

CHAPTER 3

THE NATURE OF TRENCH WARFARE

MAIN ISSUES

▶	the trenches
▶	no-man's land
▶	fighting along the Western Front
▶	weaponry
▶	the increasing use of technology

KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

•	machine gun: an extremely powerful and rapid-firing gun capable of killing large numbers of soldiers in a very short time
•	trench warfare: a method of fighting in which troops fight from fixed positions and seek to capture enemy trenches
•	front-line trench: the trench closest to enemy trenches
•	no-man's land: the area of land between the two enemies' front lines
•	'over the top': describes soldiers' actions when they leave their trenches to attack enemy trenches
•	sniper: an individual soldier using a rifle
•	pill boxes: concrete structures occupied by a few men and positioned to control a section of the front
•	artillery: heavy guns used to destroy enemy positions
•	dogfight: an aerial battle between two opposing pilots
•	aces: World War I fighter pilots

KEY PERSONALITIES

>	Manfred von Richthofen: highly successful German fighter pilot
>	Captain Albert Ball: highly successful British fighter pilot
>	Wilfred Owen: British soldier-poet
>	General Ludendorff: German commander from 1916
>	General Haig: commander of the British forces
>	Lord Kitchener: British Minister of War until his death in 1916

KEY EVENTS

+	November 1917: Battle of Cambrai (battle that saw the first successful use of tanks)
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INTRODUCTION

Few military leaders of the time had any understanding of the true nature of the war upon which they had embarked in August 1914. Feelings of elation and excitement and hopes for glory dominated both popular and official feeling. Chapters 6, 9, 10 and 11 deal more fully with people's attitudes at the outbreak of war.

Ignorance of what was to come was probably one of the main reasons why so many men eagerly lined up to volunteer for service. Military strategists believed that the conflict would be a war of movement and that, following a knockout blow, it would all be over by Christmas 1914. By the time the Western Front had been created and rival armies had dug themselves in at the end of 1914, military leaders were at a loss to find a suitable strategy. Source 2.1 sums up these feelings well.

Yet Europe's military leaders should not have been so surprised at the way the conflict developed. The use of trenches had been seen as early as the American Civil War (1861–65). The use of the Gatling gun in that conflict must have indicated what impact the **machine gun** might have. As recently as the Russo-Japanese War (1904–05), fighting from well-prepared defensive positions had already been witnessed.

It was not only the style of **trench warfare** that was to shock the world after 1914 but also the conditions on the front. The filth and degradation to which soldiers on all sides were subjected was unprecedented. Thousands of men died not only from enemy fire but also from the conditions in which they had to live and fight. The men were stretched to the limit of not only their physical endurance but also their mental endurance. These aspects of the war will be discussed in Chapter 4.

