Life in the Trenches

Beginning a Long War
On the Western Front, the First World War was typified by its lack of movement. The War had begun dramatically with sweeping advances by the Germans through Belgium and France en route for Paris. However, a stalemate set in due to the use of trench warfare, and the war that was supposed to be over by Christmas was doomed to last for several years. The men served tours of duty at the front line, support trenches, and the reserve areas. Life in the trenches during the First World War varied widely from sector to sector and from front to front.

The Trench Cycle
Typically, a battalion would be expected to serve a specific amount of time on the front line. This would be followed by time spent in support, and then in reserve lines. A period of rest would follow - generally short in duration - before the whole cycle of trench duty would start afresh.

In reality the cycle was determined by the necessities of the situation. Even while at rest men might find themselves tasked with duties that placed them in the line of fire. Others would spend far longer in the front line than usual, usually in the 'busier' sectors.

Daily Boredom
Given that each side's front line was constantly under watch by snipers and look-outs during daylight, movement was logically restricted until night fell. Thus, once men had concluded their assigned tasks they were free to attend to more personal matters, such as the reading and writing of letters home. Meals were also prepared. Sleep was snatched wherever possible - although it was seldom that men were allowed sufficient time to grab more than a few minutes rest before they were detailed to another task.

Inspection and Chores
With breakfast over, the men would be inspected by either the company or platoon commander. Once this had been completed, soldiers were assigned daily chores. For example, daily chores included the refilling of sandbags, the repair of the duckboards on the floor of the trench, and the draining of trenches. Particularly following heavy rainfall, trenches could quickly accumulate muddy water, making life ever more miserable for its occupants as the walls of the trench rapidly became misshapen and were prone to collapse.

The Smells
In the trenches, there was always an appalling reek given off by numerous conflicting sources. Bodies of dead soldiers lie about in various stages of decay. For example, approximately 200,000 men were killed on the Somme battlefields, many of which lay in shallow graves.

Overflowing latrines would similarly give off a most offensive stench. Men who had not been afforded the luxury of a bath in weeks or months gave off the pervading odor of dried sweat. The feet were generally accepted to give off the worst odor.

Trenches would also smell of creosol or chloride of lime, used to stave off the constant threat of disease and infection. Add to this the smell of the lingering odor of poison gas, rotting sandbags, stagnant mud, cigarette smoke and cooking food.
Rat Infestation
Rats thrived in the millions among trenches during WWI. Trench conditions were ideal for rats. Empty food cans were piled in their thousands throughout No Man’s Land, heaved over the top on a daily basis. Many of these rats reportedly grew to the size of cats. Aside from feeding from rotting food littered about in such cans, rats would invade dug-outs in search of food and shelter. Most soldiers who served on the Western Front would later recall how rats grew bolder, stealing food that had been lain down for just a few moments. Rats would also crawl across the faces of sleeping men, and many men recalled the ceaseless rattling of tin cans during the night, the sound of rats constantly rummaging around in No Man’s Land.

Disgusted, and often feeling a horror of their presence, soldiers would devise various means of dealing with the rat problem. Although shooting at rats was strictly prohibited, being regarded as a pointless waste of ammunition, many soldiers nevertheless took pot shots at nearby rats in this manner. Attacking rats with bayonets was also common. However the rat population was not noticeably diminished by such techniques - a pair of rats were capable of producing some 800 offspring within a single year.

Frogs, Lice, and Worse
Rats were by no means the only source of infection and nuisance. Frogs by the score were found in shell holes covered in water; they were also found in the base of trenches. Slugs and horned beetles crowded the sides of the trench.

Lice were a never-ending problem, breeding in the seams of filthy clothing and causing men to itch unceasingly. Even when clothing was periodically washed and deloused, lice eggs invariably remained hidden in the seams; within a few hours of the clothes being re-worn, the body heat generated would cause the eggs to hatch. Many men chose to shave their heads entirely to avoid the prevalent scourge from taking root in their hair. The lice also caused “Trench Fever“, a particularly painful disease that began suddenly with severe pain followed by high fever. Recovery - away from the trenches - took up to twelve weeks.

Trench Foot was another medical condition peculiar to trench life. It was a fungal infection of the feet caused by cold, wet, and unsanitary trench conditions. It could turn gangrenous and result in amputation. Trench Foot was more of a problem at the start of trench warfare; as conditions improved in 1915, it rapidly faded, although a trickle of cases continued throughout the war.

Death in the Trenches
Death was a constant companion to those serving in the line, even when no raid or attack was launched or defended against. In busy sectors the constant shellfire directed by the enemy brought random death, whether their victims were lounging in a trench or lying in a dugout.

Similarly, novices were cautioned against their natural inclination to peer over the edge of the trench into No Man’s Land. Many men died on their first day in the trenches as a consequence of a precisely aimed sniper’s bullet.