# Trench Warfare

Trench warfare is a form of land warfare using occupied fighting lines consisting largely of trenches, in which troops are significantly protected from the enemy’s small arms fire and are substantially sheltered from artillery. The most prominent case of trench warfare is the Western Front in World War I.

Trench warfare occurred when a revolution in firepower was not matched by similar advances in mobility, resulting in a gruelling form of warfare in which the defender held the advantage. In World War I, both sides constructed elaborate trench and dugout systems opposing each other along a front, protected from assault by barbed wire. The area between opposing trench lines (known as “no man’s land”) was fully exposed to artillery fire from both sides. Attacks, even if successful, often sustained severe casualties as a matter of course.

*Cheshire Regiment trench Somme, 1916*

Fighting trenches were usually about 12 feet (3.7 m) deep. Trenches were never straight but were dug in a zigzagging or stepped pattern. Later fighting trenches broke the line into firebays connected by traverses. This meant that a soldier could never see more than 10 yards (9 m) or so along the trench. Consequently, there would not be a clear line of fire if the enemy gained access at one point; or if a bomb or shell landed in the trench, the blast could not travel far.

*Verdun Communication Trench WW1*

During the day, snipers and artillery observers in balloons made movement perilous, so the trenches were mostly quiet. Consequently, trenches were busiest at night, when cover of darkness allowed the movement of troops and supplies, the maintenance and expansion of the barbed wire and trench system, and reconnaissance of the enemy’s defences. Sentries in listening posts out in no man’s land would try to detect enemy patrols and working parties or indications that an attack was being prepared.

Some sectors of the front saw little activity throughout the war, making life in the trenches comparatively easy. When the I Anzac Corps first arrived in France in April 1916 after the evacuation of Gallipoli, they were sent to a relatively peaceful sector south of Armentières to “acclimatise”. Other sectors were in a perpetual state of violent activity. On the Western Front, Ypres was invariably hellish, especially for the British in the exposed, overlooked salient. However, quiet sectors still amassed daily casualties through sniper fire, artillery, disease, and poison gas. In the first six months of 1916, before the launch of the Somme Offensive, the British did not engage in any significant battles on their sector of the Western Front and yet suffered 107,776 casualties. About 1 in 2 men would return alive and unwounded from the trenches.

As in many other wars, World War I’s greatest killer was disease. Sanitary conditions in the trenches were quite poor, and common infections included dysentery, typhus, and cholera. Many soldiers suffered from parasites and related infections. Poor hygiene also led to fungal conditions, such as trench mouth and trench foot. Another common killer was exposure, since the temperature within a trench in the winter could easily fall below freezing.



Trench foot

Interesting facts about WW1 trench warfare:

* The western front saw the digging of almost 10,000 kilometres of trenches on both sides.
* The accumulation of water in the bottom of the trenches caused many soldiers feet to start rotting, an infliction that got the name ‘trench foot’.
* On Christmas day 1916, soldiers from both sides came out of their trenches and played a game of football.
* Over 200,000 men died in the trenches of WW1.
* World War 1 trench warfare was so intense that 10% of all the soldiers who fought were killed.
* A common trick for sniping people was to send up a kite with writing on it. Anyone who raised his head to read it was shot.
* Field Punishment Number One involved the offender being attached to a fixed object for up to two hours a day and for a period up to three months. During the First World War, these men were sometimes put in a place within range of enemy shell-fire.
* Many men killed in the trenches were buried almost where they fell.
* Self-inflicted harm was common in the trenches because the soldiers would get sent home. The most common method was to shoot themselves in the foot.