

Trenches in World War I

The Trench System

Western Front

On 3rd August 1914, German troops crossed the Belgian border in the narrow gap between Holland and France. The German First and Second Armies swept aside the small Belgian Army and by 20th August had occupied Brussels.

The French commander-in-chief, Joseph Joffre, ordered his Fifth Army and the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) to meet the German advance. The German defeated the French at the battles of Sambre and Mons. By the end of August the Allied armies were in retreat and General Alexander von Kluck and the German First Army began to head for Paris. What was left of the French Army and the BEF crossed the River Marne on 2nd September.

Joffre ordered a counter-attack that resulted in the Battle of the Marne. Unable to break through to Paris, the German army was given orders to retreat to the River Aisne. The German commander, General Erich von Falkenhayn, decided that his troops must hold onto those parts of France and Belgium that Germany still occupied. Falkenhayn ordered his men to dig trenches that would provide them with protection from the advancing French and British troops.

The Allies soon realized that they could not break through this line and they also began to dig trenches. After a few months these trenches had spread from the North Sea to the Swiss Frontier. For the next three years neither side advanced more than a few miles along this line that became known as the Western Front.

Trench System

As the Germans were the first to decide where to stand fast and dig, they had been able to choose the best places to build their trenches. The possession of the higher ground not only gave the Germans a tactical advantage, but it forced the British and French to live in the worst conditions. Most of this area was rarely a few feet above sea level. As soon as soldiers began to dig down they would invariably find water two or three feet below the surface. Waterlogged trenches were a constant problem for soldiers on the Western Front.

Frontline trenches were usually about seven feet deep and six feet wide. The front of the trench was known as the parapet. The top two or three feet of the parapet and the parapados (the rear side of the trench) would consist of a thick line of sandbags to absorb any bullets or shell fragments.

In a trench of this depth it was impossible to see over the top, so a two or three-foot ledge known as a fire-step was added. Trenches were not dug in straight lines. Otherwise, if the enemy had a successive offensive, and got into your trenches, they could shoot straight along the line. Each trench was dug with alternate fire-bays and traverses.

Duckboards were also placed at the bottom of the trenches to protect soldiers from problems such as trench foot. Soldiers also made dugouts and funk holes in the side of the trenches to give them some protection from the weather and enemy fire.

The front-line trenches were also protected by barbed-wire entanglements and machine-gun posts. Short trenches called saps were dug from the front-trench into No-Man's Land. The saphead, usually about 30 yards forward of the front-line, were then used as listening posts.

Behind the front-line trenches were support and reserve trenches. The three rows of trenches covered between 200 and 500 yards of ground. Communication trenches were dug at an angle to the frontline trench and was used to transport men, equipment and food supplies.

No Man's Land

No Man's Land is the term used by soldiers to describe the ground between the two opposing trenches. Its width along the Western Front could vary a great deal. The average distance in most sectors was about 250 yards (230 meters). However, at Guillemont it was only 50 yards (46 meters) whereas at Cambrai it was over 500 yards (460 meters). The narrowest gap was at Zonnebeke where British and German soldiers were only about seven yards apart.

No Man's Land contained a considerable amount of barbed wire. In the areas most likely to be attacked, there were ten belts of barbed wire just before the front-line trenches. In some places the wire was more than a 100 feet (30 meters) deep.

If the area had seen a lot of action No Man's Land would be full of broken and abandoned military equipment. After an attack No Man's Land would also contain a large number of bodies. Advances across No Man's Land were always very difficult. Not only did the soldiers have to avoid being shot or blown-up, they also had to cope with barbed wire and water-filled, shell-holes.

Soldiers were only occasionally involved in a full-scale attack across No Man's Land. However, men were sometimes ordered into No Man's Land to obtain information about the enemy. When an artillery shell had landed just in front of an enemy trench, soldiers were often ordered to take control of the shell-hole and to try and spy on the enemy.

Small patrols were also sent out to obtain information about the enemy. These patrols would go out at night. They would have to crawl forward on their stomachs in an attempt to get close enough to find out what the enemy was up to. If possible, they would try and capture a sentry and bring him back for interrogation. To stop British night patrols the Germans used a light-shell rocket. Suspended from a small parachute, the flare blazed brightly for a minute giving the defending troops a chance to kill the soldiers who had advanced into No Man's Land.

Life in the Trenches

Waterlogged Trenches

Much of the land where the trenches were dug was either clay or sand. The water could not pass through the clay and because the sand was on top, the trenches became waterlogged when it rained. The trenches were hard to dig and kept on collapsing in the waterlogged sand. As well as trenches the shells from the guns and bombs made big craters in the ground. The rain filled up the craters and then poured into the trenches.

Many soldiers fighting in the First World War suffered from trench foot. This was an infection of the feet caused by cold, wet and unsanitary conditions. In the trenches men stood for hours on end in waterlogged trenches without being able to remove wet socks or boots. The feet would gradually go numb and the skin would turn red or blue. If untreated, trench foot could turn gangrenous and result in amputation. Trench foot was a particular problem in the early stages of the war. For example, during the winter of 1914-15 over 20,000 men in the British Army were treated for trench foot.

