

Trench Warfare



After the First Battle of the Marne, the war on the Western Front changed. Machine guns and other new weapons had made traditional methods of attack obsolete. If troops attacked the enemy by charging with bayonets, as they had in previous wars, they were mowed down by machine gun fire.

Fighting quickly turned into trench warfare. Both sides dug trenches in zigzag fashion on the western front from the Belgian coast to Switzerland. Most trenches were about ten feet deep and were fortified with sandbags and wood. Some were even fortified with corrugated iron to keep them from caving in. To make it as difficult as possible for the enemy to reach a trench, a barbed wire barrier was erected in front of it. Tin cans and razor blades were often attached to the wire to enhance its effectiveness.

There were generally four main lines of trenches. The trench line closest to the enemy was the firing trench. Soldiers served in the firing trench for up to a week. There they fired at enemy troops and took shelter from enemy fire. The line behind the firing line was the cover trench, where reserve troops supported the front line. The third trench line was the support trench. It frequently held field artillery and ammunition that could quickly be brought up to the front lines. The fourth trench line was the reserve trench, which contained supplies, reserve troops, and wounded soldiers receiving first aid in field hospitals. Communications trenches connected

the four trench lines with one another and allowed soldiers and supplies to move between them. Soldiers typically rotated on duty between the four main trench lines.

Life in the trenches was extremely grim. Heavy rains caused the trenches to fill up with water and mud. Many soldiers who were asleep or wounded sank into the mud and drowned. Disease, flies, lice, and rats were rampant. In the first five months of the war, both sides lost nearly a million men.

The area between the trenches was called no man's land. No man's land was the bleak area between the fighting armies containing barbed wire, shell craters, smashed equipment, and the decomposing bodies of the dead. Combat engineers, or sappers, would dig advanced trenches out into no man's land for reconnaissance or to reconnoiter the enemy positions. On command, soldiers would go "over the top" (climb out of the trenches) and charge toward the enemy. When they did this, they were slaughtered in record numbers by machine gun fire and artillery.

1. Why were traditional methods of fighting no longer possible during World War I?

2. Describe the horrible conditions of trench warfare.



3. Why do you think the armies' positions On the Western Front moved so little during World War I?
