



# WARS

BY TIMOTHY FINDLEY



## START UP

How do you think a soldier under attack feels? How would this feeling change if the soldier were also responsible for a battalion of his or her colleagues? Share your thoughts in a small group.

The following excerpt is from *The Wars*, a Governor-General's award-winning novel set during the First World War. Robert Ross, the protagonist, is a 19-year-old Canadian officer who faces the horrors of war and makes desperate decisions to protect the soldiers whose lives he holds in his hands.



1 p.m.

Robert slowly tilted his head to one side. He had lain completely still for three hours. The back of his neck was numb. He slid his hand up under his cheek. The glove made it feel like a stranger's hand. His hair was frozen into points that hung down over his eyes.

"Bates?"

There was no answer.

"Bates?" A little louder.

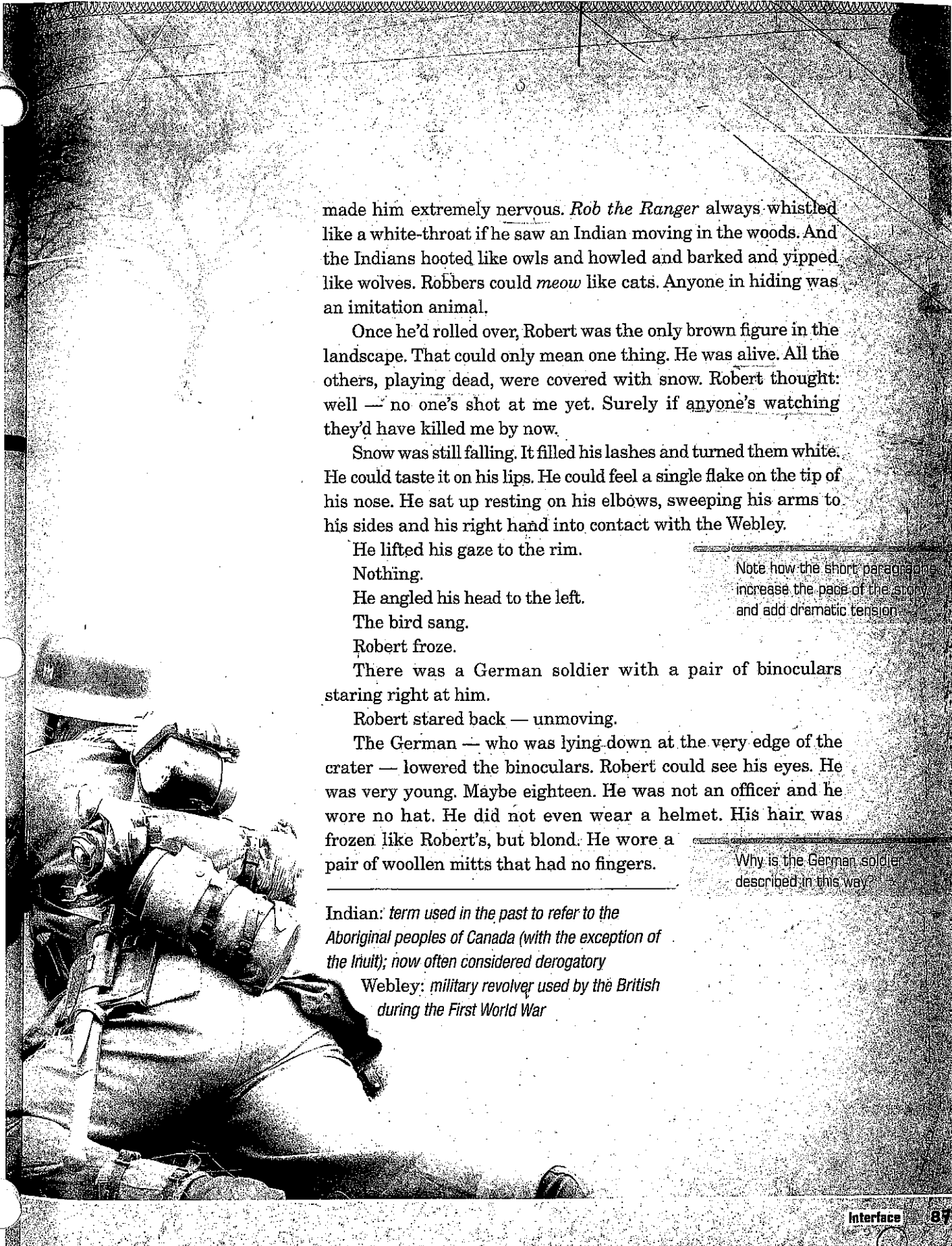
"Yes sir?" Somewhere to his left.

