

# 5

## TRENCH WARFARE

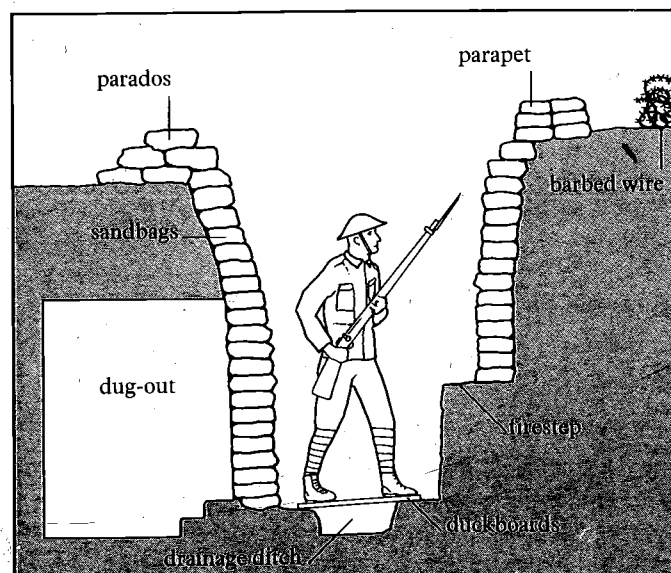
After the failure of the Gallipoli campaign the 'westerner' generals were even more certain that the war could only be won on the Western Front. They pinned their hopes on breaking the stalemate by making massive assaults on the German trench lines. Before reading the story of these assaults, you need to find out about the lives that soldiers on both sides were leading in the trenches, and about the weapons they were using against each other.

### Building trenches

Trenches were built wherever the enemy was found, no matter what was in the way. A German soldier wrote:

'Part of our trench went through a cemetery. We cleared out the contents of the family vaults and used them to shelter ourselves from artillery fire; hits from heavy shells would hurl the coffins and semi rotted corpses high into the air.'

The diagram and photographs here show how trenches were built. A trench was usually at least 2 metres deep and 2 metres wide, and was dug in a zig-zag so that the blast from an exploding shell would be confined to only a small section of the trench. There were normally three lines of trenches on each side of the 'no-man's land' that divided the enemy armies. In the front line, trenches were built with firing steps and elbow rests to help the soldiers shoot over the top. Behind these were the support trenches and behind those were the reserve trenches.



Cross-section of a trench

Connecting the three lines were communication trenches. There were also 'blind alleys' to confuse the enemy in case of a successful attack, and 'saps' which were shallow trenches leading to look-out posts or machine-gun nests.

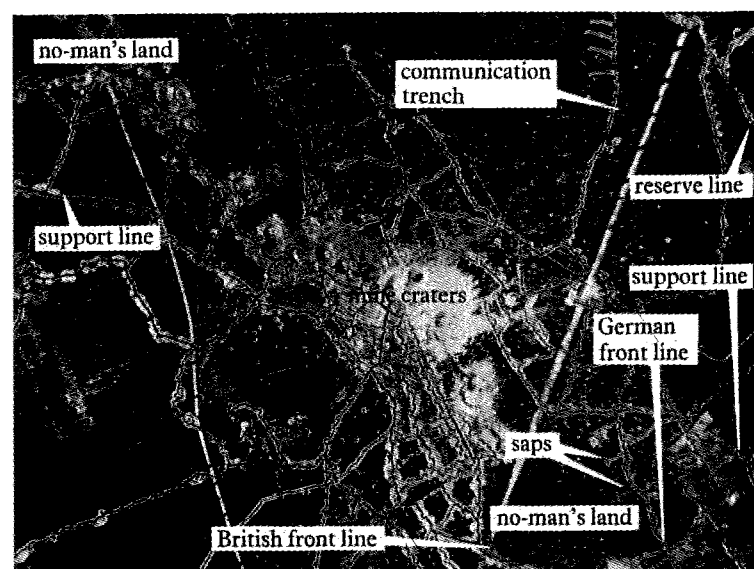
### Life in the trenches

The following accounts show us that for most soldiers life in the trenches was a horrifying experience. What every soldier feared most was 'going over the top'. This meant climbing over the parapet and charging at the enemy trenches in an attempt to capture them. A young German tells us what often happened:

'At noon we went over the top. After less than a hundred yards we ran up against an almost concrete wall of whistling and whining machine-gun bullets. My company commander had his face shot away; another man yelling and whimpering held his hands to his belly and, through his fingers, his stomach protruded. A young boy cried for his mother, bright red blood spurting out from his face.'

