

## The passage describes an attack during the First World War.

The artillery barrage was due to start in fifteen minutes' time. Prior shared a bar of chocolate with Robson, sitting hunched up together against the cold damp mist. Then they started crawling forward. The Manchester regiment had to advance over the waterlogged fields. The rain had stopped, but the already marshy ground had flooded

5 in places, and over each stretch of water lay a thick blanket of mist. Concentrate on nothing but the moment, Prior told himself, moving forward on knees and elbows like a frog or lizard or like - like anything except a man. Even with all this mist there was now a perceptible thinning of the light, a gleam from the canal where it ran between spindly, dead trees.

10 There is to be no retirement under any circumstances. That was the order. They have tied us to the stake, Prior thought. We cannot fly, but bear-like we must fight the course. The men were silent, staring straight ahead into the mist. Talk, even in whispers, was forbidden. Prior looked at his watch, licked his lips, watched the second hand crawl to the quarter hour. All around him was a tension of held breath. 5.43.. Two minutes. He 15 crouched further down, whistle clenched between his teeth.

Prompt as ever, hell erupted. Shells whined over, flashes of light, plumes of water from the drainage ditches, tons of mud and earth flung into the air. A shell fell short. The ground shook beneath them and a shower of pebbles and clods of earth peppered their steel helmets. Five minutes of this, five minutes of the air bursting in waves against your face, men with 20 dazed faces braced against it, as they picked up the light bridges meant for fording the flooded drainage ditches, and carried them out to the front. Then, abruptly, silence. A gasp for air, then noise again, but further back, as the barrage lifted.

Prior blew the whistle, couldn't hear it, was on his feet and running anyway, urging the men on with wordless cries. They rushed forward, making for the line of tress. Prior kept 25 shouting, 'Steady, steady! Not too fast on the left!' It was important there should

be no bunching when they reached the bridges. The men were stumbling into quagmires or tripping over clumps of grass. A shell whizzing over from the German side exploded in a shower of mud and water. He saw several little figures topple over, it didn't look serious, 30 somehow, they didn't look like beings who could be hurt.

The bridges were laid down, quickly, efficiently, no bunching at the crossing, just the clump of

boots on wood, and then they emerged from beneath the shelter of the trees and out into the terrifying openness of the bank. As bare as an eyeball, no cover anywhere, and the machine-gunners on the other side were alive and well. They dropped down, firing to cover the  
35 engineers as they struggled to assemble the bridge, but nothing covered them. Bullets fell like rain and the men started to fall. Prior saw  
the man next to him, a silent, surprised face as he twirled and fell, a slash of scarlet like a huge flower bursting open on his chest. Crawling forward, he fired at the bank opposite though he could hardly see it for the clouds of smoke that drifted across. Only two engineers were  
40 left, still struggling with the bridge. And still the terrible rain fell. Kirk paddled out in a crate to give covering fire, was hit, hit again, this time in the face, went on firing directly at the machine gunners who crouched in the their defended holes only a few yards away.

Prior was about to start across the water with ammunition when he was hit, though it didn't feel like a bullet, more like a blow from a truncheon or a cricket bat, only it knocked  
45 him off his feet and he fell, one arm trailing over the edge of the canal.

He tried to turn to crawl back beyond the drainage ditches, knowing that it was only a matter of time before he was hit again. Simple repetitive thoughts rang round and round his brain. What a mess. What a shambles. Madness. There was no pain, more spreading numbness that left his brain clear. He saw Kirk die. He saw Owen die, his body lifted off the ground by  
50 bullets, describing a slow arc on the air as it fell. It seemed to take for ever to fall, and Prior's consciousness fluttered down with it. He gazed at his reflection in the water, which broke and reformed and broke again as bullets hit the  
the surface and then, gradually, as the numbness spread, he ceased to see it.

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On the edge of the canal the Manchesters lie. The stretcher-bearers have departed with the  
55 last of the wounded and the dead are left alone. The battle has withdrawn from them; the bridge they succeeded in building was destroyed by a single shell.

The sun has risen. The first shaft strikes the water and creeps towards them along the bank, finding here the back of a hand, there the side of a neck, lending a rosy glow to the skin from which the blood fled, and then, finding nothing here that can respond to it, the  
60 shaft of light passes over them and begins to probe the distant fields.

*(Adapted from 'The Ghost Road' by Pat Barker)*