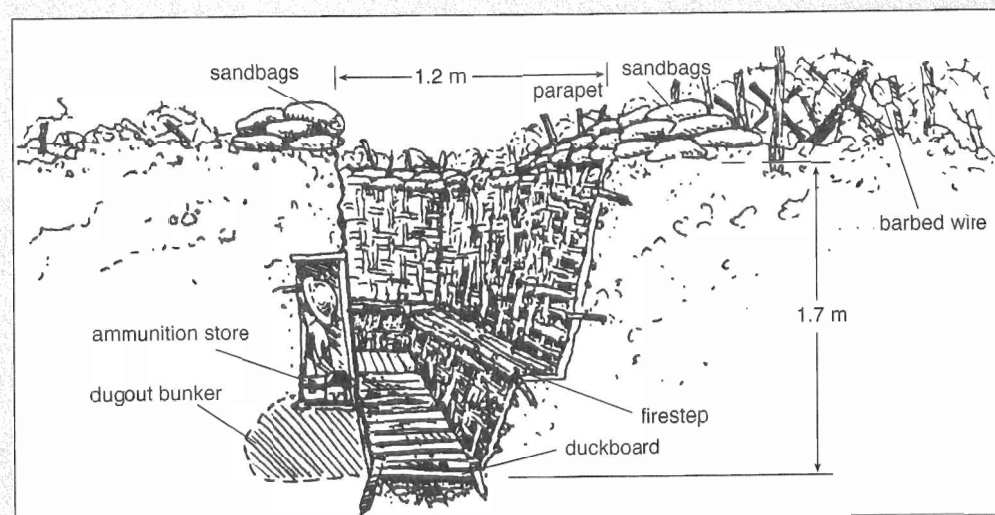
THE TRENCHES

As the front stabilised at the end of 1914 and into 1915, trenches were seen as temporary expedients. They were dug to house the men before the big offensive that would achieve the decisive knockout blow. However, as the weeks turned into months, the trenches took on an air of permanency. They were strengthened. German trenches eventually used concrete and were built to a depth of up to 12 metres. British trenches were never as solid as their German counterparts because the British maintained a firm belief in the cult of the offensive. If the men were going to break through the German lines at any time, why waste time building long-lasting trenches?

As time went on, the trenches became more complex. Compartments were created for supplies of ammunition. There were dugouts in which the men would try to sleep. German trenches had rooms going off the main trench. Officers' conditions were always better than those of the ordinary soldier and some German officers' trenches captured later in the war had electricity and wallpaper!



The general public on the home front were given an idealised view of the trenches. Model trenches were constructed in Hyde Park in London and members of the public were invited to share the experience of the boys over in France. Source 3.1 shows the idealised view of a trench. The reality of course was quite different. Source 3.2 gives a more realistic view of what the trenches were like.

SOURCE
3.1

Cross-section of a trench

SOURCE QUESTIONS

- 1 What do you think was the purpose of the barbed wire immediately in front of the trench?
- 2 What were the sandbags used for?
- 3 Why do you think it was necessary to have a duckboard at the bottom of the trench?
- 4 What was the aim of the firestep?

SOURCE
3.2

The reality of the trenches

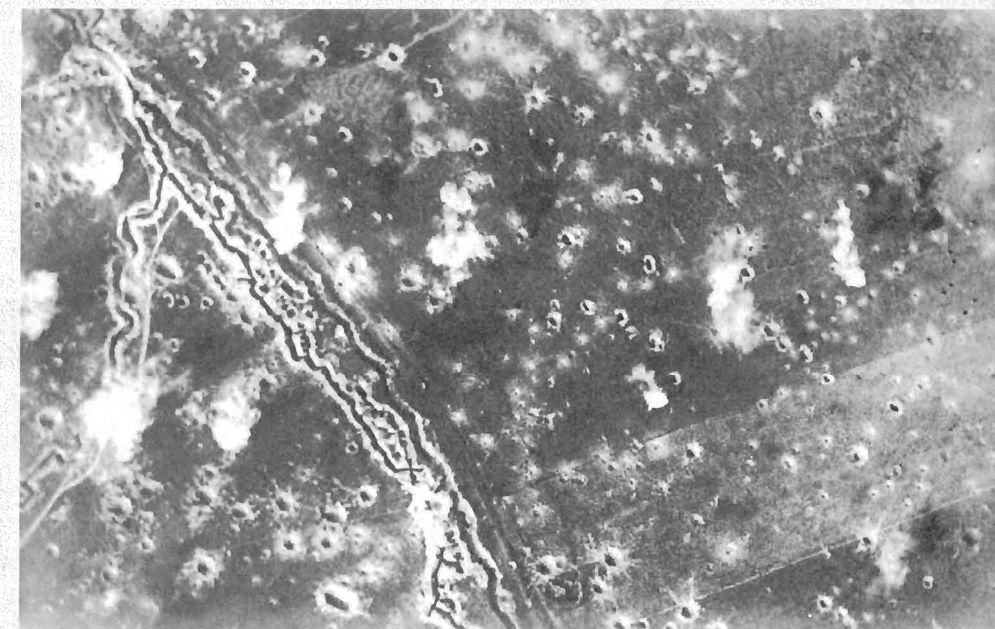
AWM E01120

SOURCE QUESTIONS

- 1 What are the main differences between the trench shown in Source 3.2 and the one presented in Source 3.1?
- 2 Why do you think these differences exist?
- 3 Why was the idealised trench of Source 3.1 unable to be maintained?