Before soldiers were sent over the top, the enemy trenches were bombarded with shells from heavy guns to try to kill the front-line troops and to tear gaps in the barbed wire defending them. A British sergeant wrote this about the effects of shelling:

'It was on May 2nd that . . . this single high explosive shell killed 7 and wounded 18 – yet the



Line of trenches as seen on an aerial photograph taken in France in 1915



A deep, well-built British trench protected by barbed wire. Can you spot the periscope covered with sacking which the sentry is using to watch the German front line?

day before 400 shells came over and dropped behind the trench and no one was hurt. The trench after the dead and wounded were removed presented a ghastly sight – it was red with blood like a room papered in crimson.'

The very noise of shells exploding gave many men 'shell-shock'. This is how a young British soldier from Wiltshire was affected:

'His steel hat was at the back of his head and his mouth slobbered, and two comrades could not hold him still. These badly shell-shocked boys clawed their mouths ceaselessly. Others sat in the field hospitals in a state of coma, dazed as though deaf, and actually dumb.'

When they were not fighting or being bombarded, soldiers in the trenches lived a miserable life. When it rained they often spent days knee-deep in water or mud, and this could lead to 'trench foot':

'Your feet swell up two or three times their normal size and go completely dead. You could stick a bayonet into them and not feel a thing. If you are fortunate enough not to lose your feet and the swelling begins to go down, it is then that the . . . agony begins. I have heard men cry and even scream with the pain and many had to have their feet and legs amputated.'

Then there were the rats and the lice. A pair of rats can produce 880 offspring in a year, and even dry, clean trenches swarmed with them. A British officer wrote:

'There are millions! Some are huge fellows, nearly as big as cats. Several of our men were awakened to find a rat snuggling down under the blanket alongside them.'

Most soldiers got lice because they often had to go without washing or changing their clothes for weeks at a time. For George Coppard, the result was that:

'The things lay in the seams of trousers, in the deep furrows of . . . woolly pants. A lighted candle applied where they were thickest made them pop like Chinese crackers. After a session of this, my face would be covered with small blood spots, from extra big fellows which had popped too vigorously.'

In theory, soldiers in the trenches had plenty to eat. Judge for yourself from this list made by a British soldier in his notebook:

List of army rations: 1 man per diem (day)

Meat (bully beef)	1 lb	[453g]
Bread (or biscuits)	1¼ lb	[567g]
Bacon	¼ lb	[113g]
Tea	½ oz	[14g]
Sugar	2 oz	[56g]
Jam	2 oz	[56g]
Cheese	1 oz	[28g]
Butter	¾ oz	[21g]
Potatoes	¾ lb	[340g]
Salt	1 oz	[28g]
Pepper	⅓ oz	[0.7g]
Mustard	⅓ oz	[1.4g]

But cooking in the trenches was difficult. A soldier from Hull describes a typical meal of

' . . . bully beef [corned beef] and biscuits, and plum and apple jam and biscuits, washed down with tea flavoured from the previous meal, cooked in the same container as the water was boiled, onion being predominant.'

At the end of his day in the trench, a soldier might be able to get a few hours sleep in his dug-out and, if he was not exhausted, perhaps dream of home and hope that next day he would 'catch a blighty one' – a wound that would not kill or maim him, but serious enough to get him sent back to 'Blighty' – Britain.

### Work section

- Copy or trace the photograph of trenches seen from above. Label your diagram to show all the following kinds of trenches: front-line, support, reserve and communication trenches, blind alleys and 'saps'.
- Use the evidence in this chapter to write a diary of a soldier's experiences during one week in a front-line trench.