

# World War I

"The War to End All Wars" Part 2



## **Trench Warfare and New Weapons: Symbols of the Wars Stalemate** *By the war's end, each side had dug at least 12,000 miles of trenches.*

Both sides originally believed that the Great War would be over quickly. The German generals were so confident of success that Kaiser Wilhelm II proclaimed that he would have "Paris for lunch, St. Petersburg for dinner."

From the very beginning, the war grew rapidly out of control. New styles of warfare, like the use of gas and heavy artillery, produced new kinds of horror and unprecedented levels of suffering and death. In the west, as the German army invaded Belgium, rumors and stories quickly spread of the atrocities the German soldiers inflicted upon Belgium civilians.

When the German invasion of France failed to take Paris or destroy French and British resistance on the river Marne, stalemate quickly followed, and a line of trenches soon stretched along the war's Western Front from the Swiss Alps to the English Channel. Christmas Eve of 1914 saw an extraordinary truce between the men fighting in the trenches that had been called "the last twitch of the 19th century."

## **Trench Facts**

- Each battalion had its own supply of rum that it distributed to its soldiers. Each division of 20,000 men received 300 gallons.
- Every soldier carried iron rations -- emergency food that consisted of a can of bully bee, biscuits and a tin of tea and sugar.
- A single pair of rats could produce up to 880 offspring in a year.
- A total of 3,894 men in the British Army were convicted of self-inflicted wounds. A firing-squad offense -- none were executed, but all served prison terms.

- The British Army treated 20,000 soldiers for trench foot during the winter of 1914-15.
- One-third of all casualties on the Western Front may have been killed or wounded in a trench.
- A lit candle was fairly effective in removing lice, but the skill of burning the lice without setting yourself on fire was difficult to learn.
- Soldiers in the trenches often depended on impure water collected from shell-holes or other cavities, causing dysentery.