Dysentery

Dysentery is a disease involving the inflammation of the lining of the large intestines. The inflammation causes stomach pains and diarrhea. Some cases involve vomiting and fever. The bacteria enters the body through the mouth in food or water, and also by human feces and contact with infected people. The diarrhea causes people suffering from dysentery to lose important salts and fluids from the body. This can be fatal if the body dehydrates. This disease struck the men in the trenches, as there was no proper sanitation. Latrines in the trenches were pits four to five feet deep. When they were within one foot they were supposed to be filled in and the soldiers had the job of digging a new one. Sometimes there was not time for this and men used a nearby shell-hole.

Dysentery caused by contaminated water was especially a problem in the early stages of the war. The main reason for this was that it was some time before regular supplies of water to the trenches could be organized. Soldiers were supplied with water bottles that could be refilled when they returned to reserve lines. However, the water-bottle supply was rarely enough for their needs and soldiers in the trenches often depended on impure water collected from shell-holes or other cavities. Later, to purify it, chloride of lime was added to the water. This was not popular with the soldiers, as they disliked the taste of the purified water.

Trench Rats

Many men killed in the trenches were buried almost where they fell. If a trench subsided, or new trenches or dugouts were needed, large numbers of decomposing bodies would be found just below the surface. These corpses, as well as the food scraps that littered the trenches, attracted rats. One pair of rats can produce 880 offspring in a year and so the trenches were soon swarming with them.

Some of these rats grew extremely large. One soldier wrote: "The rats were huge. They were so big they would eat a wounded man if he couldn't defend himself." These rats became very bold and would attempt to take food from the pockets of sleeping men. Two or three rats would always be found on a dead body. They usually went for the eyes first and then they burrowed their way right into the corpse.

One soldier described finding a group of dead bodies while on patrol: "I saw some rats running from under the dead men's greatcoats, enormous rats, fat with human flesh. My heart pounded as we edged towards one of the bodies. His helmet had rolled off. The man displayed a grimacing face, stripped of flesh; the skull bare, the eyes devoured and from the yawning mouth leapt a rat."

Stretcher Bearers

Advancing troops were not allowed to stop and care for wounded soldiers. All men carried an emergency field dressing and if possible attempted to treat their own wounds. The wounded soldier then had to wait until the stretcher-bearers arrived. There were only four stretcher-bearers per company and so it was often sometime before they received medical help. Some dragged themselves into a shell-hole for protection, but this was dangerous as many sank into the mud and drowned. One man with a broken thigh spent two days dragging himself backward with his hands, until he reached his own trenches. Another soldier who had been shot in the chest, lasted eleven days in No Man's Land before the stretcher-bearers found him.

In good conditions two men could carry a wounded man on a stretcher. However, after heavy rain it took four men to lift a stretcher. The men not only had the problem of dragging their feet out of the mud after every step, they also had to make sure not to rock the stretcher as this would increase the pain of the wounded man. The pain of shattered bone ends grating together was so intense that the wounded man was likely to die of shock. One stretcher-bearer working in the mud in 1916 reported that: "as one carried a wounded man you got stuck in the mud and staggered. You put out a hand to steady yourself, the earth gave way and you found you were clutching the blackened face of a half-buried, dead soldier."

Once he had been picked up by the stretcher-bearers, the wounded man would be taken to the regimental aid post that was usually based in the reserve trenches. After the wounds had been cleaned and bandaged the injured man was taken to the Casualty Clearing Station where surgery was carried out.

Blighty wounds

Faced with the prospect of being killed or permanently disabled, soldiers sometimes hoped that they would receive what was known as a blighty wound, and be sent back home. There were some cases where soldiers shot themselves in an attempt to end their time on the frontline. Self-inflicted wounds (SIW) was a capital offence and if discovered, a man found guilty of this faced execution by firing squad. A total of 3,894 men in the British Army were convicted of SIW. None of these men were executed but they all served periods in prison.

Others killed themselves rather than carry on in the trenches. The usual method of suicide was to place the muzzle of their Lee-Enfield rifle against the head and press the trigger with their bare big toe. In some cases, when men could endure no more, stood up on the fire-step and allowed themselves to be shot by an enemy sniper.

Body Lice

Men in the trenches suffered from lice. One soldier writing after the war described them as "pale fawn in color, and they left blotchy red bite marks all over the body." They also created a sour, stale smell. Various methods were used to remove the lice. A lighted candle was fairly effective but the skill of burning the lice without burning your clothes was only learnt with practice. Where possible the army arranged for the men to have baths in huge vats of hot water while their clothes were being put through delousing machines. Unfortunately, this rarely worked. A fair proportion of the eggs remained in the clothes and within two or three hours of the clothes being put on again a man's body heat had hatched them out.