Both Allied and German trenches developed into a complex network that stretched back many kilometres from the front line. The more complex the trench networks became and the further back they stretched, the more difficult it was going to be to break through. The **front-line trench** was where troops positioned themselves for launching an attack on the enemy, or awaited such an attack. These were supported with observation posts and machine-gun nests. Further back were the reserve trenches where reinforcements would wait to be called up to the front line. Connecting the trenches was a series of communications trenches that stretched back even further to first-aid posts and supply depots. The trench network became so complex that soldiers began to give trenches street names.

Source 3.3 provides an aerial view of bombed-out trenches along part of the Western Front.



AWM H12079

An aerial photograph of bombed trenches

SOURCE
3.3

SOURCE QUESTIONS

- 1 What impression of the battlefield is presented in the photograph above?
- 2 How does this photograph help us to understand the problems faced in attempting to achieve a breakthrough?

NO-MAN'S LAND

The front-line trenches did not stretch across the country in a neat straight line. They often zigzagged. The aim of this was twofold: it added stability and also made possible a double line of fire if an enemy attacked. Opposing trenches did not remain the same distance apart all along the front. The area between the

Allied and German front-line trenches was called **no-man's land**. In some places, no-man's land could be 8–10 kilometres wide; in other places it could be as narrow as 50 metres.

No-man's land presented a nightmare scenario for most soldiers. Leaving one's trench and going 'over the top' into that area made one an easy target for enemy machine guns. No-man's land was usually full of deep craters and the combination of mud, heavy rain and artillery bombardment made it a fearful quagmire through which it was difficult to even walk, let alone fight. The Battle of Passchendaele (see pages 62–4) was fought under such conditions.

No-man's land was hazardous for other reasons. It was often mined, which meant a wrong step could lead to oblivion. At night small groups of soldiers were sometimes sent out to raid opposing trenches. This placed these men at risk of **sniper** fire and attacks from enemy troops undertaking the same task. At night, flares would be sent up into the air to light up no-man's land and target any men out there.

One of the greatest fears for ordinary soldiers was to be stranded in no-man's land either wounded or stuck on the barbed wire and left to die.

Later in the war, concrete **pill boxes** were constructed. Their aim was to control a wide area of land with minimum resources. A small group of well-armed men holed up in a pill box could achieve the same purpose as a line of men in a front-line trench.



THE BASICS OF BATTLE

In war, all soldiers can justly claim that there is no such thing as a typical battle. Every situation is unique, determined by the lie of the land, the weather, the timing of the battle, the skills of the commanders and a host of other human factors. However, Western Front battles did have some common features.

- As the trench network became more complex, commanders realised that to achieve any breakthrough would require an enormous effort involving massive firepower, limitless supplies and vast numbers of men.
- Moving such a vast force required careful planning. Typically a location along the front would be selected for an attack. The men, supplies and logistical support would be assembled. However, putting together such a vast force for an attack could take months, as in the case of the Somme in 1916.
- Inevitably, it became impossible to keep such vast movements a secret. The increasing use of reconnaissance aircraft over the Western Front ensured this.
- This meant that if the enemy suspected a big push was underway, they would prepare their defences in a similar manner. It became almost impossible to achieve surprise.
- Once the forces had been assembled, the spot chosen for the attack was heavily bombarded by artillery. Heavy guns, such as those shown in Source 3.4, would pound the enemy's front-line position.
- The aim was to soften up the opposing front line and drive the defenders out of their trenches.
- The **artillery** bombardment inflicted on the Germans before the Battle of the Somme (see pages 56–61) lasted for an entire week.

