

Life in the Trenches in WW1



Trench warfare was a tactic used by British, French and Russian Forces, on one side and German and Austrian armies on the other, fighting on both the Western and Eastern Fronts during World War 1.

Why dig trenches? To protect soldiers from shell fire and stop the enemy advancing forward.

Size

1-2 metres wide, and 3m deep

Types

In the British Sectors there were 3 lines of trenches: the front, support and reserve.

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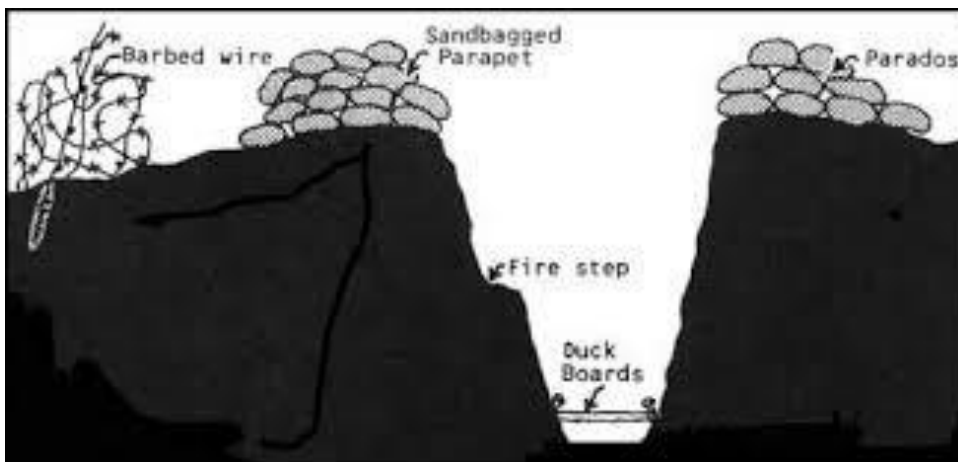
Trenches were defensive positions formed out of dug-out embankments. They were protected by barbed wire and reinforced with sandbags and wood. The bottom was covered with boards, made of wood, called duckboards.

Duckboards were supposed to protect the soldiers' feet from the water and mud but trenches were often muddy damp places when exposed to bad weather.

The front trench

This was made up of *fire* and *command trenches*.

The *fire trenches* were not straight but continuous and had sections or *firebays*. These were as much as 9 metres long. They were separated by *traverses*. The *traverses* helped protect the soldiers from blasts from shells which could land in the next bay and from attacks down the middle of the trench. Soldiers spent 8 days in this trench. These trenches contained a Fire Step which was 2-3 metres high and used by the soldiers to fire through the parapet sandbags at the top of the trench at the enemy.



The *command trenches* had officer command posts in them. They also had dug outs, for rest, and latrines. These latrines were trench toilets. They were usually pits dug into the ground between 1.2 metres and 1.5 metres deep. Two people who were called sanitary personnel had the job of keeping the latrines in good condition for each company. Often officers gave out sanitary duty as a punishment for breaking army regulations. Enemy snipers or shell bursts were a danger for men using the latrines. Going to the toilet was a risky business.

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Communication trenches led to the front. In these trenches telephone cables were laid to battalion headquarters and battery headquarters. Fresh reserves and supplies were moved along these trenches.

The support trench

This held reinforcements of troops but no command lines or positions.

The reserve trench

This was between 360 metres – 540 metres behind the support line.

Soldiers spent 4 days in the reserve trench.

Artillery positions were behind this.

3 ways to dig trenches

Method	Advantages	Disadvantages
<i>Entrenching</i> The soldiers dug the trenches straight into the ground.	Quick	Open to enemy fire while digging.
<i>Sapping</i> The soldiers extended the trench on one side.	Safer	Took a long time.

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<i>Tunnelling</i> Dig the tunnel then take off the roof when it is finished.	Safest	The most difficult.
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Location

By the end of 1914 the trenches stretched through Belgium and France on The Western Front in World War 1. Neither the Germans nor British moved much from October 1914 to March 1918.

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What was life like in the trenches?

Life was difficult. Soldiers became dirty and smelly. Trenches flooded in bad weather. It was muddy and boggy. The trenches were riddled with diseases like Cholera. It was difficult to sleep in the trenches, being uncomfortable and noisy.

Pests like lice and frogs lived in the trenches. Rats ate the food of the soldiers and nibbled on soldiers themselves as they slept.



A pair of rats could produce up to 900 young a year in the trenches and grew large in size after eating human remains left on the battlefield.

Trench Foot resulted in sustained exposure to the conditions in the trenches. This could lead to amputation of a foot.

In cold conditions *Frost Bite* could lead also to amputation of limbs.

The soldiers lived in fear of being attacked by the enemy and of catching diseases.

Soldiers were tired and found it difficult to sleep. They had 2 hour watches where they looked for the enemy. There were often night raids when the enemy would sneak across *No Man's Land* and kill or take prisoner soldiers in the trench.

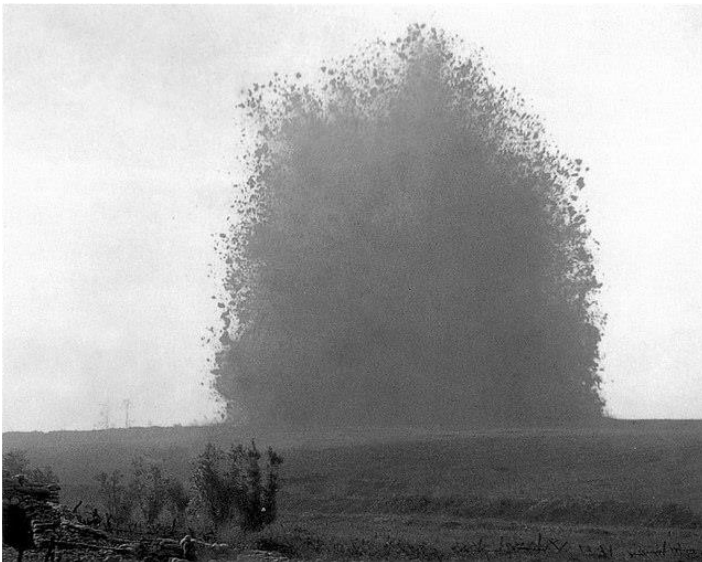
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Activity

- 1) Imagine what life was like in the trenches. Write a diary entry.
- 2) Write a letter to a loved one about your life and how you feel in the trenches.
- 3) Use the photographs to help describe what it was like in the trenches. What did it smell, look, sound, feel like?

No Man's Land

This was the space that was between the two opposite sides' trenches that were fighting each other. The space was very open. Men were very vulnerable



to machine guns and rifle fire. This area could be covered with landmines and barbed wire.

References

World War 1. HP Wilmott. DK.

<http://ww1facts.net/the-land-war/life-in-the-trenches/>

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