

# Life in the Trenches



**An Examination of Living Conditions on the  
Western Front During the First World War**

# World War I Erupts

- The First World War erupted in the summer of 1914.
- Initially the war was met with tremendous optimism as hundreds of thousands eagerly volunteered for duty.



British and French recruits greeted by cheering crowds in 1914.

# War of Movement

- In the early phases of the war, all combatants launched offensives designed to win the war before Christmas.
- In the West, German troops crossed the Belgian border in the narrow gap between Holland and France.



Strategic Situation in the Summer of 1914.

# Fighting in the West

- By the end of August the Allied armies were in retreat and the German First Army began to head for Paris.
- The French ordered a desperate counter-attack and halted the German advance.
- Unable to break through to Paris, the German army was given orders to retreat to the River Aisne.



The Battle of the Marne (September 1914)

# A Continuous Front

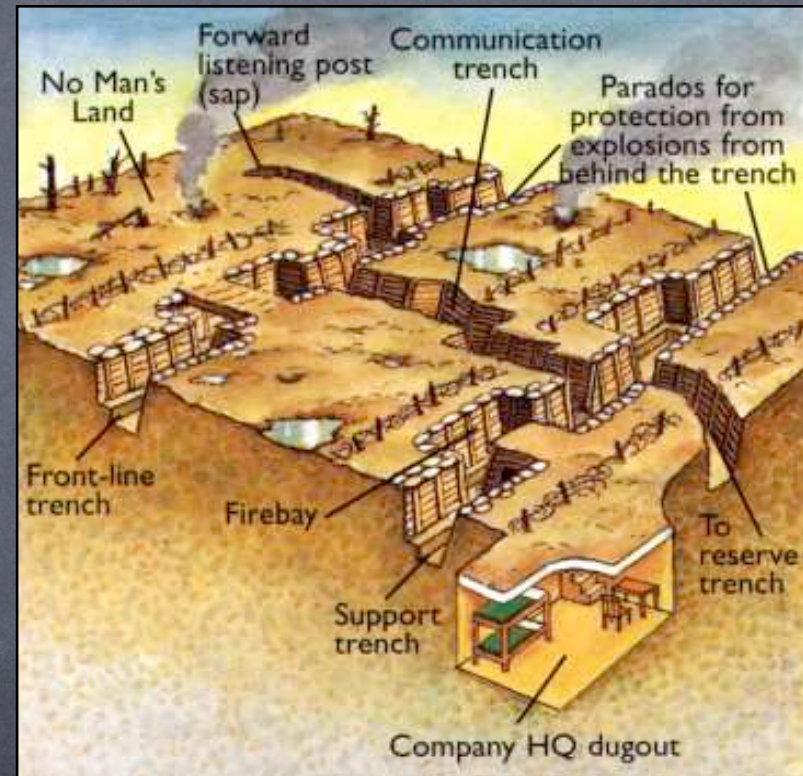
- For a couple of months, both sides attempted to outflank the other but were unable to achieve any lasting victory.
- After a few months these trenches had spread from the North Sea to the Swiss Frontier.
- The Allies soon realized that they could not break through this line and both sides began to dig in.



The front lines shown changed little between 1915 and 1917.

# Stalemate

- In the West, the Germans decided that they must hold onto those parts of France and Belgium that they still occupied.
- They were ordered to dig trenches that would provide them with protection from the advancing French and British troops.
- Trenches were usually about seven feet deep and six feet wide and often possessed deep underground dugouts that housed large bodies of soldiers.



A typical trench system.

# German Trenches

- 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.



This captured German trench was typical of those found on the Western Front. Generally better prepared than Allied trenches, the resilience of German trenches would frustrate Allied attacks throughout the war.

# Allied Trenches

- Most of the area that the Allies were forced to build their trenches 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.
- Water-logged trenches were a constant problem for soldiers on the Western Front.



