

# Trench Warfare: Life in the Trenches

## Introduction:

When it rained, which it did a great deal, the water poured into the trenches and down into the dug outs. Day after day, week after week, the men ate and slept, or crouched behind their rifles, in soaking wet uniforms. Often the water and mud came above the knees. When the shells landed near them they were half buried in mud. There was mud everywhere, thick, gluey mud, in which was mixed up all the ruin of war, bites of trees and buildings and guns...and human bodies.



They could not keep warm and they could not keep clean. Their bodies crawled with lice and rats swarmed everywhere. There was always plenty of food for the rats, for they fed upon the dead bodies. The men who died in no-man's land could not be buried. It was not safe to go out and fetch them. And even the wounded could not always be brought back safely. The men in the trenches had to listen to the cries of their dying comrades. They had to endure the smell of blood and rotting bodies.

For the guns hardly ever stopped firing, day or night. High explosive shells fell upon the dugouts and buried men alive. Shrapnel shells burst in the air, spraying their deadly splinters above the open trenches – the tin helmet was invented to protect the men's heads against shrapnel. Machine guns splattered. Rifles cracked. There were many different noises at the front. Even more terrifying than the crash of the explosions was the noise the shells made as they flew through the air. The heavy shells rumbled like express trains. The smaller shells whined. The bullets whistled. The men learned to recognize the different noises and this often saved their lives.

*R. Musman, First World War, p. 32.*

## Rats...

One night I was awaked by stiff whiskers on my face. I opened my eyes to see a large rat scanning me gravely. He backed off a trifle as I looked at him and pushed him into the palm of my hand. The feel of his feet was revolting and I pitched the thing from me. The rate rose in an arc and descended head down straight into Thornston's open mouth. Its weight drove it in and Thornston's jaw closed convulsively. For a heartbeat there was a picture of the rat's hind legs kicking wildly, then Thornston put a hand on each side fo the rat and threw it across the trench. He sat up and spat furiously, giving me a tug. I pretended I had not seen the whole thing happen and acted stupid.

*"What's up I asked?"*

*"A rat-sfut-jumped-in to my-sfut mouth."*

*"Your crazy," I said, "They wouldn't"*

*"But I'm sfut-telling you they sfut-did."*

Soon he had everyone awake and was describing, with much spitting, how the horrible thing had jumped into his mouth. All hands asked questions and shook with laughter.

*W.R. Bird. Ghosts Have Warm Hands. Pp. 120-121.*



*To add to the general discomfort, the trenches were alive with rats. The knowledge that the gigantic rats had grown fat through feeding on the dead bodies in no man's land made the soldiers hate them more fiercely than almost anything else. The soldiers often beat the rats, stomped on them or shot them – but they always came back.*

### **Gas...**

Gas was used for the first time on October 27, 1914 by the Germans; they fired 3000 gas shells into Allied lines. Its first effective use did not occur till April 22, 1915 at the Second Battle of Ypres. With an east wind blowing towards the French and Canadians, 5000 chlorine filled cylinders were opened causing panic in the lines.



### *Gas Attack*

...running blindly in the gas clouds, and dropping with breasts heavy in agony and the slow poison of suffocation mantling their dark faces. Hundreds of them fell and died; others lay helpless, froth upon their agonized lips and their racked bodies powerfully sick, with tearing nausea at short intervals. They too would die later – a slow lingering death of agony unspeakable...

The whole war was tainted with the acrid smell of chlorine that caught at the back of men's throats and filled their mouths with its metallic taste. Behind the gas-cloud came advancing Germans, under cover of a violent artillery fire.

*Troops faced gas attacks without protection in many cases. A Canadian, captain Scrimger, found an active solution to the chlorine gas attacks. Soldiers were ordered to urinate on a piece of cloth and hold it over their noses and mouths as a makeshift gas mask to neutralize the gas. The experience at Ypres led to the development of more sophisticated gas masks.*

### **Trench Foot...**

The second episode I would remember was the issues of whale oil to rub on our feet. It came in jugs and was colder than ice. It would prevent trench feet. Orders were that every man should rub it on his feet once every twenty-four hours while we were in those winter trenches. I did so religiously and never had the least trouble. But we had a big chap who tried in every way to get from the front, going on sick parade, complaining of blindness and even trying to wound himself slightly. He had been caught in the act and warned of what his punishment would be, so instead he never used the whale oil.