"I'm going to roll over now. Onto my back. I don't want anybody else to move."

"Yes sir."

Robert eased himself onto his side. So far — so good. There wasn't a sound. Then he rolled over with his arms stuck out over his head. He looked like a child about to make "an angel" in the snow. The handkerchief was frozen to his left glove. Looking back, he could see it was off down his arm in another country. A bird sang, something like a white-throated sparrow: one long note descending; three that wavered. This was the bird that had sung before. He waited for it to sing again. It didn't. Robert tried to focus every inch on the rim within his range. The bird had

Note the stark, white images the author uses here and in the following paragraphs



made him extremely nervous. *Rob the Ranger* always whistled like a white-throat if he saw an Indian moving in the woods. And the Indians hooted like owls and howled and barked and yipped like wolves. Robbers could *meow* like cats. Anyone in hiding was an imitation animal.

Once he'd rolled over, Robert was the only brown figure in the landscape. That could only mean one thing. He was alive. All the others, playing dead, were covered with snow. Robert thought: well — no one's shot at me yet. Surely if anyone's watching they'd have killed me by now.

Snow was still falling. It filled his lashes and turned them white. He could taste it on his lips. He could feel a single flake on the tip of his nose. He sat up resting on his elbows, sweeping his arms to his sides and his right hand into contact with the Webley.

He lifted his gaze to the rim.

Nothing.

He angled his head to the left.

The bird sang.

Robert froze.

There was a German soldier with a pair of binoculars staring right at him.

Robert stared back — unmoving.

The German — who was lying down at the very edge of the crater — lowered the binoculars. Robert could see his eyes. He was very young. Maybe eighteen. He was not an officer and he wore no hat. He did not even wear a helmet. His hair was frozen like Robert's, but blond. He wore a pair of woollen mitts that had no fingers.

Note how the short paragraphs increase the pace of the story and add dramatic tension.

Why is the German soldier described in this way?

*Indian*: term used in the past to refer to the Aboriginal peoples of Canada (with the exception of the Inuit); now often considered derogatory

*Webley*: military revolver used by the British during the First World War

Robert could see him so clearly he could see him swallow, as if he was nervous.

Bates said: "Sir?"

Robert tried to speak without moving his lips. "Don't move," he said. "There's somebody there."

Bates did not reply but Robert heard one of the other men cursing in the mud. "Be quiet," he said and, as he said it, he saw in front of them the dreadful phenomenon that could give them all away. His breath. He muttered: "Don't anybody raise his head. Keep on breathing into the ground."

All this time, Robert had not moved. All this time, the German had watched him. Robert thought: there has to be a reason.

He sat up.

Nothing happened.

The German went on staring at Robert — not even using the binoculars. He seemed to be waiting for Robert to take the initiative.

Robert thought: he isn't armed. That's what it is. He isn't armed. He hasn't caught us — we've caught him. He's afraid to move.

Very slowly, Robert drew the Webley and held it in such a way that the German could not help but see it. He didn't want to point it at him yet. He waited to see what reaction the gun itself would get. The German raised his binoculars. Then he lowered them — but that was all.

**Robert didn't take his eyes off the German for a second and the German didn't take his eyes off Bates.**

Robert said: "Bates? Don't be afraid. There's only one and I don't think he has a gun. Try rolling over and see what happens. I've got him covered."

Bates rolled over.

The German shifted his gaze — saw that Bates had moved and then looked back at Robert. He nodded. It was astounding. He nodded!

Robert did not quite understand at first and then the German lifted his head as much as to say: *get up*.

initiative: *first move*

What might the reason be?

"Get up," Robert said to Bates. "Stand right up. He isn't going to shoot."

Bates had been watching the German too. He stood up. "Now what?" he said.

"Go to the top," said Robert. "Go the way we came. Just go. But go slowly. Don't alarm him."

Bates went around behind Robert — out of his sight lines — but Robert could hear him scrambling and squelching through the mud and then the sound of falling debris as he clambered up the face of the crater. Robert didn't take his eyes off the German for a second and the German didn't take his eyes off Bates. The tilt of his head was like a mirror. It showed Bates's progress all the way to the top. And when Bates had arrived and was safe — the German looked back down at Robert — smiling.

Robert stood up. He waved acknowledgement. Whatever his reasons — the German obviously intended them all to go free.

"I want everyone of you to go and join Bates," Robert said.