# Serving in the Trenches

- The British Army worked on a 16 day timetable. Each soldier usually spent eight days in the front line and four days in the reserve trench. Another four days were spent in a rest camp that was built a few miles away from the fighting.
- However, when the army was short of men, soldiers had to spend far longer periods at the front. It was not uncommon for soldiers to be in the front line trenches for over thirty days at a time.



Soldiers did not spend the whole of the time in the trenches.

# Barbed-Wire

- Trenches on the Western Front were protected by thick barbed-wire entanglements.
- Barbed-wire was usually placed far enough from the trenches to prevent the enemy from approaching close enough to lob grenades in.
- Sometimes barbed-wire entanglements were set up in order to channel attacking infantry into machine-gun fire.



Barbed-wire entanglements were virtually impassable. The primary function of any preliminary bombardment was to ensure the destruction of the enemy's barbed-wire.

# 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 but generally averaged about 200-250 meters.



# Artillery

- **Artillery accounted for as many as 7 out of every 10 casualties suffered on the Western Front.**
- **Barrages by thousands of guns, delivering millions of shells was not uncommon in many battles.**
- **Heavy artillery became vital for war on the Western Front due to the deep belts of barbed-wire and fortified nature of most trench systems.**



While not common, massive artillery guns such as the German "Big Bertha" shown above could fire one-ton shells more than ten miles.

# Poison Gas

- The German Army first used chlorine gas cylinders in April 1915 against the Allies at the Second Battle of Ypres.
- The use of Chlorine gas was soon followed by more potent chemical weapons like Phosgene and Mustard Gas.
- Although these new weapons did not help one side win the war, they did increase the level of suffering for both sides.



It has been estimated that the Germans used 68,000 tons of gas against Allied soldiers. This was more than the French Army (36,000) and the British Army (25,000).

# Gas Casualties

- One nurse described the death of one soldier who had been in the trenches during a chlorine gas attack. “He was sitting on the bed, fighting for breath, his lips plum coloured.
- He was a magnificent young Canadian past all hope in the asphyxia of chlorine. I shall never forget the look in his eyes as he turned to me and gasped: I can’t die! Is it possible that nothing can be done for me?”



Between 1914 and 1918, more than 91,000 men were killed as a result of poison gas. Gas casualties, however, accounted for almost 3,000,000 total casualties.

# Conditions in the Trenches

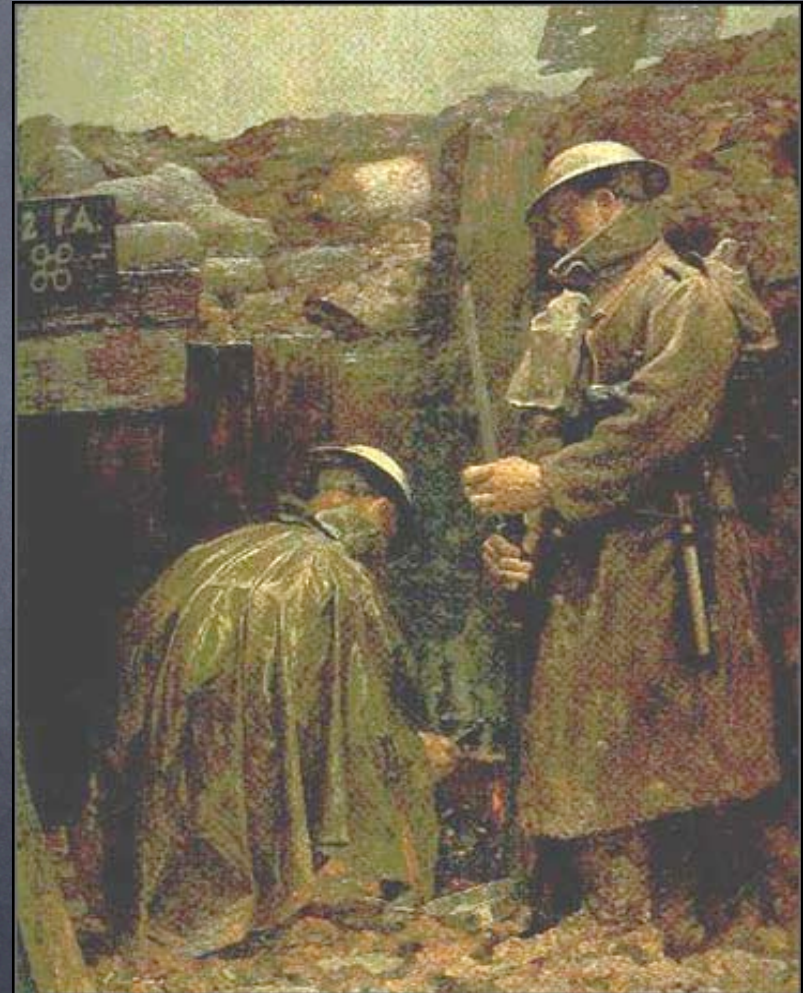
- Apart from being cold, hungry and wet most of the time, soldiers in the trenches suffered from a variety of problems during the war.
- Rats, lice, dysentery, trench foot, and a host of other hardships made life in the trenches horrific and impossible to forget.
- Soldiers were also the victim of friendly fire on occasion.



