

Today's wars are different from those fought in the past. Long-range weapons, technology, and even the media have changed how battles are fought. News broadcasters analyze confrontations as they occur, and satellites keep lines of communication open among many army bases. In contrast, World War I was a distant war for many in the United States, in part because news stories took longer to travel from the front lines.

When the United States entered World War I, also known as the "Great War," in 1917, the war had already been raging for three years. American soldiers arrived in Europe to find a type of battlefield they had never before encountered. Long, deep ditches in the ground called trenches lined the fronts, and machine guns and tanks rolled along the countryside. Life on the frontlines was very different than the homes soldiers on both sides of the conflict had left behind. Let us take a look at the conditions of trench warfare and the daily life of soldiers on the front during World War I.



British soldiers sit in a frontline trench on a battlefield in 1917. A tank sits just above the trench.

The Allied Trenches

Trench warfare was used during the American Civil War, but not to the extent that it was used during World War I. Allied trenches were dug so that soldiers could be below the line of the machine guns. But they also allowed for soldiers to move around. Soldiers could carry supplies through the trench without the worry of being shot. The trenches were not long, straight lines. Trenches only ran in a straight line for a few yards before turning a different angle. This zig-zag design meant that enemy soldiers could not shoot down the entire length of a trench if they managed to enter it. Trenches were like underground bases. Soldiers slept and worked in the trenches.

There were three levels of trenches: frontline, support, and reserve. These trenches were connected through communication trenches, which soldiers used to bring messages and supplies through the ranks. Life in support and reserve trenches was tense because an attack could come at any time. However, these two trenches saw less fighting than the front trenches. They allowed soldiers to "rest" before heading back to the front. Rest was not relaxing and fun, but it was a break from battle. Instead of resting, soldiers helped stock supplies and dig more trenches.

Soldiers cycled through these three types of trenches instead of staying on the most dangerous front line all the time.

The German Trenches

The German trenches were constructed differently from the Allied trenches. Germans initiated the frontline advances and chose the highest points to build their trenches. This allowed their trenches to drain downhill. However, the landscape did not always support an advancing front line.

The main difference between the Allied and German trenches was depth. Some German trenches went 50 feet below the surface. Because the trenches were deep, the Germans used wooden frames to support the sides and ceilings. While this made their trenches sturdier than Allied trenches, a bomb could still cause a cave-in and casualties.

German trenches had more luxuries than Allied trenches. Some German trenches even had cots, toilets, and electricity.



German soldiers wait in trenches in 1915. Germans built frames into the trenches for support. How does this trench compare to the British trench image on the previous page?

Life on the Front Line

The front line of the trench was the most active and dangerous part of war for both the Allied and German troops.

A soldier's routine began at dawn with a stand-to-arms, which meant standing guard on the edge of a trench. The soldier fired into No Man's Land, the area between the enemy trenches. Soldiers were ordered to keep firing even if they did not see anything. This was called the "morning hate." The constant fire would keep the enemy from sneaking up on the trench. After the morning hate, soldiers ate a cold breakfast of crackers and salted meat, such as beef jerky. Then they were given their daily orders. Some soldiers were sent on missions to search No Man's Land for survivors or to track enemy movement. If soldiers were spotted by the enemy, they would do whatever it took to avoid being killed, even laying perfectly still and playing dead for hours at a time.

Each evening, the Allied soldiers once again completed the stand-to-arms and made sure no enemies were approaching in the darkness. Soldiers slept in the trenches, often cold and waiting for an attack.

Exploring No Man's Land was part of war. Other soldiers were ordered to repair or expand the trench to maintain protection from enemy exposure. Trenches were expanded through tunneling. Sometimes, soldiers had to dig under No Man's Land to get as close as possible to the enemy line.

Trench collapse was not the only danger. When it rained, the trenches filled with water because they did not have coverings. Water-filled trenches posed challenges for soldiers and their equipment. Trench foot, caused by the swampy trenches, was a fungal infection that often resulted in foot amputations. Pest control was also a problem in the trenches. Rats and lice plagued soldiers and carried diseases into the trenches. Soldiers tried to kill rats as soon as they were spotted because the rats multiplied very quickly.

Food was an important part of a soldier's life because food gave him the energy necessary to continue fighting. As World War I dragged on, soldiers had less and less to eat, as rations were lower. British soldiers, for example, received 10 ounces of meat a day at the start of the war, but 2 years later, they received only 6 ounces of meat. Usually, that meat was canned. Many soldiers tired of eating the same food day after day. In addition to the meager meat rations, soldiers also ate bread and vegetables when they were available.

Even though it was war, there was down time between battles. Soldiers often spent their time writing letters or resting after performing their daily duties. The majority of soldiers wrote letters home, most likely to keep their minds off the dangers they faced. Letters served as a connection to their homes—to the people and places they had left.

Behind the front lines, hospitals, officer clubs, and army headquarters managed other aspects of war. But on the front lines, the men were below the ground, looking for ways to advance their lines forward to claim enemy territory. Trench warfare meant the soldiers were continually living in tough conditions, but it became their reality for the duration of the war.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

1. What was a daily occurrence in No Man's Land?
 - A. morning hate
 - B. digging a trench
 - ~~C. enemy surrender~~
 - ~~D. collapsing trenches~~
2. Why was it important to maintain the trench structures?
 - ~~A. Officers gave demerits for messy barracks.~~
 - ~~B. A weak trench signaled surrender to the enemy.~~
 - C. The long passageways needed to be clear for escape.
 - D. Collapsing walls would leave soldiers exposed to the enemy.
3. Which of the following reflects a reasoned judgment in the text?
 - A. Day-to-day life for German and Allied forces on the front lines was similar.
 - B. German trenches were cleaner and drier, which meant there was no disease among the ranks.
 - ~~C. German and Allied trenches were dug for a moving battlefield and could be moved quickly.~~
 - ~~D. Allied soldiers could count on being pulled back to reserves after being on the front line for two weeks.~~
4. What do you think were some of the challenges of living in a trench for months or longer? Provide at least two examples from the reading passage to support your opinion.