

Question: In what ways were soldiers affected by trench warfare during WWI?

*The sourcing paragraph now directly follows the introduction

* The paragraph about the positives of trench warfare has been made the fourth paragraph.

Powerful rain showers continue to flood trenches along the Western Front. The bare feet of soldiers are rooted to the swampy ground below, making any movement an elusive task. Explosions are heard coming from all directions, as the screams from wounded soldiers continue to intensify. While rats swim between soldiers legs, the powerful smell of rotting human flesh cause many to collapse. This description highlights only a small piece of what trenches were like during World War I. Beginning in 1914, an army's infantry spent most of their time inside of these confined spaces. While there was variety to the trenches, all of them managed to share one common element: A nightmarish lifestyle. Although many outsiders claimed that the trenches were wonderfully built structures, elaborate enough to protect the soldiers within, little did they know of the many horrors that soldiers endured within their habitation. Although trenches were strategically structured, and provided limited safety during battle, life within them was essentially unimaginable; The weather was detrimental, vermin seized the living space, and powerful explosions gave soldiers shell-shock. A soldier who spent merely one month in the trenches inevitably went home changed forever; both their mind and body completely deteriorated. What aspects of trench life could have possibly caused so much physical and mental damage? The combination of miserable weather, intruding rodents, and the bombardment of weaponry, worked together to cause depression, disease, shell-shock, and death. These horrific effects on the soldiers' well-being ultimately made life unbearable during WWI.

In writing this research paper, many external resources were used to answer my main question. I utilized a variety of websites and books to educate myself thoroughly on the effects trench warfare had on soldiers during WWI. To find initial background information, I used a very well-organized and detailed article from *The Long, Long Trail* site. *The Long, Long Trail* is a personal webpage developed in 1996 by military historian, researcher and well-known author, Chris Baker. The site is very reliable, as it gives incredibly thorough explanations on many different aspects of trench warfare. While some of the information provided by the article did not answer my specific question, background research was a crucial part in understanding a broader view of my topic. Specifically, I researched the mental and physical effects that certain aspects of the trenches had on soldiers. Two of the sources that provided information on the weather and its effects in the trenches was the *BBC* (British Broadcasting Corporation), and *The Daily Beast*, which are both highly recommended both receiving hundreds of thousands of readers per day. Another source I used was the *World War One Source Book* by Philip J Haythornthwaite. This textbook-style reading included very informative pages on diseases in the trenches, such as trench foot and gangrenous. I also found the *World War One Smithsonian Visual History Book* by R.G. Grant to provide the most information on trench structures, and the strategies used in constructing them. Both of these books contained many interesting images with very thorough explanations. While these secondary and tertiary sources did provide countless content, it was also very important to look at the first-hand perspectives of soldiers using letters sent home from the trenches. These primary sources provided a description of the emotions soldiers had during their duty. I have been able to gather many of these letters to help prove my argument in this paper. I generally agree with all of the arguments posed by the authors of these sources. All of them acknowledge the indescribable trench life, and more

especially the disastrous effects they had on soldiers. I have used their sources to extend upon their main ideas and create my own valid argument.

The idea of digging into the ground and using natural barriers as protection was not a new idea to WWI. This practice had been widely used in other substantial wars such as the U.S. Civil War and Russian-Japanese War ([The World War](#)). Trench warfare was introduced to the Great War in September 1914, and ended with a breakthrough attack from the Allies in July 1918. Between these two dates, armies utilized the practice of entrenchment, a strategy where both armies dug in to take cover and hold their ground ([Daniels](#)). A typical trench system included a line of three or four trenches: the front line, the support trench, and the reserve trench, all built parallel to one another and anywhere from 100 to 400 yards apart. The open space between the two opposing front-lines became known as No Man's Land. By November 1914 there was a continuous line of trenches covering over 470 miles from Switzerland to the North Sea; a distinctive border that was titled the Western Front ([Grant](#)). Although trenches appeared well-structured and organized from an outsider's perspective, little did people know of the many hardships that soldiers endured within them.

Although many aspects of trench warfare had negative effects on the soldiers, these strategically organized structures provided safety, enabling soldiers to battle more efficiently during the war. Most trenches were built with the same fundamental design. The front wall of the trench, known as the parapet, was approximately ten feet high. In addition, the parapet also featured two to three feet of sandbags stacked above ground level which provided protection from both weather and gunshots ([Daniels](#)). A ledge, known as the fire-step, was built into the lower part of the ditch and allowed a soldier to step up and see over the top through a peephole between sandbags, giving the soldiers a relatively clear view of the battlefield. Periscopes and mirrors were also used to see above the sandbags. The rear wall of the trench, known as the

parados, was lined with sandbags as well, protecting against a rear assault. Another strategy was the digging of trenches in a zigzag pattern so that if an enemy entered the trench, he could not fire straight down the line (Dvorsky). While the conditions of the trenches were certainly very poor, their elaborate structures kept soldiers safe throughout the war.