It has been estimated that about 75,000 British soldiers in the war were killed by British shells that had been intended for the Germans.

# Food

- **Soldiers on the Western Front were very critical of the quantity and the quality of food they received.**
- **The bulk of their diet in the trenches was bully beef (canned corned beef), bread and biscuits.**
- **By the winter of 1916 flour was in such short supply that bread was being made with dried ground turnips. The main food was now a pea-soup with a few lumps of horsemeat.**



# Dysentery

- **Dysentery is a disease involving the inflammation of the lining of the large intestines. The inflammation causes stomach pains and diarrhea and 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.**



# 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.



Corpses lay everywhere and were often in various stages of decay. With little time to bury the dead, the decomposing bodies of men would attract rats. With rats came disease.

# Corpses



"We all carried the smell of dead bodies with us. The bread we ate, the stagnant water we drank. Everything we touched smelled of decomposition due to the fact that the earth surrounding us was

# Lice

- Men in the trenches suffered from lice that left blotchy red bite marks all over the body.
- As well as causing frenzied scratching, lice also carried disease. This was known as trench fever.
- Although the disease did not kill, it did stop soldiers from fighting and accounted for about 15% of all cases of sickness in the British Army.



This 1915 *Punch* magazine cartoon depicts the dehumanization process which results from service in the trenches.

# Weather Conditions

- Rain and snow would transform the battlefield into a morass of heavy thick mud that made the lives of soldiers particularly difficult.
- Cold and wet conditions produced numerous medical problems for soldiers.
- Battles rarely let up during times of extreme weather conditions.



# Trench Foot

- 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.



During the winter of 1914-15, for example, over 20,000 men in the British Army were treated for trench foot.

