

Trench Warfare on the Western Front

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 their victims were lounging in a trench or lying in a dugout (many men were buried as a consequence of such large shellbursts).



Similarly, novices were cautioned against their natural inclination to peer over the trench into No Man's Land. Many men died on their first day in the trenches as a consequence of a precisely aimed sniper's bullet. It has been estimated 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

For many veterans who were asked to recall their memories of life in the trenches the overriding feature that lingered in the mind was the problem - and horror - of trench rats. Rats in the millions infested trenches. There were two main types, the brown and the black rat. Both were despised but the brown rat was especially feared. Trench conditions were ideal for rats. Empty food cans were piled in the thousands throughout No Man's Land, heaved over the top on a daily basis. Gorging themselves on human remains (grotesquely disfiguring them by eating their eyes and liver) they could grow to the size of a cat.

Men, exasperated and afraid of these rats (which would even scamper across their faces in the dark), would attempt to rid the trenches of them by various methods: gunfire, with the bayonet, and even by clubbing them to death. Although shooting at rats was strictly prohibited - it being regarded as a pointless waste of ammunition - many soldiers nevertheless took pot shots at nearby rats in this manner. Attacking rats with bayonets was also common.

It was futile 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 Worse

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.

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 gangrenous and result in amputation. Trench Foot was more of a problem at the start of trench warfare; as conditions improved in 1915 it rapidly faded, although a trickle of cases continued throughout the war.



The Trench Cycle

Typically, a battalion would be expected to serve a spell in the front line. This would be followed by a stint spent in support, and then in reserve lines. A period of rest would follow - generally short in duration - before the whole cycle of trench duty would start afresh.

In reality the cycle was determined by the necessities of the situation. Even while at rest men might find themselves tasked with duties that placed them in the line of fire. Others would spend far longer in the front line than usual, usually in the more 'busy' sectors. As an example - and the numbers varied widely - a man might expect in a year to spend some 70 days in the front line, with another 30 in nearby support trenches. A further 120 might be spent in reserve. Only 70 days might be spent at

rest. The amount of leave varied, with perhaps two weeks being granted during the year.

Inspection and Chores

With breakfast over the men would be inspected by either the company or platoon commander. Once this had been completed NCOs would assign daily chores to each man (except those who had been excused duty for a variety of reasons). Example - and necessary - daily chores included the refilling of sandbags, the repair of the duckboards on the floor of the trench and the draining of trenches.

Particularly following heavy rainfall, trenches could quickly accumulate muddy water, making life ever more miserable for its occupants as the walls of the trench rapidly became misshapen and were prone to collapse. Pumping equipment was available for the draining of trenches; men would also be assigned to the repair of the trench itself; others would be assigned to the preparation of latrines.



Daily Boredom

Given that each side's front line was constantly under watch by snipers and lookouts during daylight, movement was logically restricted until night fell. Thus, once men had concluded their assigned tasks they were free to attend to more personal matters, such as the reading and writing of letters home.

Meals were also prepared. Sleep was snatched wherever possible - although it was seldom that men were allowed sufficient time to grab more than a few minutes rest before they were detailed to another task.

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. For example, approximately 200,000 men were killed on the Somme battlefields, many of which lay in shallow graves. Overflowing latrines would similarly give off a most offensive stench.

Men who had not been afforded the luxury of a bath in weeks or months would offer the pervading odor of dried sweat. The feet were generally accepted to give off the worst odor.



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

Add to this the smell of cordite, 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.

<http://www.firstworldwar.com/features/trenchlife.htm>