

The dangers and difficulties faced by the soldiers on the western front essay sam...

[War](#)



During World War 1, the soldiers of the Western Front faced many extreme dangers and difficulties. Troops on all sides suffered and endured the horrific conditions of trench warfare, which claimed the lives of millions, and traumatised millions more.

Dangers and difficulties that soldiers on the Western Front endured included:

DANGERS

DIFFICULTIES

- * Artillery
- * Machine gun fire
- * Sniper fire
- * Poisonous gas
- * Gas Gangrene
- * Trench Foot
- * Other diseases
- * Execution of soldiers
- * Extreme weather conditions
- * Lice
- * Rats and vermin

- * Flies

- * Shell-shock

- * Psychological traumas due to loss of fellow soldiers

- * Poor food rations/malnutrition

- * Poor personal hygiene and sanitation

- * Stench and decay

The dangers and difficulties often overlap one another, as many difficulties were also potentially life threatening.

ARTILLERY

Artillery, or explosive shells, had produced three-quarters of all wounds by the end of the war (DIXON, S. Modern World History. 1996). Therefore, it was the greatest danger to all soldiers. A common cause of death or wounding was by shrapnel, which occurs when tiny jagged pieces of metal from the explosive shell penetrate into the body in an explosion. In addition, artillery explosions created huge craters in the earth which churned the soil and turned the land into wet, muddy swamps, combined with barbed wire and dead bodies.

MACHINE GUN FIRE

The Germans used machine guns quite effectively for defensive purposes. The machine gun shot 600 bullets per minute and was capable of wiping out

hundreds of oncoming infantry soldiers, and hence was a significant hazard to many soldiers, particularly the Allied soldiers, on the Western Front. " One machine gun could stop 2000 men before they had advanced 200 metres from their own trench" ((DIXON, S. Modern World History. 1996)

SNIPER FIRE

Snipers, or specially trained marksmen, were a danger feared by all sides. These snipers were well armed and protected and very difficult to target by the enemy. Not only did snipers in the Western Front successfully eliminate thousands of enemy troops, they were also efficient spies and reported on troop movements.

POISONOUS GAS

Gas was greatly feared by troops as it caused severely horrific effects for the victims. Furthermore, it was not uncommon for the wind to change its course and direct the fumes of the gas back on to the attacker. Several methods were used to counteract the effects of gas, such as urine-soaked (or soaked in bicarbonate of soda) cloths held over the mouth and nose or box respirators (later developed in 1917). Several types of gases were used in the Western Front:

* Mustard gas - An odourless, oily gas which burned the skin and caused severe respiratory problems. In extreme cases, severe coughing detached mucous membranes from the lungs, flesh was burnt to the bone, and sometimes even genitals were eaten away by severe burning and blistering.

- * Chlorine Gas - A visible gas with a pungent smell. When inhaled, it caused excessive production of mucus which, in severe cases, caused a soldier to drown to death in his own mucus.
- * Phosgene Gas - A powerfully fatal, invisible gas. It was similar to chlorine gas, but far more powerful and rapid to kill, drowning victims from discharges into their own lungs.
- * Prussic Acid Gas - A gas developed by the French, which directly affected the central nervous system. There was minimal protection available from this type of gas, and victims who suffered its effects usually became completely incapacitated.

GAS GANGRENE

The French soils of Northern France were full of organic manure that contained a bacillus found in horse intestines. These bacilli became enmeshed into the soldiers clothing and when the soldier was wounded or struck by a bullet, fabric particles from their clothes would be forced onto the wound, which then became severely infected. This infection was deadly and caused a painful, balloon like swelling.

TRENCH FOOT

Trench Foot was a horrendous condition caused by constant immersion in water and mud. Also, the poor sanitation and the inability to change into dry footwear was a significant contributor to Trench Foot. The condition caused feet to swell, blister, become numb and turn red or blue. In severe cases, the

toes or the entire sole of a man's foot would fall away. It was very common for gangrene to develop in these massive open wounds, which often caused amputation to follow soon after.

DISEASE

The combination of the cold, wet, vermin, poor diet and poor sanitation resulted in a great deal of disease and illness among troops in the trenches.

Some common diseases among many were:

- * Pneumonia
- * Dysentery
- * Trench Fever
- * Bronchitis
- * Venereal Disease
- * Frostbite
- * Nephritis (Kidney Disease)
- * Scabies
- * Tuberculosis

Disease and infection were easily spread from soldier to soldier through lice, vermin, flies and physical contact. The table above (source: McCALLUM, Anne, Evidence of War. 2000) clearly shows the number of British hospital

admissions due to disease on the Western Front in 1917. Death from disease was the second greatest cause of death apart from enemy attack.

EXECUTION OF SOLDIERS

In both the armies of the Allied forces and the Central Powers, certain offences committed by soldiers were punishable by death. For the British army, these offences were mutiny, cowardice before the enemy, self-inflicted wounds, disobedience, desertion or attempted desertion, sleeping or being drunk on post, striking a superior officer, casting away arms or ammunition in the presence of the enemy, leaving a post without orders, abandoning a position, and treacherously communicated with or in any way assisting the enemy. (Source: <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/FWWexecutions.htm>)

Although the danger of being executed was not as significant in comparison to the other obvious dangers of trench warfare, a total of 304 died this way (another secondary source by REES, Rosemary, Britain and the Great War (1993) states that 346 men were killed).

