

Trench Rats

Many men killed in the trenches were buried almost where they fell. If a trench subsided, or new trenches or dugouts were needed, large numbers of decomposing bodies would be found just below the surface. These corpses, as well as the food scraps that littered the trenches, attracted rats. One pair of rats can produce 880 offspring in a year and so the trenches were soon swarming with them.

Robert Graves remarked in his book, *Goodbye to All That*: "Rats came up from the canal, fed on the plentiful corpses, and multiplied exceedingly. While I stayed here with the Welch, a new officer joined the company and, in token of welcome, was given a dug-out containing a spring-bed. When he turned in that night he heard a scuffling, shone his torch on the bed, and found two rats on his blanket tussling for the possession of a severed hand."

George Coppard gave another reason why the rats were so large: "There was no proper system of waste disposal in trench life. Empty tins of all kinds were flung away over the top on both sides of the trench. Millions of tins were thus available for all the rats in France and Belgium in hundreds of miles of trenches. During brief moments of quiet at night, one could hear a continuous rattle of tins moving against each other. The rats were turning them over."

Some of these rats grew extremely large. Harry Patch claimed that "there were rats as big as cats". Another soldier wrote: "The rats were huge. They were so big they would eat a wounded man if he couldn't defend himself." These rats became very bold and would attempt to take food from the pockets of sleeping men. Two or three rats would always be found on a dead body. They usually went for the eyes first and then they burrowed their way right into the corpse.

One soldier described finding a group of dead bodies while on patrol: "I saw some rats running from under the dead men's greatcoats, enormous rats, fat with human flesh. My heart pounded as we edged towards one of the bodies. His helmet had rolled off. The man displayed a grimacing face, stripped of flesh; the skull bare, the eyes devoured and from the yawning mouth leapt a rat."

Food

At the beginning of the war British soldiers were fed well, but as the size of the army grew and the war went on longer, the army started to ration food. (Ration = only giving a certain small amount).

Soldiers mainly ate 'bully beef' (or tinned corned beef), bread and biscuits. It took so long for fresh food to reach the soldiers on the front line that usually the bread and biscuits were stale. As the war went on flour was in short supply, so bread was then made from ground up turnips (-not very tasty!). The main meal became a thin pea-soup with lumps of horsemeat in it (often with weeds and nettles in it because the kitchen staff had no fresh vegetables!). Soldiers would drink weak coffee and oxo (a type of gravy), as tea, fresh milk and sugar were a luxury. The main diet was of porridge and various types of vegetable stew (with things like carrot and turnip in).

Kitchen staff only had 2 large pans, so everything had to be cooked in them, which without good washing up facilities, meant that everything the men ate tasted of something else. For example, soldiers often complained that their tea tasted of vegetables.

To try and make their food taste better soldiers would often break up stale biscuits or bread, add potatoes, onions, sultanas or whatever was available, and boil the mixture up in a sandbag.

The catering staff put the food in dixies (cooking pots), petrol cans or old jam jars and carried it up to the trenches in straw-lined boxes. By the time the food reached the front-line it was always cold.

Harry Patch later reported: "Our rations - you were lucky if you got some bully beef and a biscuit. You couldn't get your teeth into it. Sometimes if they shelled the supply lines you didn't get anything for days on end. There were five in a machine-gun team, and everything we had was shared amongst us. I used to get a parcel from home. My mother knew the grocer pretty well."

Rum was usually distributed after, rather than before an offensive. It was also issued during very cold weather. The French and German armies were more generous and supplied their soldiers with daily amounts of wine and brandy.

Disease

Trench Foot

Many soldiers fighting in the First World War suffered from trench foot. This was an infection of the feet caused by cold, wet and insanitary conditions. In the trenches men stood for hours on end in waterlogged trenches without being able to remove wet socks or boots. The feet would gradually go numb and the skin would turn red or blue. If untreated, trench foot could turn gangrenous and result in amputation. Trench foot was a particular problem in the early stages of the war. For example, during the winter of 1914-15 over 20,000 men in the British Army were treated for trench foot.



Dysentery

Dysentery is a disease involving the inflammation of the lining of the large intestines. The inflammation causes stomach pains and diarrhoea. Some cases involve vomiting and fever. The bacteria enters the body through the mouth in food or water, and also by human faeces and contact with infected people. The diarrhoea causes people suffering from dysentery to lose important salts and fluids from the body. This can be fatal if the body dehydrates. This disease struck the men in the trenches as there was no proper sanitation. Latrines in the trenches were pits four to five feet deep. When they were within one foot they were supposed to be filled in and the soldiers had the job of digging a new one. Sometimes there was not time for this and men used a nearby shell-hole.