SOURCE
3.4

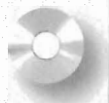


AWM H13198

Heavy artillery typical of the Western Front

SOURCE QUESTIONS

- 1 What problems do you think troops might experience using the weapons shown above?
- 2 How might men under attack be affected by the continuous use of heavy artillery?



Artillery barrages had the capacity to turn open land into a cratered moonscape and cities into rubble. Source 3.5 shows the impact of artillery bombardment on the Belgian city of Ypres.



AWM E01257

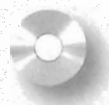
Artillery damage inflicted upon the Belgian city of Ypres



AWM E00707

SOURCE QUESTIONS

- 1 Using the photographs at left as evidence, describe the effect artillery bombardment had on the city of Ypres.
- 2 Locations such as Ypres were often fought over several times during the war. What does this suggest about the nature of warfare on the Western Front?



SOURCE
3.5

Once the commanders were satisfied that the enemy trenches had been cleared, the signal was given to the troops to leave the trenches. A whistle was blown and the attacking force climbed out of their trenches and moved across no-man's land towards the enemy line. At the Somme, British soldiers were ordered to walk across no-man's land in straight lines at one-minute intervals. The men would often be burdened with not only with their weapons but also supplies, spades and anything else that they might need to establish themselves once they had taken the enemy trenches. No-man's land was frequently a muddy quagmire peppered with craters, often filled with water or gas (see pages 35–7). Crossing no-man's land was exhausting.

As the attackers crossed no-man's land they would be met with a chorus of machine-gun fire. Two men operating a machine gun could hold off hundreds of attacking infantry. The machine gun had become the key weapon of modern defensive warfare. Infantry attacks across no-man's land always resulted in enormous casualties. If attackers reached the other side, they had to negotiate enemy barbed-wire defences. Artillery attacks often threw barbed wire up in the air. It then fell in a tangled mess that was sometimes almost impossible to get through. If it was possible to get through the wire, hand-to-hand fighting might ensue as the defenders tried desperately to keep possession of their trenches.

SOURCE
3.6



French army artillery in action with a 75-millimetre gun—the soldiers are wearing newly developed gas masks

SOURCE QUESTIONS

- 1 What aspects of fighting along the Western Front are suggested in the photograph above?
- 2 Do you think these gunners are fighting offensively or defensively? Give reasons.

Attacks like these might continue for months. There would then be a pause in the fighting until the commanders decided on another attempt to achieve a breakthrough.

Men who fought in the trenches have described their existence as ranging from moments of utter fear and terror, when an attack was launched, to possibly weeks of utter boredom. Parts of the Western Front might see no action at all. However, this did not mean the soldier in the trenches could relax. A moment of carelessness could result in death from a sniper's bullet. As late as November 1918 men at the front died from sniper attacks even though the massive offensives experienced earlier in the war had come to an end.

The pattern of fighting along the Western Front was futile and deadly. It might seem impossible to find humour in such horror. However, humour can highlight truths as successfully as a more sombre text, as Source 3.7 demonstrates.

Read Source 3.7 and answer the questions that follow.

Scene: in the trench

[Lieutenant George is in the trench, peering through a pair of binoculars across no-man's land.]

BLACKADDER Oh, God, why do they bother?

GEORGE Well, it's to kill Jerry, isn't it, sir?

BLACKADDER Yes, but Jerry is safe underground in concrete bunkers. We've shot off over a million cannon shells and what's the result? One dachshund with a slight limp!

...

BLACKADDER I, on the other hand, am a fully rounded human being with a degree from the university of life, a diploma from the school of hard knocks, and three gold stars from the kindergarten of getting the shit kicked out of me. My instincts lead me to deduce that we are at last about to go over the top. [Peers over the top of the trench with a periscope.]