Most soldiers were extremely fearful of their commanding officers and the “firing squad” that performed the executions. Life in the trenches of the Western Front was so unbearable for most troops that the punishment of committing desertion or mutiny was a risk they were willing to take. This table below indicates the number and reason for executions in the British army in World War One.

EXTREME WEATHER CONDITIONS

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The extreme weather conditions that were endured by the millions of troops on the Western Front were an indirect cause of thousands of deaths that occurred during the war. The intolerable winters of Western Europe claimed the lives of many sick and dying soldiers. As the temperatures plummeted to sub-zero conditions, the death rates saw a dramatic increase. " Hot tea froze in minutes and bully beef became cnks of red ice. Bread acquired a sour taste and boots froze solid in seconds if they were taken off." (Denis Winter). Heavy rain was quite common and occasionally filled the trenches knee deep with mud. These harsh, freezing conditions brought with it waves of many diseases, including influenza, pneumonia, frostbite, trench foot, dysentery, etc.

The hot and humid summers, though not as excruciating as the winters, were accompanied with heavy rainfall, flies, lice and rats.

LICE / FLIES / RATS AND VERMIN

The trenches of the Western front were over infested with lice. The tiny, blood sucking insects caused extreme discomfort and skin disorders for the soldiers. Not only did these lice cause incredible itching, they transmitted several diseases including trench fever. " The more they scratched, the more they opened sores and created worse infections" (WEBB, Ken. Modern History, 2002). The condition of the trenches in the heat of the summer months was a perfect place for lice to breed.

Rats in their millions swarmed the trenches. They fed not only on the soldiers' rations but on the thousands of dead, decaying bodies and it was

common for them to grow to the size of a small cat. Rats were even known to attack sleeping or wounded men who lay helpless. A single rat couple could produce up to 900 offspring in a year, spreading infection and contaminating food. 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."

(Source: <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/FWWrats.htm>)

Flies were a constant irritation in the summer. The poor state of the trenches, the abundance of decomposing corpses and the 40 tonnes of manure that the infantry division's 6000 horses were able to produce daily attracted an enormous fly population to the trenches.

SHELL SHOCK

Shell shock was a mental condition caused by prolonged exposure to artillery bombardment, particularly triggered by the close proximity of a shell burst, incessant gun fire and the accumulation of the fear and stresses of death and destruction. Symptoms included nervous collapse, irritability, tiredness, lack of concentration, lack of speech and sometimes a loss of control of limbs. Initially, military authorities tried to deny the existence of shell shock and ridiculed the sufferers of the psychological disorder, branding them a

coward. By the end of World War One, the British army had recorded 80, 000 cases of shell shock.

PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA DUE TO LOSS OF FELLOW SOLDIERS

Most World War One soldiers were ordinary men who were separated from their loved ones and the normality of home life. In response to living under extreme fear and heavy stress, the men turned increasingly to one another for comfort and support, and therefore, there was a growing sense of camaraderie amongst the troops. This was particularly the case between men in the same platoons or battalions. Unfortunately, millions of surviving soldiers were frequently faced with the traumatising loss of their fellow troops. Soldiers paid a heavy emotional and psychological toll for this constant exposure to death and loss.

POOR FOOD RATIONS / MALNUTRITION

Many soldiers on all sides of the war suffered from malnutrition due to extremely poor food supplies. The British soldiers, although better fed than the German troops, received less than half the allocated 4300 calories per day. Rations consisted mainly of tea, sugar, bread biscuits, stew and bully beef. However, it was rare that full rations were allocated to troops as food was stolen, contaminated, lost or spoiled in transit. The rations were of such poor quality that bread and biscuits were hard enough to break teeth. The Germans suffered greater food shortages due to the Allied blockage. These poor diets resulted in malnutrition, and the inability for soldiers to recover effectively from disease or injury.

POOR PERSONAL HYGIENE AND SANITATION / STENCH AND DECAY

In the front lines of the Western Front, sanitation was virtually non-existent. The personal hygiene of the men was tremendously poor, and was a major contributor of the development of disease and infection. The troops were bathed or showered quite rarely and it was not uncommon for a soldier to wear the same clothing for up to several weeks. The heavy rain was not enough to wash away the debris of rotting corpses, human faeces, manure, urine and assorted rubbish thrown away by the soldiers.

The rotting carcasses of soldiers, infested with vermin, lay around in their thousands which produced an appallingly unbearable reek. The stench of the latrines, manure, urine, unwashed men and their rotting, stinking feet added to already intolerable smell of the trenches. However this was also made worse by the smell of creosol, chloride of lime (used to fight infection) the lingering odour of poison gas and rotting sandbags. The combination of these disgusting odours often induced vomiting, which had a foul smell of its own.