

Life in the trenches

[History](#)



Trenches were basically long holes that were just deep enough to cover the height of your body. The main purpose of digging these trenches was to supply reasonable cover from enemy fire. These trenches were more often than not in dreadful shape. The sides of these trenches (especially in Ypres) often collapsed inwards causing a serious safety hazard (the least of their worries). Trenches were often built in zigzags so when the enemy captured the trench, they could not simply fire straight along the trench killing everyone.

The trenches spread from the East to the West. By the end of 1914, trenches stretched all along the 475 miles front between the Swiss border and the Channel coast. The general conditions of the trenches fought in during World War 1 were terrible. The trenches were constantly filled with mud, water, blood, urine, shrapnel, body parts and other such disgusting items. Because of these items constantly filling the trenches, men's feet literally rotted because of being in this constantly. Men would "live" in these trenches for months on end.

Trench foot wasn't the only thing that came from living in the trenches, other conditions such as shell shock, lice and illnesses from poor hygiene. This mostly led to death. Soldiers would never get good nights sleep because of the shelling, the smell and uncomfortable conditions. Despite these terrible conditions, most soldiers would try and keep the spirits up and be thankful for the protection it would give them. The conditions were so bad in the trenches some men would self-inflict wounds into parts of their bodies or deliberately raise an arm or leg over the top of the trench or cover such as sand bags hoping they would be shot at.

They did so that they would be sent home to recover and get away from the war. All-in-all most men weren't willing to do that and would not try to get shot and stay loyal to their country and fight. When the soldier's feet began to rot and swell it was called "Trench foot". Trench foot was the result of a lot of hours or days of exposure to wet or damp conditions at a temperature just over or freezing, this is why it was often contracted during times in the trenches.

Conditions in the trenches were often like this because of all the rain and mud covering the bottom of the trenches, the soldiers couldn't escape it while fighting and had no option but to stand in these conditions all day and most of the night. Most of the damage caused by these terrible conditions was on the nerves and muscles, and gangrene can occur, and often did from this. In many soldiers' cases, the flesh on the foot would die and it may become necessary to have the foot or sometimes even the leg amputated. To give the soldiers best prevention against this was to keep their feet dry.

To do this the soldiers were ordered to carry extra socks with them in a waterproof packet. They were also ordered to wash their feet daily, apply whale oils, and put on dry socks. These were not requests but orders because soldiers not doing all this were given fines and extra work, this was to make sure they weren't getting trench foot deliberately to escape war. Although this was demanded, many soldiers failed to do this because of the intense conditions in the trenches; they never had the time or the energy to be able to fulfill this daily routine.

Rats became a problem in trenches during World War 1 as well. They were attracted by the smell and damp conditions. Rats could and did eat men's uniform, but generally just run around in the trenches and sometimes even biting soldiers, causing the soldier pain and often leading to infection. In extreme cases, a wounded or unprotected soldier could be eaten alive by a large rat or group of rats. Dead corpses would often be eaten by the rats. One soldier described the rats as "small dogs" that would attack and eat anything; he also said that they were almost as much of a threat as the Germans!

Wounded men were often afraid to go to sleep in their beds and men tried to secure their food during the night to stop rats from getting it (by hanging them up in the dug outs). Lice were also a sin in World War 1 they are tiny creatures that feed on human blood and live in the skin and anywhere else warm. Almost all of the soldiers would be infected with lice; they would live in soldier's clothes and roam the human body sucking blood. The lice would cause intense itching and uncomfortable living situations.

Lice would spread through the trenches very quickly because of cramped living conditions. Soldiers would often group together during breaks in the war and attempt to get rid of lice through various methods such as running a lighter round your jacket and listening for the pops of the eggs. Even if the men were successful at ridding lice from themselves, they were very likely to get them again from someone else and so lice were constantly a problem through the war and made the living conditions far worse.

Apart from disease, rats, mould, lice etc there are many more dangers that face the soldiers of to war in his trench. Though trenches supplied enough defence against small German shells there where still the big ones that the British trenches just couldn't stand (unlike the Germans who had dugouts far underground, far enough away for any size shell). When soldiers thought that the trenches would protect them from harm, they where wrong and those thought didn't last long. Throughout the war, the allies used five million tons of artillery shells against the enemy.

In the first two weeks of a battle, the British with other allies managed to shoot 4, 283, 550 shells at the German defences and the Germans managed to get around 3, 000, 340 against the Allies and the trenches could not with stand the force and created a great danger. The trenches never protected soldiers from shell shock. Soldiers who exposed themselves to continuous amount of shellfire produced a number of symptoms. These symptoms included tiredness, irritability, and lack of concentration, headaches, and eventually mental breakdowns.

About 80, 000 men of the British suffered from shell shock which was a danger that no amount of defence could stop. What made shell shock worse was, any man caught trying to escape from the battle because they had got this disease would automatically be executed on the spot by firing squad. One of the major dangers though was obviously being shot. Millions of men where slaughtered by machine guns and rifles. The men feared when the ordered was given to " go over the top" and storm the enemy.

There was no hope in hell that could be said to say that you wouldn't be shot. 1/3 of the men who went to war were injured and/or killed. Another danger that the soldiers had to face was the mud; especially around Ypres the ground was so soft and thick men often disappeared and were later revealed to be drowned in the mud. The work done by the soldiers in the trenches was very well thought over. You had the normal jobs such as bringing food and water up to the frontline, carrying of corpses and the wounded away from battle and then you had the dreadful jobs. One job described as "Unthinkable" was to bury the latrine and dig a new hole to use.

This may seem a lot better than some but mixing faeces and urine with mud, rain and boiling hot days and it begins to become outrageously smelly. This job is pretty pleasant compared to charging towards the enemy and being shot at, which was a very common job in the army. The frontline also needed a good supply of ammunition. The ammo was usually brought back by soldiers heading back to the frontline who had gone to the army generals to tell them what they had heard the enemy talking about the night before.

Soldiers were also responsible for appointing someone to stand watch. A "Guard" would do a few hours shift then attempt to get some sleep while someone else does their bit to look out for advancing enemies and their snipers. Soldiers didn't much enjoy being the guard because then they would get even less sleep and be even more exhausted. One job the soldiers were given for their benefit mainly was to wash their feet daily, apply whale oils, and put on dry socks to prevent "trench foot". In front of the trenches was stretched a barrier of barbed wire, up to 15 metres thick.

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In between was No Man's Land - the area which was being fought over. The two trench lines could be as much as 800 metres apart; in a few places, the enemy was just 20 metres away. Every night, patrols were sent out into the area to find out what the enemy was doing. The aim was to capture the enemy's trenches, but this was difficult because they were all so well-defended. So overall the war was a waste of life and time and trenches just made the death toll higher and it take a hell of a lot longer.