GEORGE Great Scott, sir, you mean, you mean the moment's finally arrived for us to give Harry Hun a darned good British-style thrashing, six of the best, trousers down?

BLACKADDER If you mean, 'Are we all going to get killed?' Yes. Clearly, Field Marshal Haig is about to make yet another gargantuan effort to move his drinks cabinet six inches closer to Berlin.

GEORGE Right! Bravo! Well let's make a start, eh, up and over to glory, last one in Berlin's a rotten egg.

BLACKADDER Give me your helmet, lieutenant.

[George hands his helmet to Blackadder, who throws it up into the sky. Immediately heavy machine-gun fire is heard. He catches the helmet, which now has over twenty holes in it, and gives it back to George.]

GEORGE Yes, some sort of clever hat-camouflage might be in order.

...

MELCHETT Ah, yes, the special mission. At ease, Blackadder. Now, what I'm about to tell you is absolutely tip-top secret, is that clear?

BLACKADDER It is, sir.

MELCHETT Good man. Now, Field Marshal Haig has formulated a brilliant new tactical plan to ensure final victory in the field.

SOURCE
3.7

[They gather around a model of the battlefield.]

BLACKADDER Now, would this brilliant plan involve us climbing out of our trenches and walking slowly towards the enemy, sir?

DARLING How can you possibly know that, Blackadder? It's classified information.

BLACKADDER It's the same plan that we used last time, and the seventeen times before that.

MELCHETT E-E-Exactly! And that is what is so brilliant about it! We will catch the watchful Hun totally off guard! Doing precisely what we have done eighteen times before is exactly the last thing they'll expect us to do this time! There is, however, one small problem.

BLACKADDER That everyone always gets slaughtered in the first ten seconds.

MELCHETT That's right! And Field Marshal Haig is worried that this may be depressing the men a tad. So, he's looking to find a way to cheer them up.

BLACKADDER Well, his resignation and suicide would seem the obvious solution.

MELCHETT Interesting thought. Make a note of it, Darling!

...

[Blackadder, Baldrick and George crawling across no-man's land.]

BLACKADDER All right, total and utter quiet, do you understand? So, for instance, if any of us crawl over any barbed wire they must on no account go aaAAAAAAAAAAH!

BALDRICK Have you just crawled over some barbed wire, sir?

BLACKADDER No, Baldrick, I just put my elbow in a blob of ice-cream.

BALDRICK Oh, that's all right then.

BLACKADDER Now, where the hell are we?

GEORGE Well, it's difficult to say, we appear to have crawled into an area marked with mushrooms.

BLACKADDER [patiently] What do those symbols denote?

GEORGE Pfff. That we're in a field of mushrooms?

BLACKADDER Lieutenant, that is a military map; it is unlikely to list interesting flora and fungi. Look at the key and you'll discover that those mushrooms aren't for picking.

GEORGE Good Lord, you're quite right, sir, it says 'mine'. So, these mushrooms must belong to the man who made the map.

BLACKADDER Either that, or we're in the middle of a minefield.

BALDRICK Oh dear.

GEORGE So, he owns the field as well?

[Machine guns fire.]

GEORGE [yelling] THEY'RE FIRING, SIR, THEY'RE FIRING.

[The guns stop.]

BLACKADDER Ah yes, thank you, lieutenant. If they hit me you'll be sure to point it out, won't you?

...

BLACKADDER Quite. Come on, let's get out of here.

GEORGE Oh, sir, just one thing. If we should happen to tread on a mine, what do we do?

BLACKADDER Well, normal procedure, lieutenant, is to jump 200 feet into the air and scatter yourself over a wide area.

[Headquarters, later that night. Melchett and Darling are dining.]

DARLING I suppose Blackadder and his boys will have gone over the top by now.

MELCHETT Yes. God, I wish I were out there with them, dodging the bullets, instead of having to sit here drinking this Chateau Lafitte, eating these filets mignons in sauce bearnaise.

