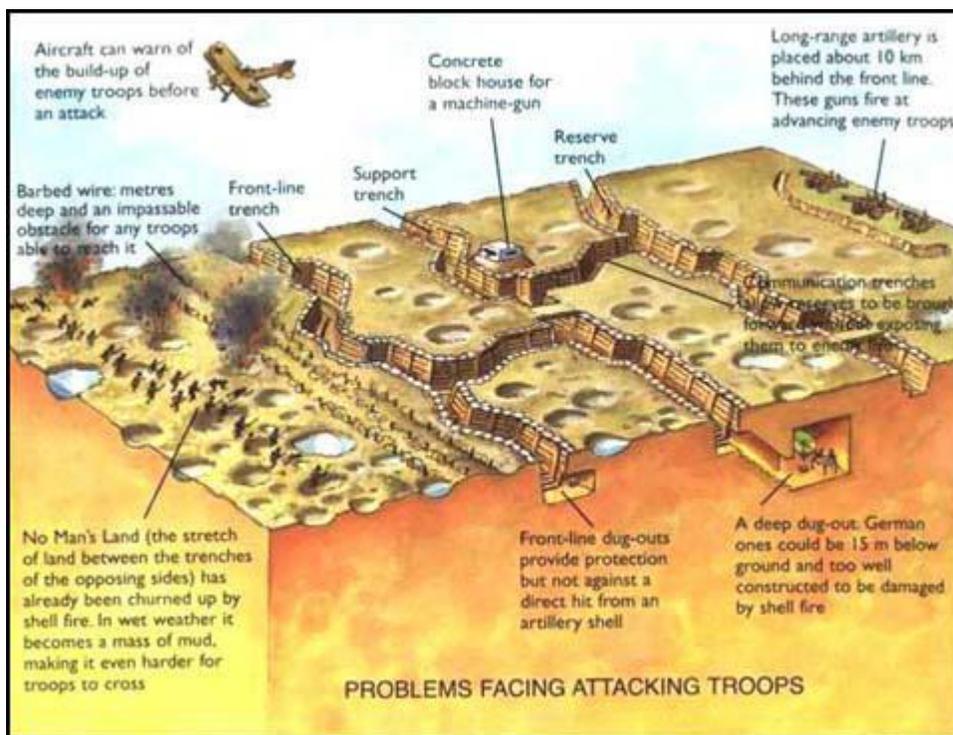


The Trench System

After the [Battle of the Marne](#) in September, 1914, the Germans were forced to retreat to the River Aisne. The German commander, General [Erich von Falkenhayn](#), decided that his troops must at all costs hold onto those parts of France and Belgium that Germany still occupied. Falkenhayn ordered his men to dig trenches that would provide them with protection from the advancing French and British troops. The [Allies](#) soon realised that they could not break through this line and they also began to dig trenches.

After a few months these trenches had spread from the North Sea to the Swiss Frontier. As the Germans were the first to decide where to stand fast and dig, they had been able to choose the best places to build their trenches. The possession of the higher ground not only gave the Germans a tactical advantage, but it forced the British and French to live in the worst conditions. Most of this area was rarely a few feet above sea level. As soon as soldiers began to dig down they would invariably find water two or three feet below the surface. [Water-logged](#) trenches were a constant problem for soldiers on the [Western Front](#).



[Frontline trenches](#) were usually about seven feet deep and six feet wide. The front of the trench was known as the [parapet](#). The top two or three feet of the parapet and the [parados](#) (the rear side of the trench) would consist of a thick line of [sandbags](#) to absorb any bullets or shell fragments.

In a trench of this depth it was impossible to see over the top, so a two or three-foot ledge known as a [fire-step](#), was added. Trenches were not dug in straight lines. Otherwise, if the

enemy had a successive offensive, and got into your trenches, they could shoot straight along the line. Each trench was dug with alternate [fire-bays](#) and [traverses](#).

[Duck-boards](#) were also placed at the bottom of the trenches to protect soldiers from problems such as [trench foot](#). Soldiers also made [dugouts](#) and [funk holes](#) in the side of the trenches to give them some protection from the weather and enemy fire.

The [front-line trenches](#) were also protected by [barbed-wire entanglements](#) and [machine-gun posts](#). Short trenches called saps were dug from the front-trench into [No-Man's Land](#). The sap-head, usually about 30 yards forward of the front-line, were then used as [listening posts](#).