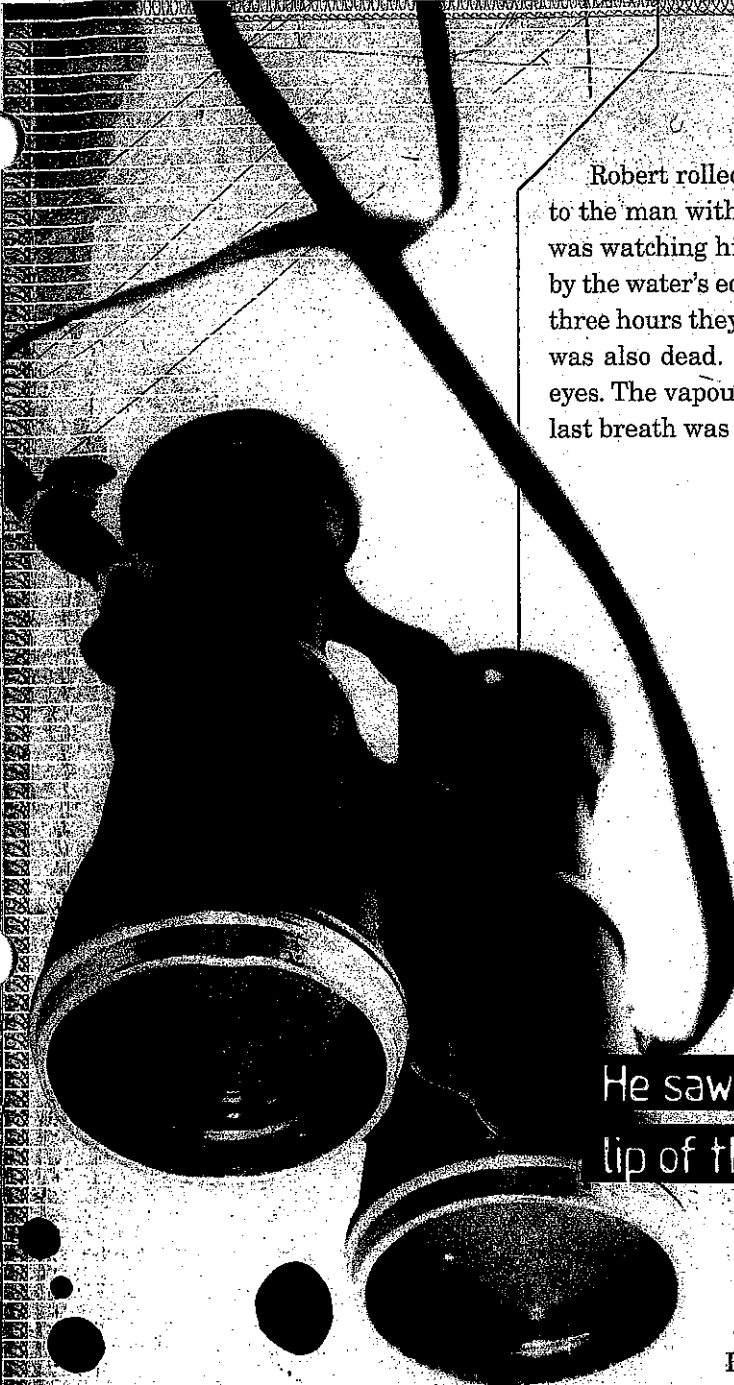
"Don't stop and don't look back. Go as far as you can with your hands in the air, so he'll know you're not armed. Maybe he's crazy — but he isn't going to kill us."

One by one, four of the men began to stumble to the Lewis gun. "Get up," Robert said to the fifth, who he thought must have fallen asleep. When the man did not respond, Robert went across to him and turned him over with the toe of his boot. It was the man who had wept and become hysterical. Dead. His eyes wide and staring. He had strangled on his shirt tail.

squelching: *walking heavily*

Why is this an effective simile?





Robert rolled him back, face down in the mud, and went to the man with the broken legs. All this while the German was watching him but Robert felt entirely safe. He crouched by the water's edge and was amazed to see it was solid. In the three hours they had lain there it had got that cold. This man was also dead. Probably of shock. Robert could not see his eyes. The vapour inside the gas mask had frozen. The man's last breath was a sheet of ice.

It was now Robert's turn to climb.

He would have to turn his back on the German.

Well. There was no other way.

He began.

