

* What are the soldiers in this story doing?

They are marching to the sea.

* How did Billy Boy Watkins die?

He has a heart attack after stepping on a land mine.

* Why does Toby want to shut Paul up?

Paul's laughter might give away their position to the enemy.

1. What Do You Think? What was your reaction to the narrator's statement, at the end of the story, that Paul "could not stop being afraid"?

Some might discuss why Paul thought that reaching the ocean would allay his fears.

2. On the basis of your inferences, what kind of person do you think he is, and how well do you think he is going to adjust to being in a war?

Possible Responses: Paul is young, naive, shy, quiet, and sensitive. Paul will have difficulty adjusting to the war and feeling comfortable; Paul will grow accustomed to the war and perform adequately as a soldier.

3. Why does Paul worry about being as "terribly afraid" as he was when he watched Billy Boy die?

Possible Response: Paul feels he can handle the fears involved in warfare, but does not know how to feel when confronted with a random event like Billy's death.

4. Why do you think Paul decides not to tell his parents that he was afraid on his first day of combat?

Possible Response: Paul wants his parents to be proud of him and believes his fear shows weakness.

5. In your opinion, what amuses Toby and Paul about Billy Boy's death from a heart attack?

Paul and Toby are amused that, considering all the dangers involved in fighting a war, Billy Boy died by scaring himself into having a heart attack.

6. Would you say that Paul's giggling is normal or unusual? Explain your answer.

Students might feel that Paul's laughter is a perfectly normal response to an extremely stressful situation, or they may find it completely out of place because of the solemnity of the occasion.

7. How might Paul's first day in combat be different if Billy Boy were killed by the mine instead of by fright?

Possible Responses: Billy's having been killed by the mine might have had less of an impact on Paul, because soldiers dying in mine explosions was a common experience.

8. On the basis of this story, do you think Tim O'Brien would agree with the **speaker** of Emily Dickinson's poem (page 70) about the look of agony on a person's face?

Possible Responses: O'Brien would likely agree with Dickinson because the reactions of the characters in the story--such as Billy's sudden crying fit or Paul's uncontrollable laughter--seem genuine.

9. Do you think that the experience of being in combat builds character? Explain your answer.

Some who feel that combat experience does build character might cite the importance of decision making, leadership ability, the need to work effectively with many types of people, learning new things, and understanding directions. Some who feel that combat is not worthwhile for building character may say that the horrors of war are so stressful that they prohibit character growth.