Trench Warfare in WWI

U.S. History
“Soldiers are dreamers; when the guns begin
They think of firelit homes, clean beds, and wives.
I see them in foul dug-outs, gnawed by rats,
And in the ruined trenches, lashed with rain,
Dreaming of things they did with balls and bats,
And mocked by hopeless longing to regain
Bank-holidays and picture shows, and spats,
And going to the office in the train.”

Siegfried Sassoon, British poet and soldier
Trench Conditions

Miles and miles of trenches snaked through the landscape of Western Europe from 1914 to 1918, often only a few miles apart. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers fought and died in trenches, some only a few feet deep. Rain flooded the trench, rodents and insects infested the men, and the dead were a constant reminder to the living for what may lie ahead.
Despite its deplorable conditions, many men came to recognize the comfort of the trench. Whether they used the sides of the walls as shelter from the rain or laid low during enemy fire, the trench came to be home for many men.
Trench warfare was not a new idea.

- The British experienced digging trenches in Africa during the Boer War.
- Trench warfare was even used at times during the American Civil War.
- Trench warfare as an all-encompassing strategy had never been seen.
- WWI put trench warfare in the vocabulary of every man and woman across the continents.
Germans made the initial decision to dig into the earth.

- Use the trenches to help troops take a defensive position and help transfer troops to other areas of battle.

- Trenches made a successful offensive extremely difficult, as the opposition had the landscape to its advantage.

- While this strategy gave commanders much more flexibility to move troops to where they were needed, it brought the war to a standstill.
**Problems Facing Attacking Troops**

- **Aircraft** can warn of the build-up of enemy troops before an attack.
- **Barbed wire**: metres deep and an impassable obstacle for any troops able to reach it.
- **Concrete block house for a machine-gun**
- **Front-line trench**
- **Support trench**
- **Reserve trench**
- **Communication trenches** allow reserves to be brought forward without exposing them to enemy fire.
- **No Man's Land**: the stretch of land between the trenches of the opposing sides has already been churned up by shell fire. In wet weather it becomes a mass of mud, making it even harder for troops to cross.
- **Front-line dug-outs** provide protection but not against a direct hit from an artillery shell.
- **A deep dug-out**: German ones could be 15 m below ground and very well constructed to be damaged by shell fire.
- **Long-range artillery** is placed about 10 km behind the front line. These guns fire at advancing enemy troops.
No-mans land

- The terrain between enemy trenches
- Often littered with tangled barbed wire, holes from shells, dead bodies, communication wire
- An area of death and decay; often infested with rats who ate the flesh of the dead soldiers
Artillery

- Artillery, or projectile weapons, were important weapons in WWI.

- Either wait for the enemy to come out of the ground, force the enemy into the battle with an offensive, or unload on the enemy with heavy artillery.
Problems with Artillery

- Firing on one’s own army.

- When firing artillery during an infantry attack, it was extremely important to maintain communication with the assault. The big guns had to keep up with the advancing army; otherwise, the guns would be firing on their own troops.
Unfortunately for the common soldier, no strategy could offset the technology of warfare at the time.

The new weapons and technology which could have prevented the carnage would not be available for another generation.
Break down the trench

- One of the advantages of an artillery attack was the wear on the trench itself. Sustained bombings and direct hits could collapse a trench wall or parapet. Therefore, soldiers had to continually rebuild the trench as they were being attacked. As a trench was dug out, the excess dirt and soil was heaped in between the soldier and the enemy position. An enemy; however, could consistently shoot at a trench wall to lower its height. After a day of being shot at, a soldier would spend the night digging out the bottom again to put more earth in between themselves and the enemy.
Soldiers were often caught in a deadly Catch-22: either rebuild the parapet and be on the watch for snipers or risk being killed due to inefficient defense. The better the defenses, the safer many soldiers felt in the trench.
Rats

“They scurried across the faces of men asleep, gnawing food from their packs, and gorged themselves on the flesh of the unburied.”

“There are five families of rats in the roof of my dugout, which is two feet above my head, and the little rats practice back somersaults continuously through the night, for they have discovered that my face is a soft landing when the fall.”
“Ninety-five percent of British soldiers coming out of the line were infested. Lice spread from man to man, living in the seams of his clothing and irritating his skin.”

“Lice were a constant distraction for the soldiers. The lice fed up to twelve times a day and laid five eggs a day. The persistent itching drove many men crazy and their only relief came in the delousing van, which steamed the lice from the clothes. Invariably, the men had to return to the front and the lice.”

“One soldier, as a memento of his misery, pulled a lice from his undershirt, dropped it on the letter he was writing home, and dripped candle wax over it.”
Latrines (Toilets)

When the Germans shelled a latrine, they were counting on help from a source in the sky. The weather was a major factor in many of the dangers of the trench during WWI.

The Germans often aimed their artillery at the latrines of the French and British, knowing a direct hit would affect the conditions in the camp. [1]
Trench foot

- Trenches were not waterproof; therefore, the rain was a constant nuisance. Rain collected in the soft bottom of the trench, causing muddy walkways and "trench foot".

- "A simple pleasure of trench life was digging a hole into the side of a trench to stay out of the rain, despite the risk of being buried alive."
Mass Death

- The terrible strategy of gaining ground by throwing men at the trenches caused death to be a common occurrence to the common soldier.
Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,
And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime...
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.
In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

- from “Dulce et Decorum est” (lines 9-16)

Gas was an important tool in the war, as it forced soldiers into clumsy gas masks in order to save their lives. It was a horrible, painful death, as most gas burned the lungs for a sustained period of time. A soldier in the trench was more prone to death than a soldier in the open, as the gas tended to stay in the dugout earth for a longer amount of time than above ground. Therefore, a soldier in the trench had to keep his mask on longer, as the gas stayed in a hole longer.
Constant Death

- Due to the danger of being outside the trench, many dead and wounded were left on the battlefield.
- Mortar blasts often messily buried the dead on the battlefield and in the trench.
- A soldier “found the dead embedded in the walls of the trenches; head, legs, and half-bodies, just as they had been shoveled out of the way by the picks and shovels of the working party.”
Defense of Trench

- Since death was only an enemy attack away, soldiers defended their trenches with whatever material they could find.
- Sandbags lined the lips of the trench,
- barbed wire served as a barrier against foot invasion, and
- trenches were designed in a snake-like pattern to decrease the damage done by a shelling.
- the deeper the trench, the better defense a trench would provide.
Conclusion

- WWI was a frightening war for a soldier. Holed in the ground, wearing light clothing against many different enemies from men to weather, and conditions sufficient only for rats, men fought against their environment and their enemy. The ground was a safe haven, yet a dangerous grave for many soldiers.

- However, without the trenches, the war would have been far more horrific. Flesh and blood were protected from the machine guns, artillery, and grenades which would have decimated soldiers out in the open.

- In the end, the soldiers of WWI were much more protected by the trench than hindered by it.

- Soldiers may have preferred the comfort of home to the war; but if they had to fight, they would have preferred to be defended in the ground than a target in the open.
Your Task/Homework

- Write a letter home from the trench.

- Letter must describe what is occurring, what you are facing, what has happened...what are the conditions like?