It was the sort of climb you have in dreams. Every step forward, he slid back two. He almost dropped the gun. His knees were in agony. Harris's scarf got caught on the Lewis gun and Robert had to tear it away. He kept falling forward, sliding in the snow. Once he looked up and could see Bates waiting — watching the German. The others could not be seen. They were over the lip and safe in the trench. Robert had about six feet to go.

**He saw the German reaching over the lip of the crater. Something exploded.**

All of a sudden, Bates shouted: "Sir."

What happened next was all so jumbled and fast that Robert was never to sort it out. He fell. He turned. He saw the German reaching over the lip of the crater. Something exploded. The German gave a startled cry and was suddenly dead, with his arms dangling down.

The shot that had killed him rang around and around the crater like a marble in a bowl. Robert thought it would never stop. He scrambled for the brink only in order to escape it and Bates had to pull him over the edge, falling back with Robert on top of him. The warmth of Bates's body was a shock

What effect do you think the author was trying to create with this simple description?



and the two men lay in one another's arms for almost a minute before Robert moved. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't speak. He could barely see. He sat with his head between his knees. He didn't even know the gun was still in his hand until he reached with it to wipe the mud from his face. It smelt of heat and oil. He turned around and crawled to the edge of the crater. He could barely see. He sat with his head between his knees. He wanted to know what had happened and why the German had so suddenly moved against him after letting all the others escape.

He raised his field glasses and the first thing he saw was their counterpart lying in the mud about a foot from the young man's hand. Binoculars. He had only been reaching for his binoculars.

Robert sagged against the ground. It was even worse than that. Lying beside the German was a modified Mauser rifle of the kind used by snipers. He could have killed them all. Surely that had been his intention. But he'd relented. Why?

The bird sang.

One long note descending: three that wavered on the brink of sadness.

That was why.

It sang and sang and sang, till Robert rose and walked away. The sound of it would haunt him to the day he died. ○

counterpart: *equivalent; equal*

How must Robert feel here?

How is pathos created by this ending? Why does the reader sympathize with Robert?

## ➕ ZOOM IN

- Design the cover for a DVD of a film based on *The Wars*. Decide on the text and images you would include, and write a blurb for the back of the DVD cover.
- Share your cover in a small group.
- Make up a "found poem" from the information in this excerpt. For your poem, choose language, symbols, and descriptions that show Robert's emotions. Your goal is to communicate the essence of what you think the author, Timothy Findley, intended to express about war in this scene from his novel.
- Share your poem with a partner.

## ⊖ ZOOM OUT

- In a small group, research the conflicts going on in the world today.
- On a map of the world, mark the areas where the conflicts are occurring.
- Make up a fact card outlining each conflict, including the location, the main issues, the number of people involved, the length, and so on.
- Present your fact card to your class.
- Working with a partner, choose a current or historical war.
- Write a letter home in the voice of a soldier involved in this war. You may have to do some research in order to add authentic details. Focus on conveying the soldier's point of view about the conflict and his or her participation in it, and what he or she thinks should be done to resolve the conflict.
- Share your letter in a small group.

**ELA B10 – Justice and Fairness (sub-theme of Equity and Ethics)**

**“The Wars”**

*In this excerpt, Robert Ross, a 19-year-old Canadian officer during WWI, “faces the horrors of war and makes desperate decisions to protect the soldiers whose lives he holds in his hands.”*

**Before Reading**

When you see this title, what do you think? What connections can you make to other literature or the world around you?

In your school life, you have often discussed war and how soldiers might feel. Now answer the “Start Up” question from the story handout and share your answer with a group: How would a soldier under attack feel if the soldier was also responsible for a battalion of his or her colleagues?

**During Reading**

Pause throughout and discuss...

p. 87 – Why was the German officer described in this way?

p.88 – Why hasn’t the German officer shot at Robert?

**After Reading**

1. What is pathos? How is pathos created by the ending? Why does the reader empathize with Robert?
2. Why does the bird signal the German relenting? Why will the sound of it haunt Robert until the day he dies?

3. You will now focus on the literary technique of "characterization" and create a "Found Poem" that shows **Robert's emotions**. For your poem, choose language, symbols and descriptions to show his emotions. A found poem **ONLY** uses words and phrases from the piece of literature it is based upon, but those words and phrases can be rearranged into any order and pattern that you wish.



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evokes pity/sadness

Robert realizes German was just like him.

2. Why does the bird signal the German relenting? Why will the sound of it haunt Robert until the day he dies?

↓  
- b/c "anyone in hiding can be an imitation animal" – Robert moved 1st after bird sang so German knew he wasn't scared - must be more Canadians in hiding  
- Robert realized German wasn't reaching for gun

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