

# Life in the Trenches

## A World Below Ground

At the beginning of World War I, the British army owned twenty-five hundred shovels. Just four years later, it had over ten and a half million. Why did one army accumulate so many shovels? To dig trenches—deep, gaping holes in the ground that sheltered soldiers from the shelling of mortars, the barrage of artillery fire, and the blasts of grenades. By the end of the war, soldiers on both sides had dug 15,000 miles of trenches. That's equivalent to digging across the United States five times!

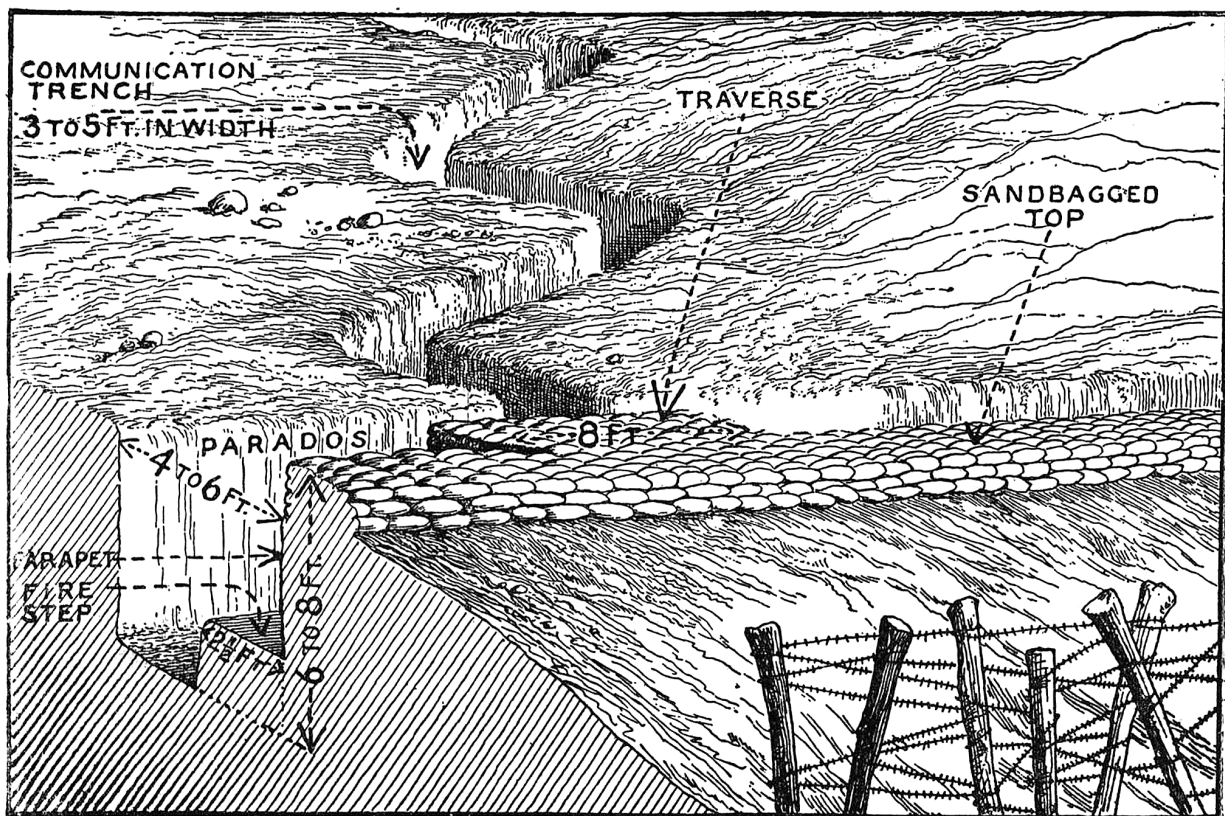


Diagram of a Trench

How did all the digging begin? Trenches were not new. Armies used them in ancient and medieval warfare, and later during the American Civil War. But trenches didn't become an indispensable aspect of war until 1914. Most people thought that the war would last for a few short months. Instead, machine guns and quick-loading rifles kept each side from gaining a significant advantage. As soon as the advancing side moved, the defending army fired at will from the protection of trenches.

