

Life in the Trenches

A War of Movement?

The Great War — a phrase coined even before it had begun — was expected to be a relatively short affair and, as with most wars, one of great movement. The First World War was typified, however, by its lack of movement, the years of stalemate exemplified on the Western Front from autumn 1914 until spring 1918.

Not that there was not movement at all on the Western Front during 1914-18; the war began dramatically with sweeping advances by the Germans through Belgium and France en route for Paris. However stalemate — and trench warfare soon set resulted.

Daily Death in the Trenches

Death was a constant companion to those serving in the line, even when no raid or attack was launched or defended against. In busy sectors the constant shellfire directed by the enemy brought random death whether victims were lounging in a trench or lying in dugouts — many men were buried alive as a consequence of such large shell-bursts.

Similarly, novices were cautioned against their natural inclination to peer over the parapet of the trench into No Man's Land.

Many men died on their first day in the trenches from a precisely aimed sniper's bullet.

Estimates show that up to **one third** of Allied **casualties** on the Western Front were actually sustained in the trenches. Aside from enemy injuries, disease wrought a heavy toll.

Rat Infestation

Rats in the millions infested trenches. Rats gorged themselves on human remains, grotesquely disfiguring dead bodies by eating their eyes and liver. Rats feasted on corpses so frequently that many rats grew to be the size of cats.

Soldiers were maddened and afraid of these rats, which often scampered across their faces in the dark. Men attempted to rid the trenches of rats by various methods: by gunfire, by bayonet, and even by clubbing them to death.

It was useless however: a single rat couple could produce up to 900 offspring in a year, spreading infection and contaminating food. The rat problem remained for the duration of the war, although many veteran soldiers swore that rats sensed impending heavy enemy shellfire and consequently disappeared from view.

Frogs, Lice, and Trench Foot

Rats were by no means the only source of infection and nuisance. Lice were a never-ending problem, breeding in the seams of filthy clothing and causing men to itch unceasingly.

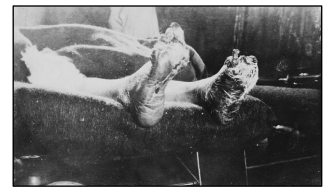
Even when clothing was periodically washed and deloused, lice eggs invariably remained hidden in the seams; within a few hours of the clothes being re-worn, the body heat generated would cause the eggs to hatch.

Lice caused Trench Fever, a particularly painful disease that began suddenly with severe pain followed by high fever. Recovery — away from the trenches — took up to twelve weeks. Lice were not actually identified as the culprit of Trench Fever until 1918.

Frogs by the score were found in shell holes covered in water; they were also found in the base of trenches. Slugs and horned beetles crowded the sides of the trench.

Many men chose to shave their heads entirely to avoid another common scourge: nits.

Trench Foot was another medical condition peculiar to trench life. It was a fungal infection of the feet caused by cold, wet and unsanitary trench conditions. It could turn into gangrene and result in amputation.



Patrolling No Man's Land

Patrols would often be sent out into No Man's Land. Some men would be tasked with repairing or adding barbed wire to the front line. Others, however, would go out to assigned listening posts, hoping to pick up valuable information from the enemy lines.

Sometimes enemy patrols would meet in No Man's Land. They were then faced with the option of hurrying on their separate ways or else engaging in hand to hand fighting.

They could not afford to use their handguns while patrolling in No Man's Land, for fear of the machine gun fire it would inevitably attract, deadly to all members of the patrol.

... And the Smell

Finally, no overview of trench life can avoid the aspect that instantly struck visitors to the lines: the appalling reek given off by numerous conflicting sources.

Rotting carcasses lay around in the thousands.

Overflowing toilets similarly gave off a most offensive stench.

Men who had had a bath in weeks or months reeked of dried sweat. The feet were generally accepted to give off the worst odor.

Trenches would also smell of cleaners or chloride, used to stave off the constant threat of disease and infection.

Add to this the smell of gunpowder, the lingering odor of poison gas, rotting sandbags, stagnant mud, cigarette smoke and cooking food... yet men grew used to it, while it thoroughly overcame first-time visitors to the front.

Shell Shock: The Human Impact of War

In World War I 56% of troops were killed or wounded. Not surprisingly, the horrific trench warfare had profound psychological effects on the young men in the battlefield. Many soldiers had to cope with images that wouldn't go away. At times, parts of human bodies were used to shore up the trench system itself. Some soldiers found it humorous to hang their water canteens on a protruding arm or leg. These were not people who were disrespectful of the dead; these were people who were *living with* the dead. One can imagine the possibility of becoming numb to such images, but some who couldn't turn off their feelings. They brought them home with them, dreamt about them, and went mad because of them.



By the winter of 1914–15, "shell shock" was a pressing medical and military problem. Not only did it affect increasing numbers of frontline troops serving in World War I, but also doctors were struggling to understand and treat the disorder. Soldiers, themselves, coined the term "shell shock." Symptoms included fatigue, tremors, confusion, nightmares and impaired sight and hearing. It was often diagnosed when a soldier was unable to function and no obvious cause could be identified. Because many of the symptoms were physical, it bore little overt resemblance to the modern diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Although today, modern psychologists recognize shell shock as a form of PTSD.

In 1916, British soldier Arthur Hubbard painfully set pen to paper in an attempt to explain to his mother why he was no longer on the front lines. He had been taken from the battlefields and placed in a hospital suffering from shell shock. In his words, his breakdown was related to witnessing "a terrible sight that I shall never forget as long as I live." He wrote the following letter to his mother. [Punctuation and wording appear as originally written]:

We had strict orders not to take prisoners, no matter if wounded my first job was when I had finished cutting some of their wire away, to empty my magazine on 3 Germans that came out of one of their deep dugouts. bleeding badly, and put them out of misery. They cried for mercy, but I had my orders, they had no feeling whatever for us poor chaps... it makes my head jump to think about it.

Hubbard had "gone over the top," meaning he climbed out of his trench and charged forward through no-man's land to attack the enemy German trench. While he survived, practically his whole battalion was wiped out by German artillery. He was buried, dug himself out, and during the subsequent retreat was almost killed by machine gun fire. Within this landscape of horror, he collapsed.

Arthur Hubbard was one of millions of men who suffered psychological trauma as a result of their war experiences. Symptoms ranged from uncontrollable diarrhea to unrelenting anxiety. Soldiers who had bayoneted men in the face developed hysterical tics of their own facial muscles. Stomach cramps seized men who knifed their foes in the abdomen. Snipers lost their sight. Terrifying nightmares of being unable to withdraw bayonets from the enemies' bodies persisted long after the slaughter.

The dreams might occur “right in the middle of an ordinary conversation” when “the face of a [German] that I have bayoneted, with its horrible gurgle and grimace, comes sharply into view,” an infantry captain complained. An inability to eat or sleep after the slaughter was common. Symptoms, however, did not always occur during the war. One soldier did not suffer until he returned home when he admitted he “cracked up” and found himself unable to eat, deliriously re-living his experiences of combat.

These were not exceptional cases. It was clear to everyone that large numbers of combatants could not cope with the strain of warfare. Medical officers quickly realized that everyone had a “breaking point” — weak or strong, courageous or cowardly, war frightened everyone.

1. What is shell shock?

2. What were some of the symptoms of shell shock?

3. What were some of the causes of shell shock?