Behind the [front-line trenches](#) were support and reserve trenches. The three rows of trenches covered between 200 and 500 yards of ground. [Communication trenches](#), were dug at an angle to the frontline trench and was used to transport men, equipment and food supplies.

Primary Sources

(1) John Raws, letter to his mother (9th July 1916)

The fortification consists of breastworks, built up high to the front, with just a little shallow trench dug behind. The reason is that drainage is so difficult. These breastworks are made of millions of tightly-made sandbags laid one upon the other, packed well together. Every eight yards there is an island traverse, a great mound of earth and sandbags strengthened by rivetting, round which the trench winds. This is to localise the explosion of shells or prevent an enemy who might reach the flank being able to pour fire right down the length of a trench. There are communication trenches back every few yards and innumerable succeeding lines for the main army. The whole network extends in most places for three or four miles. The dug-outs are all in lines, but mostly along the communication trenches.

When there is no excitement there are about two sentries to every sector of say 9 yards on watch, and one officer for the company. The rest are in the dugouts. When a bombardment comes or there is a gas alarm, everyone rushes out and takes what cover one can in the front trench, awaiting developments. Against the front breastwork we have a step, about two feet high, upon which men stand to shoot. When there is a bombardment nearly everyone gets under this step, close in against the side.

(2) Private Victor Wheeler, a Canadian soldier, was involved in digging some of the Allies first trenches.

With pick and shovel we dug trenches through beautiful fields of grain, fully realising what damage we were doing to the farmers' hopes of reaping small harvests that would enable them to stem hunger during the coming winter. The patriarch with his ox-drawn plough, the matronly gleaner, and the young woman gathering grass and leaves, roots and truffles, stood arms akimbo, wordlessly, helplessly, hopelessly watching. The depressing effect on

the morale of the men - to many of whom raising grain on the Western prairie also meant their livelihood - could not be easily dismissed.

(3) Robert Donald, *Daily Chronicle* (August, 1915)

The soil is soft clay, admirably suited for entrenching, tunnelling, and mine warfare - when it is dry. As an outside observer, I do not see why the war in this area should not go on for a hundred years, without any decisive result. What is happening now is precisely what happened last year. The only difference is that the trenches are deeper, dug-outs better made, tunnels are longer, and the charges of explosives heavier.

Everywhere there are trenches, barbed wire, machine guns where they are least expected, and all the complicated arrangements for defence. The trenches are very deep, very narrow, and very wet. Streams of water run at the bottom.

The nearer one gets to the front the more mysterious and wonderful become the methods of defence. You are allowed to peer through an observation post towards the German trenches a few hundred yards away. You see absolutely nothing but a mass of brushwood, broken trunks of trees, hanging branches and barbed wire.

The guns were always at work. On my day of my visit to this area there was an almost continuous bombardment going on. The shells were hurtling over our heads. You heard the sharp discharge, and then the exploding of the shell. You saw nothing. The sound re-echoes through the woods and valleys like rolling thunder. The French fire six rounds to the enemy's one. The object of the cannonading is to disturb any work going on behind the enemy lines.

(4) Corporal Henry Gregory later recalled the state of the trenches in November, 1917

This was the winter when the trenches gave way and fell in. What a state they were in; they were two or three feet in water and mud. We were always soaked well above the knees, and plastered in mud. We had to sleep and stand about all day in this condition. The discomforts at this time were terrible, and can hardly be realized by those who were not there.

It was hard work going up the trenches while they were in this condition, the water swishing above your knees, and your boots slipping about in the slime underneath. We used to get on the parapet when we got the chance, as it was slow moving down in the water and mud, but the order came through that no one was to walk on top of the parapet. This they made a crime.

(5) Lieutenant Bernard Pitt, letter to his parents (25th December, 1915)

What is life like in the trenches, well, muddy, and cramped, and filthy. Everything gets covered with mud; you can't wash, for water has to be fetched for a mile. There is no room, and if you walk upright in many of the trenches, you run grave risks; and you sleep, huddled

together, unable to stretch. All day long shells and rifle bullets go banging and whistling, and from dark to midnight the Huns fire rifle-grenades and machine-guns at us.

(6) Lieutenant Bruce Bairnsfather, *Bullets and Billets* (1916)

An extraordinary sensation - the first time of going into trenches. The first idea that struck me about them was their haphazard design. There was, no doubt, some very excellent reason for someone making those trenches as they were; but they really did strike me as curious when I first saw them.

