

## 5. Trench Rats and Lice

In addition to surviving threats from the enemy, soldiers in the trenches had to overcome numerous hardships. An issue that made living conditions rather uncomfortable was the infestation of millions of pests. Two of the most annoying were rats and lice.

Lice are tiny insects that infected the clothes and bodies of soldiers. Lice bites were extremely itchy and made life miserable. Also, lice could spread disease, such as “trench fever.” Lice were nearly impossible to get rid of because the men did not have the ability to wash properly in the trenches.

Men attempted to kill lice by crushing them between their fingernails, or by burning them out, but these methods did not kill the eggs, which would hatch hours later.

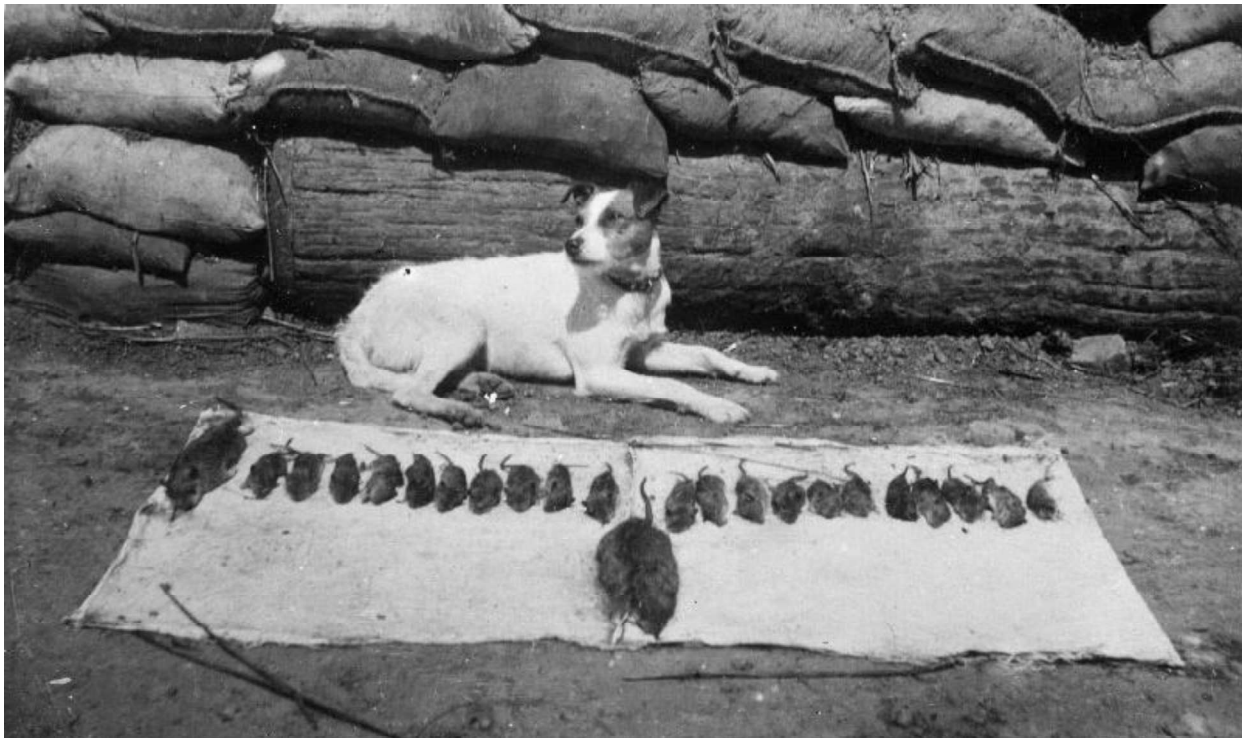


Soldiers attempt to rid their clothes of lice while someone keeps watch for the enemy

Rats were another pest that thrived in the crowded, unsanitary conditions of the trenches. A lack of proper garbage disposal attracted the rats, which fed on rotting food waste. The rats added to the filth of the trenches and spread diseases among the men. The rats could grow to be enormous and were constant nuisances. Soldiers reported rats stole food from them while they ate and scurried over them while they slept. Soldiers tried in desperation to get rid of the rats, but regardless of how many they killed, the rats were too numerous.

Stuart Dolden describes life among the rats in the trenches:

*“The outstanding feature of the trenches was the extraordinary number of rats. The area was infested with them. It was impossible to keep them out of the dugouts. They grew fat on the food that they pilfered from us, and anything they could pick up in or around the trenches; they were bloated and loathsome to look at. Some were nearly as big as cats. We were filled with an instinctive hatred of them, because however one tried to put the thought of one's mind, one could not help feeling that they fed on the dead.”*



As shown, soldiers trained dogs to hunt rats in the trenches

Source: “Animals during the War.” BBC, 10 Jan. 2014, [www.bbc.co.uk/schools/0/ww1/25403863](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/0/ww1/25403863).