# Shell Shock

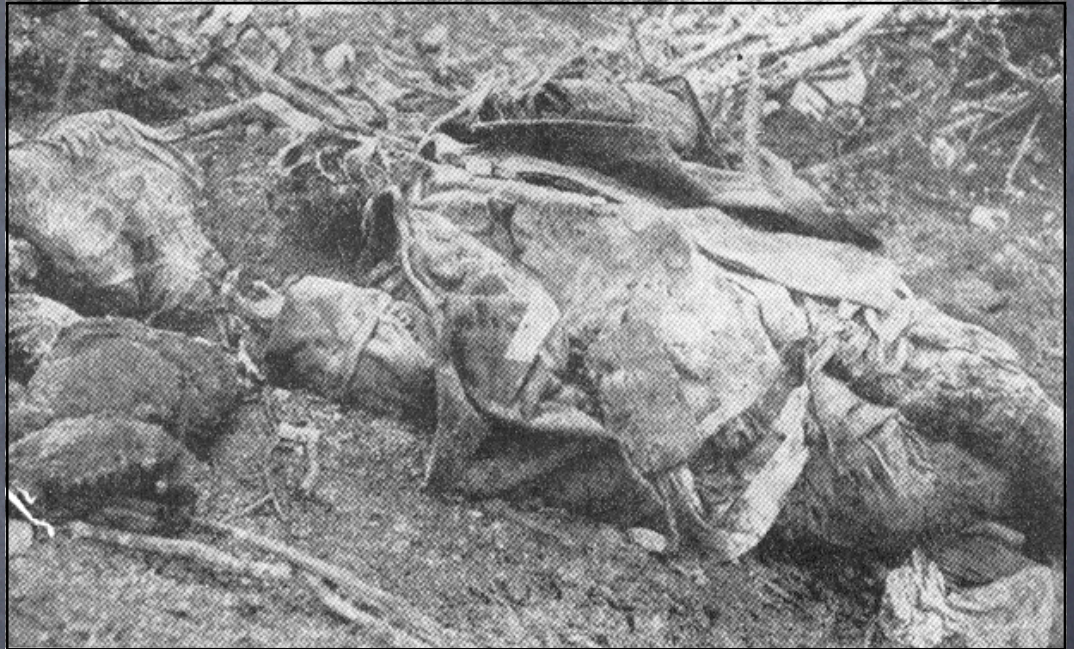
- By 1914 British doctors working in military hospitals noticed patients suffering from "shell shock".
- Early symptoms included tiredness, irritability, giddiness, lack of concentration and headaches. Eventually the men suffered mental breakdowns making it impossible for them to remain in the front-line.



Between 1914 and 1918 the British Army identified 80,000 men as suffering from shell-shock.

# The Human Cost

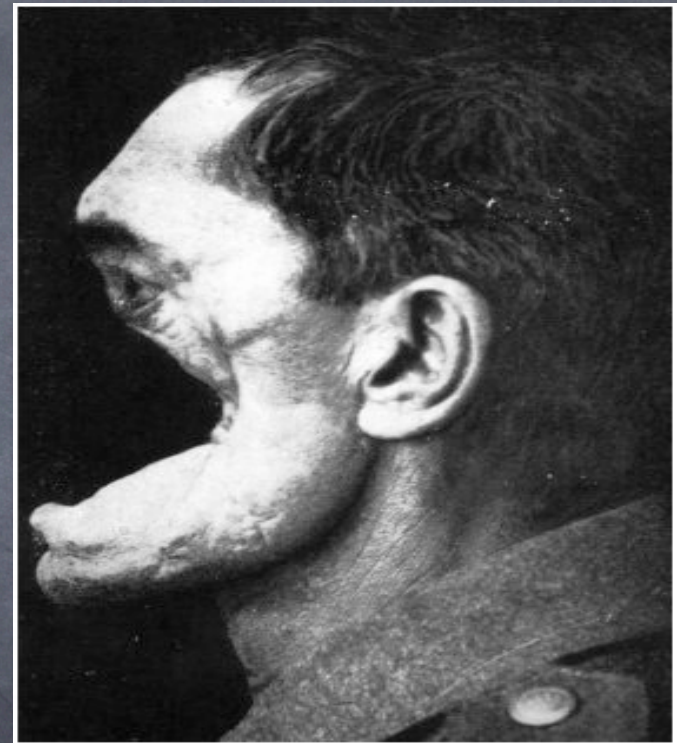
- After four years of war, the British Empire suffered more than 908,000 killed and more than 2,000,000 wounded.
- Many more would carry the emotional scar of fighting in the trenches during the First World War.



The First World War resulted in more than nine million dead and twenty million wounded.

# The Survivors

- For the survivors of the war, their experience coloured every aspect of their life.
- Some would go on to relate their experiences through art and literature, but others would share their experiences with no one.



On one or two faces there are even the hints of smiles. Some, however, will never smile again...