It was a long and weary night, that first one of mine in the trenches. Everything was strange and wet and horrid. First of all I had had to go and fix up my machine guns at various points, and find places for the gunners to sleep in. This was no easy matter, as many of the dug-outs had fallen in and floated off down stream.

(7) At the age of 92, Arthur Savage was asked about his memories of life on the Western Front.

My memories are of sheer terror and the horror of seeing men sobbing because they had trench foot that had turned gangrenous. They knew they were going to lose a leg. Memories of lice in your clothing driving you crazy. Filth and lack of privacy. Of huge rats that showed no fear of you as they stole your food rations. And cold deep wet mud everywhere. And of course, corpses. I'd never seen a dead body before I went to war. But in the trenches the dead are lying all around you. You could be talking to the fellow next to you when suddenly he'd be hit by a sniper and fall dead beside you. And there he's stay for days.

(8) Charles Repington, *The First World War* (1920)

We visited the trenches of the 4th Army, which are held on their left by the 7th Cavalry Corps. In front is the first line of all, which is an outpost line held by a small number of men and a few machine guns just to check the enemy and to split up an attack. All these trenches are protected by wire, mostly barbed, but not altogether so; and as it is the order in the 4th Army to add two yards of depth to one or other of the lines of wire entanglement every week, the result is a perfect sea of wire.

After leaving the low ground we reach the chalk, where the trenches are extremely good. The chalk, of course, stands up almost perpendicularly when frost and thaw do not crumble it.

In the lower ground the trenches have still much water in them, but there are duck-boards which allow one to get along dry. Further up, the trenches are very dry and clean. Units remain in these trenches for ten days.

The dug-outs are very deep, with good wooden bunks, one above the other, for the men to sleep in. There are blankets and straw in the bunks. Each dug-out has at least two entrances, in case one is blown in by a shell. The approaches to the advanced lines are zig-zags, but each bit of the trench is defended by parapets or traverses with loop-holes for rifle

fire, so that not much progress can be made by the enemy along the trench, even if he gets into them.

(9) Charles Hudson, letter to his sister (October 1915)

It is devilish cold at 3.30 a.m. in the trenches. I am on duty from 2 to 5 this morning and am supposed to be patrolling the trenches, but have taken an interval to write in the officers' mess. A temporary affair, 3 sides sandbags and canvas, top corrugated iron and sandbags.

Yesterday we had a bad shock. Poor old Russell, I don't think you know much of him, was killed. He was an awfully good fellow was Russ, real stolid stuff. I don't mean he was a rough diamond, for he was a gentleman by birth as well as by nature. I had been showing him where I had patrolled the night before in front. Then I went to my dugout and he went to fetch some field glasses - he was using them over the parapet foolishly. He had hardly been up 10 seconds before a bullet went straight through the glasses, knocking the back of his head out. He was dead when I got to him and in fact never spoke, poor boy. It makes my heart ache to think of his poor mother. I know he was so fond of her and, except for her, a woman hater by nature.

I have to take over the Company, it is a great responsibility. There I am with 200 men immediately under me. Times are bound to come where one feels incapable of facing it and would like to consult an older head or simply obey. One will feel, I know, 'Have I done everything to safeguard accidents if an attack comes' etc. etc. All that part is the gloomy side, it remains that I have a Company and with the responsibility goes the opportunity. I am the youngest Company Commander by 7 or 8 years!

Today we go into a Rest Camp some miles from here. It will be a pleasant change, although I should like a few more nights here as I have a job to finish. Last night I and a Sergeant (an ex-Metropolitan Police Force man) went out to the German lines. We crawled out slowly, listening, and got right up to the German parapet and reconnoitred their wire. Apparently they are starting a most elaborate system of wire defence. The part we were opposite was completed and I was dying to go tonight and find out details and especially how far the new system went and if they were working on it now.

I would have gone last night, only a damned ass of a Sergeant has apparently gone off his head and went wandering out this morning without leave. When he came in I blew him up and in the afternoon he calmly sent a message to his platoon officer to say he was going and went at about 3 p.m. and hasn't been seen since. It is now 4.30 a.m. I couldn't very well go out when he was about as I don't want to get shot by my own man by mistake and he would probably shoot at sight.

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