The German VII Reserve Corps, pursued by the British Expeditionary Force in the Battle of the Marne in September 1914, was the first to dig trenches and halt the British attack. Both armies marched north in the race to the sea as they tried to outflank the other, all the while digging more trenches along the way. By the end of 1914, two lines of trenches reached across five hundred miles from the Switzerland border to the North Sea—this line became known as the western front. Trench warfare had begun.

## Anatomy of a Trench

What did trenches look like? They typically reached ten feet deep, so soldiers could walk around without being seen by the enemy. In areas where trenches were more shallow, a careless soldier could let his head rise above the top for enemy snipers to target.

Trenches had duckboards, or wooden planks at the bottom, which kept feet dry when it rained and got muddy. Trenches contained saps, short cul-de-sacs dug forward and connected to the front line trench by a little tunnel. Each night, two guards crawled out to the sap and sat for hours. They listened for sounds from the enemy's line; any movement or noise could signal attack preparations.

Tiny rooms, called dugouts, were tunneled sideways into the dirt. Officers slept in dugouts which offered shelter from wind and rain. The Germans built superior dugouts. Because they planned on maintaining their position for a long period of time, they dug up to thirty feet below ground, lined the bunkers with concrete, and installed electric lights, wallpaper, carpets, and



Standing in the Trench

running water. The British and French constructed simple trenches. Trenches were temporary because they planned to push back the Germans and liberate Belgium. Their dugouts held bunks and tables, but the roofs of corrugated iron didn't keep out the rain.

Trenches were organized in rows for specific uses. The trench closest to the enemy was called the front line. This is where actual fighting took place and where soldiers died by the hundreds of thousands from artillery, mortars, and chemical warfare.

Front-line trenches were constructed in zigzag lines to keep the enemy from jumping in and firing a few rounds in both directions to kill all the soldiers in the trench. For each mile of front line, there were about twenty miles of trenches.

About thirty-three yards behind the front line were the support or cover trenches. Troops were stationed there in case the enemy broke through the front line. Behind the support trenches were the reserve trenches. Both the support and reserve trenches were used to relay messages and to transport reinforcements, ammunition, and food supplies during times of battle. This was accomplished through the communication trenches, which joined all three trench lines.

Despite this basic structure, there was no standard trench system. It all depended on the nature of the terrain and the ratio of troops to space. The more frequented trenches were given names. British soldiers walked down "The Strand" or "New Bond Street" and German soldiers passed through "Hansa Weg" or "Munster Gasse." Some trenches grew so complex that soldiers needed guides to maneuver through the trenches. Soldiers, even whole units, easily lost their way in the maze of dead-ends.

No-man's-land was the open space between the friendly trench and the enemy trench. Soldiers strung barbed wire everywhere along this area. On the eastern front, certain areas of no-man's-land extended up to 4,000 yards wide. On the western front, no-man's-land usually stretched 200 to 300 yards wide but could be as little as 7 feet wide. British forces even managed to capture a German soldier who mistakenly walked into their trench carrying his officer's breakfast on a tray.





German Soldiers Carrying the Wounded

## Daily Life in the Trenches

On the front line, soldiers started the day with a *stand to* in case the enemy decided to attack. One hour before dawn, soldiers climbed the fire step on the side facing the enemy where soldiers could aim rifles. The rest of the day was spent on watches. Most soldiers spent time digging and repairing trenches, fetching rations and stores, cleaning their rifles, writing letters, and trying to get sleep.

Soldiers in the front line often adopted an unofficial policy of live and let live. They didn't always actively try to kill their enemies. One section of the front line might agree not to shell each other during breakfast. Another section of the line might agree not to shell the latrines. In one instance, a German soldier crossed over no-man's-land to enjoy an Allied soldier's cigarette before walking back to his side, all without one shot taken.