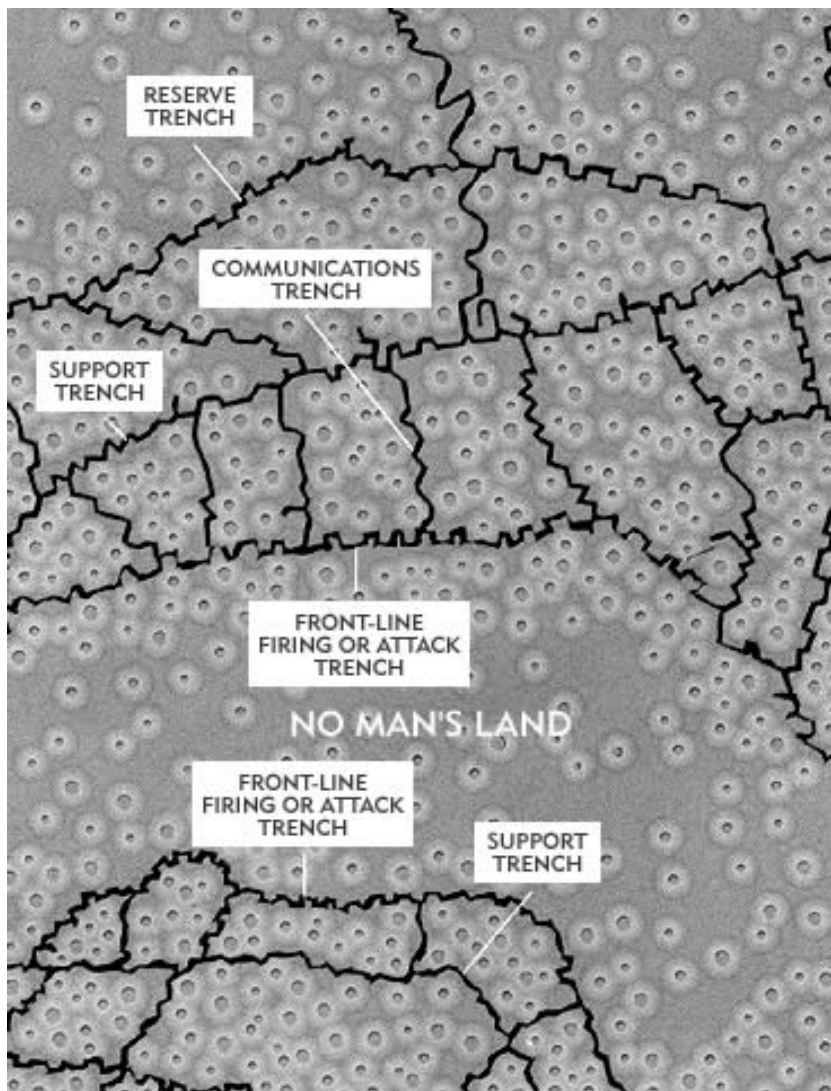
## Organization of the trenches

The Allies used four "types" of trenches.

1. The first, the front-line trench (or firing-and-attack trench), was located from 50 yards to 1 mile from the German's front trench.
2. Several hundred yards behind the front-line trench was the support trench, with men and supplies that could immediately assist those on the front line.
3. The reserve trench was dug several hundred yards further back and contained men and supplies that were available in emergencies should the first trenches be overrun.
4. Connecting these trenches were communication trenches, which allowed movement of messages, supplies, and men among the trenches. Some underground networks connected gun emplacements and bunkers with the communication trenches.

German trench life was much different. They constructed elaborate and sophisticated tunnel and trench structures, sometimes with living quarters more than 50 feet below the surface. These trenches had electricity, beds, toilets and other niceties of life that contrasted sharply with the open-air trenches of the Allies.

### Overhead View Diagram of WWI Trench System



French Soldier drying their feet.

## Morale Booster

On average, daily losses for the British soldiers were nearly 7,000 men killed, disabled or wounded. This figure remained fairly constant throughout the war. To keep morale as high as possible and to keep the soldiers on the front as fresh as possible, the British established a three-week rotation schedule. A week in the front trench was followed by a week in the support trench, which was followed by a week in the reserve trenches. During this third week, the men could relax with sports, concerts and plays, keeping their minds away from life on the front.

## No man's land: The Territory Between the Trenches

By mid-November 1914, the territory between the opposing front trenches was marked with huge craters caused by the shelling; nearly all vegetation was destroyed. Whenever possible, both sides filled this land with barbed wire to slow down any rapid advances by the enemy. The machine gun and the new long-range rifles made movement in this area almost impossible.

## Timing of Movements at the Front

Both sides quickly recognized that assaults against the enemy trenches were suicide if begun in broad daylight, so attacks tended to take place just before dawn or right at dawn. Poison gases tended to be more effective in the mornings, as the colder air and absence of wind allowed the gases to stay closer to the ground for longer periods of time.

Except for artillery shelling, daytime was relatively safe for the soldiers on the front line. Once the sun went down, men crawled out of their trenches to conduct raids, investigate the layout of the terrain, and eavesdrop near the enemy lines to pick up information on their strengths, weakness and strategies.

## Modern Weapons

- The Machine Gun
- Rapid-fire artillery
- Hand Grenades
- Poison gases
- Generals unaccustomed to the new weapons felt that sending a superior number of troops “over the top” would bring them victory.
- Their repeated orders to go over the top of the trenches to attack the enemy produced mounting piles of dead infantry.
- In the battle of Somme in 1916 the British suffered 20,000 deaths in a single day of combat.
- Submarines (U-Boat)
- Naval Blockades
- Convoys
- Airplane
- Tank
- The Rifle and bayonets



Above—American Negro Machine Gunners in the Marne Sector in France.  
Below—In the trenches; a French Officer explaining operation of the hand grenades to Senegalese and American Negro soldiers.