Weapons

When a British Army soldier was ordered to attack the enemy on the Western Front he carried a total of 30 kilograms (66 lbs) of equipment. This included a rifle, two mills grenades, 220 rounds of ammunition, a steel helmet, wire cutters, field dressing, entrenching tool, greatcoat, two sandbags, rolled ground sheet, water bottle, haversack, mess tin, towel, shaving kit, extra socks, message book and preserved food rations. The weight of the equipment made it difficult to move very fast across No Man's Land.



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|---|-------------------|
| 1 | towel |
| 2 | haversack |
| 3 | extra socks |
| 4 | soap |
| 5 | iron rations |
| 6 | preserved rations |
| 7 | canvas holdall |

The Army used lots of different weapons in fighting the war, not just the soldiers' main weapon of a rifle. They also used Bayonets (a short sword/dagger that attached to the end of a rifle to stab the enemy with); Artillery (heavy weapons and big guns that could fire explosive shells); Grenades; Machine Guns; Flamethrowers, Tanks, Pistols and Gas.

Gas

Chlorine Gas

The German Army first used chlorine gas cylinders in April 1915 against the French Army at Ypres. French soldiers reported seeing yellow-green clouds drifting slowly towards the Allied trenches. They also noticed its distinctive smell which was like a mixture of pineapple and pepper. At first the French officers assumed that the German infantry were advancing behind a smoke screen and orders were given to prepare for an armed attack. When the gas arrived at the Allied front-trenches soldiers began to complain about pains in the chests and a burning sensation in their throats.

Chlorine gas destroyed the respiratory organs of its victims and this led to a slow death by **asphyxiation** (lack of oxygen). One nurse described the death of one soldier who had been in the trenches during a chlorine gas attack. "He was sitting on the bed, fighting for breath, his lips plum coloured. He was a magnificent young Canadian past all hope in the asphyxia of chlorine. I shall never forget the look in his eyes as he turned to me and gasped: I can't die! Is it possible that nothing can be done for me?" It was a horrible death, but as hard as they tried, doctors were unable to find a way of successfully treating chlorine gas poisoning.

Mustard Gas

Mustard Gas (Yperite) was first used by the German Army in September 1917. It was one of the most lethal of all the poisonous chemicals used during the war. It was almost odourless and took twelve hours to take effect. Yperite was so powerful that only small amounts had to be added to high explosive shells to be effective. Once in the soil, mustard gas remained active for several weeks.



British soldiers blinded by mustard gas

The skin of victims of mustard gas blistered, the eyes became very sore and they began to vomit. Mustard gas caused internal and external bleeding and attacked the bronchial tubes, stripping off the mucous membrane. This was extremely painful and most soldiers

had to be strapped to their beds. It usually took a person four or five weeks to die of mustard gas poisoning. One nurse, Vera Brittain, wrote in her autobiography, *Testament of Youth* (1933): "I wish those people who talk about going on with this war whatever it costs could see the soldiers suffering from mustard gas poisoning. Great mustard-coloured blisters, blind eyes, all sticky and stuck together, always fighting for breath, with voices a mere whisper, saying that their throats are closing and they know they will choke."

Daily Life

In the trenches, each day was much the same as the last. Nothing really ever changed, unless there was a battle.



At first light, the order "Stand down!" was given and knowing that the threat of a night raid was over, the sentries could relax.

Breakfast was normally dull and tasteless but provided them with some energy, and by mid-morning most of the troops were at work.

The day-to-day work consisted of repairing damage to the trench, filling sandbags, carrying supplies, running errands, etc... The most common task carried out by soldiers was cleaning their weapons. Every soldier possessed a Lee Enfield rifle and it was their duty to keep this thoroughly clean to prevent it from jamming at a vital moment.

Daily medical checks were also part of the soldier's daily routine. Every soldier was crawling with lice – in their hair, on their body, in their clothes. Occasional de-lousing took place but this rarely did any good because the lice always seemed to find a safe hiding place in the folds of clothes.

Another problem which soldiers dealt with was water. In the trenches water was usually brought to the front line in petrol cans, and chloride of lime was added to kill off bacteria. The chloride of lime however, gave the water an awful taste.

In winter, water was less of a problem because snow and ice could be melted. Occasionally, however, bodies were found frozen in the ice, and this could cause the soldiers distress. Obviously, when asked what the most life consuming aspect of the soldier's daily routine in the trenches was, the reply would have to be the battles. But these were not daily occurrences.