Aside from the threat of enemy attacks, living conditions in the trenches tested a soldier's sanity. It was a dirty, smelly, and gruesome place to be. Soldiers lived

## Discussion or Essay Questions

To the World War I soldier, active duty in the trenches meant living in a way unlike any other experience. Make a list of all the dangers and nuisances that a soldier in the trenches had to battle. Do some research, and uncover more details about living in the trenches. Try to answer the following questions: What did soldiers eat? What activities did they engage in to counter boredom? How did they cope with the stress of war? How long did they typically stay in the front line? Why do you think soldiers sometimes adopted a policy of live and let live?



## Want to Read More?

### Ages 9-12

*Life in the Trenches* by Stephen Currie

*Eyes Like Willy's* (F) by Juanita Havill

*Trench Fighting of World War I* by John Hamilton

### Ages 12+

*Over There: The United States in the Great War, 1917–1918* by Byron Farwell

*The First World War* by John Keegan

*Shoulder the Sky* (F) by Anne Perry

*All Quiet on the Western Front* (F) by Erich Maria Remarque



### Online Articles (Older Readers)

#### The Trench Warfare Experience

<http://www.learningcurve.gov.uk/greatwar/g3/>

#### The Trenches: Symbol of the Stalemate

[http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/chapters/ch1\\_trench.html](http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/chapters/ch1_trench.html)

#### Trench Food

<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/FWWtrenchfood.htm>

#### Trench Warfare (includes graphic photos)

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/print/schools/worldwarone/hq/wfront1\\_02.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/print/schools/worldwarone/hq/wfront1_02.shtml)



### What to Watch

*All Quiet on the Western Front* (1979) NR – Lions Gate Home Entertainment

*The First World War: The Complete Series* – Image Entertainment

*The Great War and the Shaping of the 20th Century* – PBS

*Paths of Glory* (1957) NR – MGM

*World War I: The Complete Story* – CBS News



### What to Listen To

*The Great War and the Shaping of the 20th Century: Original Soundtrack* – Mason Daring (Audio CD)



### Online Fun

#### Trench warfare game

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/worldwarone/hq/trenchwarfare.shtml>

#### World War I trench 3-D virtual tour

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/war/wwone/launch\\_vr\\_trench.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/war/wwone/launch_vr_trench.shtml)



with the dead day and night. Dead bodies simply lay where they fell, piling up like logs by the fire. Under heavy attack, a soldier had no choice but to relieve himself near the closest crater. They slept in the same clothes for weeks and sometimes didn't take their shoes off the entire time.

Soldiers also contended with smaller enemies. Fleas, flies, mosquitoes, and lice were rampant. Lice lodged themselves in the seams of a soldier's uniform and caused many sleepless nights. Henri Desagneaux, a French soldier, wrote in his diary, "We are living in the earth, our clothes are thick with dirt, we are itching all over, in our shoes, in our trousers, under our shirts, we can't even nod off for one single moment. Even if the guns are silent, the bugs keep crawling." Lice caused illness and disease like trench fever and typhus. Don't forget the rats! Rats had no qualms about stealing food right out of a soldier's hand and running over him as he slept.

Mud and water were a constant problem. In Flanders, soldiers experienced only eighteen days without rain from October 1914 to March 1915. Trenches flooded with water and soldiers walked ankle-deep, sometimes chest-deep, in water. One soldier wrote, "It'll be all right as long as the U-boats [submarines] don't torpedo us." The dirty water caused dysentery, stomach pains, and diarrhea. Sometimes, sleeping men sank into the mud never to be seen again. Those soldiers who didn't drown succumbed to trench foot, a painful condition in which the foot slowly rotted away. Harry Roberts, a soldier suffering from trench foot, described the condition, "Your feet swell to two to three times their normal size and go completely dead. You can stick a bayonet into them and not feel a thing . . . Many have had their feet and legs amputated."

Unlike any other war before 1914, both German and Allied forces found trenches vital for survival during World War I. Yet, while hundreds of thousands of soldiers faced the enemy across the expanse of no-man's-land, nature's enemies within the dirt walls of their trenches continued their relentless attack and added more misery to the soldiers' sufferings.



#### About the author

Joanne Liu is a free-lance writer and attorney in Austin, Tex. She holds a B.A. in political science and economics from Brown University and a J.D. from Boston University.