Troops in the trenches were forced to live through powerful rains, flooding, and extremely cold conditions, leading to diseases such as trench foot. Heavy rainfall that rose three feet above the ground created difficult conditions for soldiers to maneuver in. Occasionally, a soldier became trapped in this thick deep mud; and unable to free themselves, would sometimes drown (Life In The). In an uncensored letter written by soldier Jonathan Symons, the horrific weather conditions are described as “simply awful, raining day after day and especially night after night...I am wet through to the skin and not a dry thing for a change” (Symons). Symons’ description of the flooding displays the uncomfortable state that soldiers were forced to experience in the trenches. The pervading precipitation created other difficulties as well. Trench walls collapsed, rifles jammed, and soldiers fell victim to the notorious trench foot. A condition similar to frostbite, trench foot developed when men were forced to stand in frigid water for several hours, without a chance to remove wet boots and socks. In a 1918 post-war interview, sergeant Harry Roberts explains how trench foot affected his soldiers. “Your feet swell to two or three times their normal size and go completely dead. You could stick a bayonet into them and not feel a thing...It is then that the intolerable, indescribable agony begins” (Roberts). Trench foot was clearly one of the most agonizing illnesses a soldier could catch, as evidenced by the thousands of trench foot deaths that occurred during the war. Unfortunately, the heavy rains were not sufficient enough to wash away the filth and foul odor of human waste and decaying corpses. Not only did these unsanitary conditions contribute to the spread of disease, they also attracted an unwanted, and unexpected enemy - the vile rat.

The extreme infestation of rats in the trenches reduced moral and created a contaminated environment for soldiers to live in. The excessive presence of rats was mostly due to the highly unsanitary conditions of the trenches. While garbage was one of these factors, the luring of rats can be mainly attributed to the forgotten rotting corpses of dead soldiers. Numerous rats would always be found gnawing on these dead bodies. The rats gouged the eyes first, followed by burrowing themselves inside of the bodies. (The Great War). At times, these rodents would even attempt to feast upon the defenseless bodies of sleeping soldiers. It wasn't uncommon for soldiers to wake up with rats crawling all over them. In a letter sent home to his family, soldier R. L. Venables explains the vile encounters he had with rats. "Whilst asleep...we were frequently awakened by rats running over us. When this happened...I would lie on my back and wait for a rat to linger on my legs; then violently heave my legs upwards, throwing the rat into the air" (Memories From The). Venables' description verifies the horrific experiences that soldiers constantly endured with rats in the trenches. Men like Venables were disgusted by the infestation, and constantly felt disturbed by their presence. Eventually, it became evident that a solution was needed to solve this rat problem. Various methods of extermination were utilized; one of which Richard Beasley discussed in a 1993 interview. He said: "Sometimes we would shoot the filthy swines. But you would be put on a charge for wasting ammo, if the sergeant caught you" (Beasley). As Beasley explained, there were certain limitations when it came to dealing with the rats. The most popular solution was going on "Rat Hunts". With these hunts, men would search the trenches for rats during their free-time, and try to kill as many as possible. Although measures like these were taken to kill-off the intruding rodents, rats continued to multiply, and thrived for the duration of the war. The morale, and overall spirit of soldiers was inevitably being reduced.

Overwhelming conditions imposed by trench warfare, including the exposure to constant shelling, led to the neurological condition known as shell-shock. Early symptoms such as fatigue, irritability, tremor, and amnesia eventually turned to men going into complete mental breakdowns (Life On The). Corporal Henry Gregory, who served with the 119 Machine Gun Company, describes the first case of shell-shock he witnessed: "As soon as the first shell came over, the soldier nearly went mad. He screamed and raved, and it took eight men to hold him down on the stretcher. With every shell he would go into a fit of screaming and fight to get away" (Simkin). Cases like the one Corporal Henry witnessed were unfortunately common in the trenches. Between 1914 and 1918, the British Army identified 80,000 men as victims of shell-shock. Although doctors argued the only cure for shell-shock was recuperation at home, the army was less sympathetic to ordinary soldiers with shell-shock; numerous officers believed that men suffering from shell-shock were cowards attempting to evade the war. Some shell-shocked soldiers who abandoned their duties were labeled deserters and summoned to a firing squad (Simkin). Philip Gibbs, a journalist on the Western Front, later recalled: "At first shell-shock was regarded as damn nonsense and sheer cowardice by Generals who had not themselves witnessed its effects. They had not seen, as I did, strong, sturdy, men shaking with ague, mouthing like madman, figures of dreadful terror, speechless and uncontrollable" (Gibbs). Clearly, shell-shock was misconstrued as a kind of hysteria, and in many cases, treatment was not given. Thankfully, as the war progressed and cases of shell-shock became more prevalent, militaries built several hospitals devoted to caring for these men. However, for the vast majority of the war, soldiers were forced to endure the horrifying effects that shell-shock imposed, leading to thousands of deaths.

It is evident that trench warfare had a profound impact on soldiers during World War I due to the poor weather conditions, infestation of rats, and shell-shock. Although trench

organization aided in saving the lives of many, the benefits were insignificant in comparison to the detrimental lifestyle that soldiers were forced to endure. Veterans of the war were usually unable to resume their lives upon returning home, and felt isolated, depressed, and suicidal.

Paul Bäumer says in the novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front*: “When we go back home we will be weary, broken, burnt out, rootless, and without hope. We will not be able to find our way any more. Men will not understand us...The life that has borne me through these years is still in my hands and my eyes. Whether I have subdued it, I know not” (Erich Remarque). The unexplainable experiences that soldiers endured will never be forgotten, as man could never truly suppress their memories of the trenches from their minds. Although trench warfare will likely never be used again in today’s world, there are many important lessons that trench warfare has brought upon us. I believe the most important of these is the need for sanitary workplace conditions. Clearly, sanitation played a crucial role in the high death toll of working soldiers. A clean workplace is inevitably a safe one too, as diseases would never again be caused by poor working conditions.

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