DARLING My thoughts exactly, sir. Damn this Chateau Lafitte.

MELCHETT He's a very brave man, Blackadder. And of course that lieutenant of his, George. Cambridge man, you know. His uncle Bertie and I used to break wind for our college.

Extracts from the BBC TV series *Blackadder Goes Forth*, from the web site <http://britcom.hispeed.com/blackadder/the fourth/episode/.txt>, also in Curtis, R, Elton, B, Lloyd, T and Atkinson, R, *Blackadder: The Whole Damn Dynasty*, Penguin, London, 1999

The above extract can be viewed in its entirety in the first episode of *Blackadder Goes Forth*, the DVD series starring Rowan Atkinson.

SOURCE QUESTIONS

- 1 A million cannon shells resulted in just one wounded dachshund. What does this tell us about the condition of the German trenches?
- 2 What point is Blackadder making when he refers to General Haig's drinks cabinet?
- 3 Why does Blackadder throw George's helmet up into the air?
- 4 What point is being made about the nature of trench warfare in the exchange between Blackadder and Melchett?
- 5 What do we learn about no-man's land from the extract?
- 6 The final extract has Melchett and Darling having dinner. What does this tell us about the differences between the men at the front and the generals behind the lines?

THE WEAPONRY OF WORLD WAR I

The war on the Western Front was dominated by rapid technological developments. Existing weapons were made to operate more quickly, accurately and effectively. Others were made increasingly bigger. New weapons that were to transform the face of modern warfare were introduced. Weaponry also ventured into the chemical and biological areas.

THE RIFLE

The rifle had long been a staple weapon of the infantry. However, by 1914 it had become absolutely deadly in the hands of trained troops. Most rifles had a range of about 500 metres though if they were used en masse, such as a group of soldiers firing simultaneously at enemy troops attacking across no-man's land, they could be accurate up to 1000 metres. The staple German rifle was the Mauser 1898-pattern rifle, which was a magazine rifle, loaded from five-round chargers. The British Lee Enfield rifle contained a magazine with ten rounds and

a trained soldier could fire fifteen rounds per minute. When the German army faced the British Expeditionary Force at Mons in August 1914, they reported that they were hit with light machine-gun fire. In fact, the British troops were using only rifle fire.

THE MACHINE GUN

The key weapon on the Western Front was the machine gun. The machine gun was an excellent defensive weapon. With its range of anything between 500 and 1000 metres and its *cone of fire*, the term used to describe the varying trajectory of a machine-gun burst, a single weapon could wipe out hundreds of advancing troops. The principal German gun was the Maxim, while the British had the Vickers. Each could fire more than 450 rounds per minute. The machine gun was heavy and so it was not easy to move it to aid advancing troops. Later in the war, lighter versions were introduced such as the British Lewis light machine gun.

ARTILLERY

The prime purpose of artillery was to soften up enemy trenches and attack heavily fortified positions. Early in the war, most armies had light artillery such as the 75-millimetre field gun with a range of about 8 kilometres. These had the advantage of mobility but had a limited impact unless used in groups. Corps artillery included 200-millimetre guns with a range of up to 20 kilometres; army artillery included 250-millimetre guns with a range of more than 20 kilometres. The most famous German artillery piece was Big Bertha, a 420-millimetre howitzer. The range and destructive power of such guns were enormous, but their effectiveness was limited as their immense weight meant that rail transport was needed to move them.

Artillery tactics increased in sophistication as the war progressed. *Creeping barrages* attempted to protect troops as they moved forward by providing an advancing screen of cover. *Box barrages* were used to support trench-raiding teams by creating a safe area into which advancing troops would move. The advancing troops would raid a specific section of an enemy trench and then quickly retire.

