



In the Trenches B1



Men of the Border Regiment in dugouts near Thiepval Wood during the Battle of the Somme.



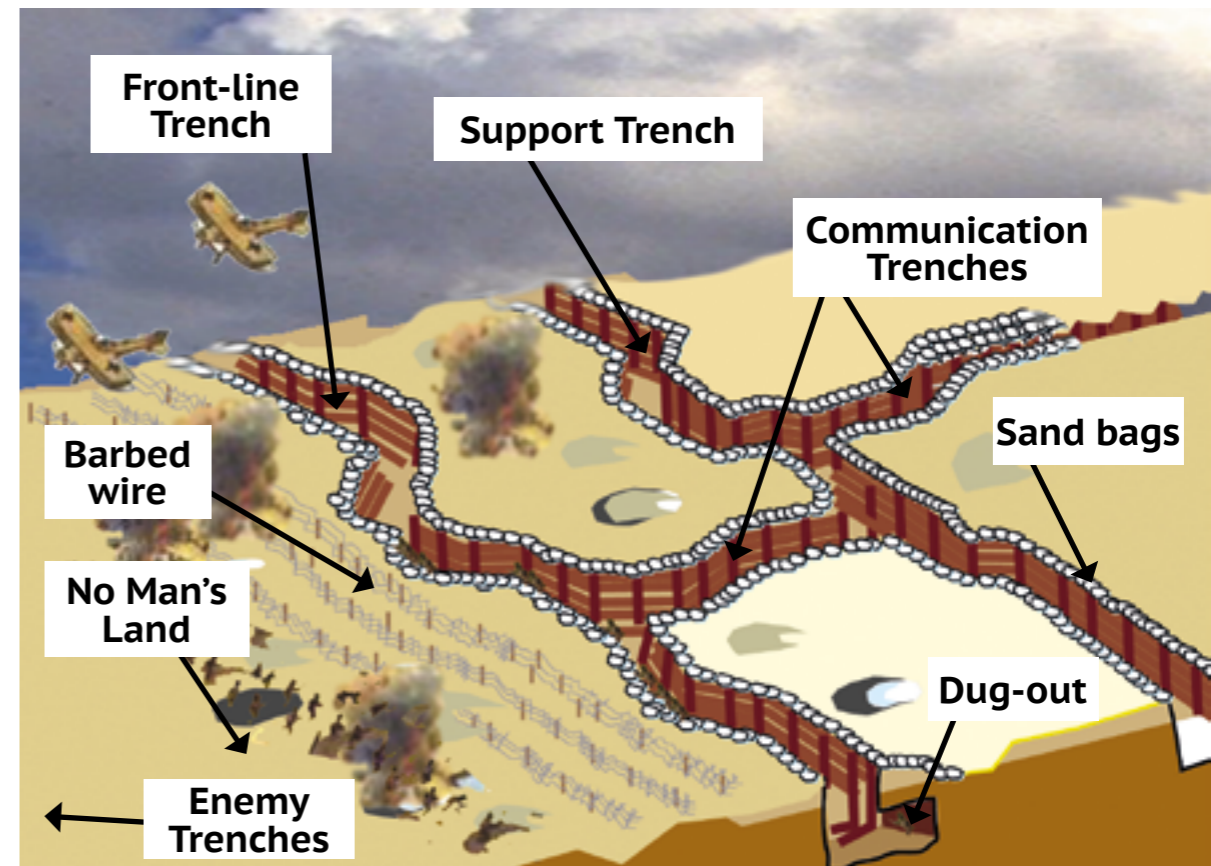
The First World War was the first modern war, and for millions of soldiers that meant a war fought in the horrors of the trenches.

When the French and British armies attacked the German army in Northern France in 1914, German General von Falkenhayn told his men to dig trenches to protect themselves. The Allies couldn't advance past the German trenches, so they made trenches too – they soon covered 560 km from Ostend to the Swiss border. For the next four years, the armies faced each other, sometimes just 10 metres apart. Millions of men on both sides lost their lives to capture a few metres of territory.

Trench Life

The trenches were about 2 metres high and 1.8 metres wide. Men lived in them for days or weeks at a time. If they were lucky, they had a dugout – a deeper “room” where they could sleep. Sometimes these were just big enough for one man, sometimes more sophisticated.

The trenches were often full of water and men developed gangrene in their feet. Other dangers were the bombardments, snipers, and giant rats. Food, water, ammunition and orders all had to come from trenches behind. When men were wounded or killed, they had to be evacuated to the trenches behind. But that was a very dangerous job during bombardments. Often, corpses couldn't be moved. The smell was terrible.



Over the Top

Life in the trenches was terrible, but it was paradise compared with “going over the top”. That was climbing out of the trenches and crossing No Man's Land to attack the enemy.

On 1 July, 1916, the French and British armies launched an attack on the German army in the Somme. It was disastrous. On the first day alone, the British lost 60,000 men: 19,240 men died and 38,230 were injured. When the battle ended on 18 November, the Allies had won just 13 km of territory and a million men were dead or injured.



This is how one officer described “going over the top” with his soldiers at the Somme:

You try to calm everybody and try not to show how terrified you are. Then you start the countdown: ten, nine, eight... and so on. You blow the whistle. You climb out of the trench and through the hole in the barbed wire. You lie there waiting for everyone to get out. Some of them are already dead or wounded. Then you stand up and start walking. At normal walking speed. In a straight line. Across open country. In daylight. Towards a line of machine guns, with artillery firing all around.

It seemed crazy, but the Army didn't know any other way to advance. Trench warfare was new. Many of the weapons were new: rifles that could reach a distance of 1.5 km, machine guns, planes, grenades and poison gas. The majority of the soldiers and officers in the war were volunteers with little experience. But when they joined the Army they agreed to obey orders. If they didn't, they would be executed.

By the end of the war, on 11 November 1918, eight million military personnel were dead and millions more handicapped. Most of them had believed they were fighting in the “the war to end wars” and that their sacrifice would stop war forever. In fact, just 21 years later, the Second World War began.



Help

blow the whistle (exp) give the signal that something is beginning/finishing using a whistle (a simple flute)
border (n) the frontier between two countries
corpse (n) a dead body
gangrene (n) a very serious disease caused when a part of

your body is infected, normally treated by amputation
launch (v) start
rifle (n) a long gun. The soldiers in the photo have rifles.
way (n.) manner
be wounded (v) have severe damage caused to your body in a fight