

Day three - Reading activity - Soldier's diary.

Dear diary,

Today, we did it. We took the beach. Our sergeants are calling it a success and, I suppose, it is. It doesn't feel like one, yet. Never before and never again will so many heroes make such a sacrifice for their country. I can't describe in mere words the devastation that I saw, this morning. I shan't go into the bloody details, there'll be enough written about that in years to come, no doubt - but you can taste the heartache and fear in the air even over the acrid smoke billowing out of the towers.

We dropped in just after midnight, us 'troopers were supposed to give support for the lads arriving in the boats. We landed just outside Caen, smack in the middle of a field. We saw the bocage from up there, the lads on the beach are in for a right treat when they get over the dunes: it's a patchwork of ankle-breaking fields and deep hedges, perfect for Jerry to hide in. They knew we were coming; they were ready. Guns lit up the sky from the moment we jumped, and the wind didn't help, too many men were scattered like ashes. We lost Johnny, "Big" Dave, all of them. Only me and Pauly seem to have made it so far, but there could be others out there, resting up or searching for us. That's what I'm choosing to tell myself right now, that they're in another field somewhere with their feet up and a smile on their face. Yeah, that's the image I want to remember.

In the end, we had to take the bridge with the men we had. We did it, though. We took it. Hopefully, it will make a difference to the men on the beaches. There's nothing else we can do for them now. We've got to carry on with our own mission and try to make a dent in their defences. It's Merville next; we've heard on the radio that the 9th has lost a lot of men, so we're going to try to head over there to support them. Everywhere you go, people seem to be in a strange state of unease. This is just the first part - even if they take the beaches, over the hills, the fight is raging on. I've only been given five minutes to get some water and clear my head before we push on. I think that's one of the things that's throwing me off so much; the juxtaposition with home - you could be forgiven for thinking you were in Dorset or Kent looking at the landscape - and yet everything is so very different. Everywhere is scarred by the war. Great gouges have been cut out of the fields, by man and machine, and thick black smoke clouds the sun everywhere we look.

Maybe it will be different after liberation. I suppose we've not won, not yet, even though it feels like a victory. We're nearly there though, that's what's making everyone feel so uneasy, I think. There's the odd feeling that we are almost there, that this stain on history will soon be blotted, yet there is still so much that needs to be done. So many chances that we might not see the end, after all that we've been through. How unfair must that seem to us all? I don't suppose anybody back home would understand. Do the men out there fighting in Cologne and Italy and god-knows where else know about today? Do they know we are coming? Do they care?

Anyway, sarge is after us all to ready up and head off to Merville. If this is the last, I get to write, I want my mother to know that I love her and I'm sorry I'm not coming home. Gwen and Brian, I love you both. Grow up brave and look after your mother.

So long, for now.

- Lt. K. Hemmings

*Questions:*

- 1. Which word in the first paragraph best describes the scene through the soldier's eyes?*
- 2. What does the soldier mean by "you can taste the heartache and fear in the air"?*
- 3. Why has the soldier used the simile "scattered like ashes"? What imagery does it use?*
- 4. Find a word that shows the soldiers were uncertain what was going on.*
- 5. Find a definition for the word "juxtaposition".*
- 6. At the end of the third paragraph, how is the soldier feeling? How do you know?*
- 7. Explain how you know what this soldier's role was.*
- 8. Where did the soldier land first?*
- 9. How is the soldier feeling in paragraph that starts "Maybe it will feel different..."? Explain.*
- 10. Summarise the events of the soldier's diary, remembering to include all the key events.*