slowly drew to an end. [271].

After a deadly bout with Scottish Highlanders, Juenger suffers another wound, possibly from one of his own, since he forgets to take off some pillaged garments–an English coat and a cap with a red band (277-278). As he is moved behind the lines, he marvels at the traffic, the "endless columns of troops," an incredible throng (279). When he reports to Major-General Hobel at brigade headquarters and "begged him to send reserves to support the attacking force," the general told Juenger that the previous day he had been reported as killed-in-action. "It was not the first time in the war," he notes. For Juenger, though, his wounds are not fatal, so a couple of weeks of convalescence in Berlin restores him once again to fighting form.

English Gains. In Summer 1918, Juenger's regiment goes into the Front near Puisieux-au-Mont. "A repulsive scent of corpses hung about this conquered ground. . . . 'Offensive incense,' I heard a cynic and an old soldier say at my elbow, as we were passing for some minutes between rows of dimly-seen graves" (282). Juenger himself drifts toward the cynical. He is tired and battle worn, and now the little things no longer capture his imagination or sustain his optimism.

> I surveyed our trench next morning and found little to cheer me. . . . The *pro formas* and returns, too, provided us with needful distraction. One was kept so fully occupied with the inner organization that time was scarcely left over for the little affair of

> holding the line. It often appeared that collecting empty cartridge-cases was of far greater importance. . . . The letter stifled the spirit. The war was bureaucratized. [284-285].

And he experiences a mood unknown to him before. He laments:

> There crept over me a mood I had never known before: a certain falling-off of the fighting spirit, a war-weariness occasioned by the length of time I had been exposed to the war's excitements. Nothing but war and danger; not a night that was not convulsed with shells. The seasons succeeded each other. Winter came and then summer, and one was always in the war. Tired of it and used to it, one was all the more dispirited and fed up with it just because one was used to it. One was blinded no longer by appearances. The war had raised deeper problems of its own. It was a singular time. [285-286].

Juenger goes through the motions with "ironical pessimism" (294). He braves more scenes of death, suffers through debilitating influenza, and narrowly escapes a sniper's bullet. But he does enjoy the feisty behavior of his storm troops. He quips, "These young warriors with great shocks of hair and puttees fell into a hot dispute twenty metres from the enemy because one of them had called the other a rabbit. They cursed like troopers and vaunted themselves with mighty boasts" (292). However, he could breathe much easier when relief comes from the 164th Infantry Regiment, and they leave behind Puisieux and "the rising storm of the final offensive that growled around it" (298). He and his men were utterly exhausted.

My Last Storm. Juenger's last storm occurs in a suburb of Cambrai, where he pulls together his "decimated company" with drill and discipline in order to offset the effects of the Allied propaganda via "vast quantities of literature thrown down from [British] aeroplanes" (301-302). Before they go into the lines, Juenger braces his men with some "psychological preparation" (304). But the mood remains somber.

> The expression on their faces was serious and manly. There was little to say. By this time there was not a man who did not know that we were on a precipitous descent. . . . Every man knew that victory could no longer be ours. But the enemy should know that he fought against men of honour.

With a reluctant measure of resolve, the men go forward. "It was our last storm. . . . Again the carnival of carnage beckoned" (308).

For his part, Juenger, with the assistance of his batman Schrader, retrieves from a tuft of grass his lost Iron Cross only to receive "a piercing shock through the chest [that] took away [his] breath." Wounded again, he continues to give instructions to his men, and he manages to brace himself and actually assist in the fight. When surrounded by the enemy, he along with Schlaeger and two others manage a remarkable escape to safety (309-312). His trek to the dressing-station is just as remarkable, since he is taken first by a stretcher-bearer and then by Lance-Corporal Hengstmann, who are both shot in the head, and finally by Sergeant Strichalsky of the Medical Corps (312-313). His fortune of being hit fourteen times–"six times by rifle-bullets, once by a shrapnel bullet, once by a shell splinter, three times by bomb splinters, and twice by splinters of rifle-bullets, [so] counting the ins and outs, this made precisely twenty punctures"–earn for Juenger the order *Pour le Merite* (314, 318).

Convincingly, Juenger's service honors the land of his birth and the land that he loves dearly–the Fatherland. He concludes:

> The idea of the Fatherland had been distilled from all these afflictions in a clearer and brighter essence. . . . The nation was no longer for me an empty thought veiled in symbols. . . . I learned from this very four years' schooling in force and in all the fantastic extravagance of material warfare that life has no depth of meaning except when it is pledged for an ideal, and that there are ideals in comparison with which the life of an individual and even of a people has no weight. . . . And if it be objected that we belong to a time of crude force our answer is: We stood with our feet in mud and blood, yet our faces were turned to things of exalted worth. And not one of that countless number who fell in our attacks fell for nothing. Each one fulfilled his own resolve. . . . When once it is no longer possible to understand how a man gives his life for his country–and the time will come–then all is over with that faith also, and the idea of the Fatherland is dead. . . . For all these great and solemn ideas bloom from a feeling that dwells in the blood and cannot be forced. In the cold light of reason everything alike is a matter of expedience and sinks to the paltry and mean. It was our luck to live in the invisible rays of a feeling

> that filled the heart, and of this inestimable treasure we can never be deprived. . . . We–by this I mean those of the youth of this land who are capable of enthusiasm for an ideal–will not shrink from them [e.g., battles old and new]. We stand in the memory of the dead who are holy to us, and we believe ourselves entrusted with the true and spiritual welfare of our people. We stand for what will be and for what has been. Though force without and barbarity within conglomerate in sombre clouds, yet so long as the blade of a sword will strike a spark in the night may it be said: German lives and Germany shall never go under! [316-319].

Questions for Discussion

1. In addition to his personal diary, what resources did Juenger use to compile his narrative?

2. How does Juenger's personality evolve over the course of four years of war? Does this seem realistic?

3. What does Juenger think about the English? The French? How does he distinguish civilians from soldiers?

4. In what way(s) is Juenger the main character at the center of the action? Does this help or hurt the verisimilitude of his narrative? Is his perspective too narrow?

5. Is Juenger consistent in his beliefs about the war? Its realities? Its purposes? Its justifications?