The result was that after two days his feet started to swell. It was learned later he had purposely walked through wet places and the cold had penetrated. His feet became so bad he could not walk and finally he had to be taken out on a stretcher. The last we heard of him was from a lad who had been to see him in the hospital in England. Both feet were huge blobs of misshapen flesh. He could only move around on crutches and his feet would never be normal again.

W.R. Bird. *Ghosts Have Warm Hands*. Pp. 37-38.

*One of my stretcher bearers has a foot swollen to three times its normal size; a great helpless bright pink lump. He has been working in the mud for all four days. I shall be surprised if he does not loose that foot.*

### **Lice...**

The war changed men mightily. The men were unselfish, each with a balance and discipline of his own. We endured much. Dugouts reeked with odours of stale perspiration and the sour alkaline smell of clothing. There was never enough water to permit frequent washing and when we could get warm washed the lice tormented us. The vermin were in every dugout, millions of descendants of the originals. We burned the seams of our shirts with cigarettes or candles. We fought hem constantly but never won.



W.R. Bird. *Ghosts Have Warm Hands*. Pp.19.

*The Suppression of Flies: A fly lays between 100 and 150 eggs at a time, usually in horse manure. All horse manure should be collected and burnt in special incinerators constructed near camp (PAC 1917 4583).*

### *Extermination of Lice*

The body louse lives on clothes over the skin. It requires a meal of blood in 24 hours. It lays its eggs in the seams of clothing and retreats into the seams and folds after feeding. The female louse lays 6-7 eggs per day to a total of 295 and the eggs hatch in 3 days.

### Recommendations:

1. Change clothing as often as possible.
2. Keep verminous clothing away from an infested kit.
3. Lice die of starvation in a weeks time in discarded clothing.
4. Brushing and ironing are the best means of destroying the eggs.
5. Badly infested clothes not needed should be burnt, buried or sunk in water.
6. The wearing of silk underclothes will prevent lice.

### **...and Diet**

#### *The Soldier's Diet: Three Views*

- A.** *What do our soldiers get to eat?* The very best and most substantial food and plenty of it. The first item is meat – fresh or frozen. Each soldier is entitled to one pound every day. In addition, he is given four ounces of bacon, usually for breakfast. Fish, too, much of it from Canada, sausages from government-owned factories and pork and beans, are issued to supplement the meat rations. Bread is perhaps, next in importance. Of this each soldier received daily one pound, or ten ounces of biscuit, or an equivalent ration made up of the two. Bread for the Canadian arm is made at the base bakeries at Boulogne, France. These turn out daily 220,000 two pound loaves, made from Canadian flour of the same quality at the pre-war days. Other items in Private Jack Canuck's daily bill-of-fare are: ten ounces of jam, five-eighths fo an ounce of tea or coffee, two ounces of cheese, two ounces oatmeal three times a week, three ounces of sugar, one ounce of condensed milk, an ounce of pickles three times a week, two ounces of potatoes, eight ounces of fresh vegetables when obtainable or two ounces of dried vegetables.

*Canada War Thrift Book, 1918. PAC 1918 4696*

B. The food was monotonous and barely adequate – biscuit that had to be soaked in water before it could be eaten, tinned meat that was all too often tainted when opened. No attempts at all were made to achieve a diet that would give strength to the body. The cookhouse in the training camp near the Chateau de la Haie had a hard-tack biscuit nailed to the door over a sign that read: "*A square meal.*"

*H.F. Wood. Vinyl. P.47*

C. Food in the trenches was always scarce; a day's ration was a tin of bully beef, hardtack, a billy-can tea and possibly a sweet sticky mixture called plum and apple jam. The troops swore it was made of turnips and rhubarb.

*I.M. Frost. Fighting Men. P. 24*

### **Christmas 1914:**

Soon the men at the front began to wonder if the war would ever end. Soon they ceased to have any enthusiasm for the fighting. They did not even hate the enemy. In fact, on Christmas Day, 1914, British and German troops met in no-man's land and played football matches and talked about home



and peace. Senior officers on both sides were worried about this and said it must not happen again. For they were afraid that if the men got too friendly they would no longer want to go on killing each other. They need not to have worried. The soldiers in all the different armies went on fighting and dying bravely even though they hated the war more than they hated the enemy.

*R. Musman. The First World War. P. 34.*