FOCUS

This section will help you understand
a. why trench warfare was such a terrible experience for the troops in World War I
b. some advances in weapon design that took place during the war.

Stalemate
The first few months of the war, between August and November 1914, saw rapid advances by the German army through Belgium and into France. By the time winter arrived, the German advance had stalled and the Front, the line separating the opposing forces, was clearly established. Soldiers on either side dug in behind barbed wire and machine-gun posts in a labyrinth of trenches that slashed across Europe for hundreds of kilometres.

Conditions in the Trenches
Living in the front-line trenches was a constant struggle for survival. Snipers were always a threat, some of them accounting for hundreds of kills. Soldiers did not just fight against the enemy, but also against the cold, the wet, and the mud. Conditions were so bad during the winter that most fighting came to a halt. Major offensives were planned each year for the spring and summer.

Eye Witness

Looking for a Cushy

Given the conditions in the trenches, it was not surprising that many soldiers looked for a way out. They began to envy their comrades who had the luck to get a blighty or a cushy, terms describing a wound serious enough to put them in hospital but not so bad that it would cause lasting damage. In his 1929 memoir, Goodbye to All That, British author Robert Graves described the fate of one fellow in his unit who went looking for a cushy.

"A bloke in the Munsters once wanted a cushy, so he waves his hand above the parapet to catch Fritz's attention. Nothing doing. He waves his arms about for a couple of minutes. Nothing doing, not a shot. He puts his elbows on the fire-step, hoists his body upside-down and waves his legs about till he gets blood to the head. Not a shot did old Fritz fire. 'Oh,' says the Munster man, 'I don't believe there's a damned square-head there. Where's the German army to? He has a peek over the top—crack! He gets it in the head. Fini."
The squalor of the trenches resulted in thousands of soldiers suffering from trench foot and trench mouth. They were also infested with head and body lice. At night the rats came out to feed on the garbage, the corpses, and even on some of the sleeping soldiers.

Shell shock was a medical condition first diagnosed during World War I. Some Allied officers thought that shell-shocked soldiers were merely shirking their duties out of cowardice. These genuinely ill soldiers sometimes faced imprisonment, physical abuse, and even firing squads. Canadian doctors early in the war accepted shell shock as a valid psychological illness. They became skilled at diagnosing, documenting, and treating this new condition.

New Weapons
The Machine-Gun
The machine-gun was the definitive weapon of World War I. It gave defenders in an entrenched position a previously unheard of killing efficiency. It was largely because of the machine-gun that the war developed into a stalemate, where neither side could advance against the other. Soldiers often referred to this weapon as the “coffee grinder” because it ground to pieces any group of attackers within range.

Figure 4-3 The tank was a British invention whose use was supported by First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill. Most army officers resisted its introduction. Lt.-Gen. Julian Byng once described the tank as “a useful accessory to the infantry, but nothing more.” The tank was introduced at the Battle of the Somme in 1916, when about a dozen of the machines were used to no great effect. In 1917, however, 400 tanks broke through the German lines at Cambrai while suffering unusually light casualties. In the last Allied push of the war, in 1918, a formation of 500 tanks swept everything before it and contributed to the collapse of the German line and the end of the war.

The widespread use of the tank in World War II was the main reason there was no repetition of the trench warfare that defined World War I.

Figure 4-2 This is an artist’s diagram of the Vickers Mark 1, the standard machine-gun used by the English army in World War I. This gun could fire 550 rounds per minute, making it capable of stopping cold an infantry attack across open ground.

RECONNECT
1. List three reasons why so many soldiers were killed or wounded during World War I.
2. Explain why the tank effectively put an end to trench warfare.