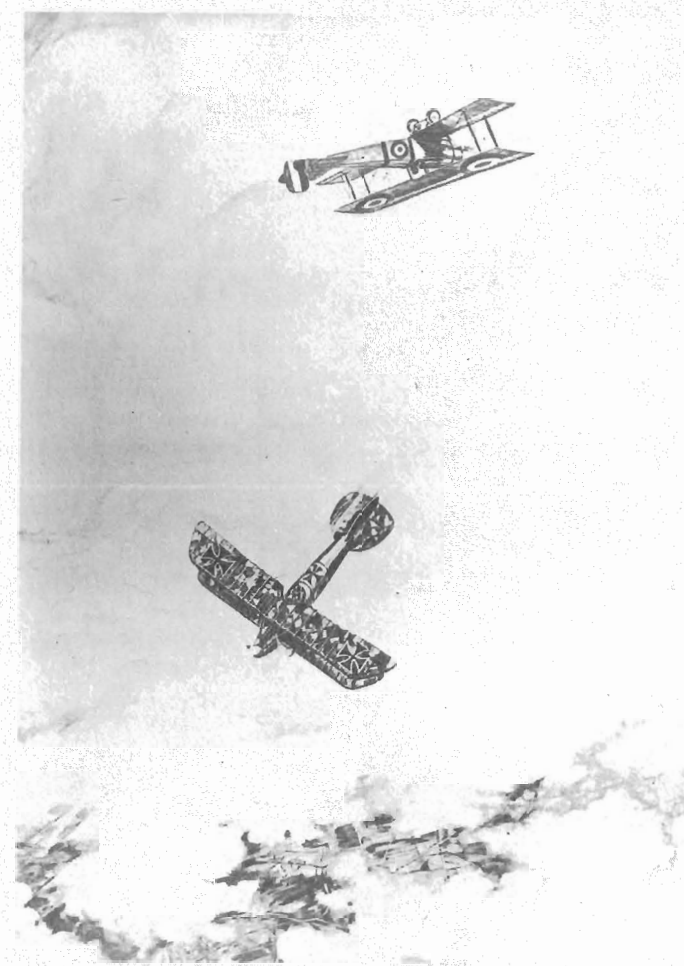
OTHER WEAPONS

Grenades were favoured by attacking forces because of their portability. Grenades were small bombs that could be thrown easily. In 1915 the Germans started using the flamethrower, or *flammenwerfer*. It caused terror in opposing troops but its effectiveness was limited by its short range and duration capability. Mortars were commonly used. Mortars were small bombs launched from metal tubes. They had a high trajectory and a limited range and their use was restricted to limited attacks on close rival trenches.

AIRCRAFT

Aircraft such as those pictured in Source 3.8 played an increasingly important role during World War I. Aircraft proved very useful for reconnaissance of enemy positions, though effective bombing was a generation away. As trench formations became more complex, commanders needed accurate reconnaissance information and it was here that the aircraft came into its own. By 1916 aerial **dogfights** had

become common as the flimsily built planes tried to maintain air supremacy. The gallant one-on-one contests soon gave way to team fighting. The best-known team was the German Richthofen Circus led by **Manfred von Richthofen**, who allegedly shot down more than eighty Allied aircraft during the war. Allied **aces**, as these heroes of the air became known, included British **Captain Albert Ball**, Canadian Billy Bishop and Frenchman Capitaine Georges Guynemer.



An artist's impression of a dogfight

SOURCE QUESTIONS

- 1 Using this illustration as evidence, suggest why flying during World War I was likely to be so hazardous.
- 2 Why might men be attracted to the dangers of the air rather than the mass attacks of the infantry?

AWM H12014

AS A MATTER OF FACT: CHECK YOUR HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE

- 1 Why was the machine gun such a useful defensive weapon?
- 2 Explain how the use of artillery became more sophisticated as the war continued.
- 3 How did modern warfare show the increasing importance of technology?



GAS

The most fearful weapon introduced during the war was gas. Gas canisters were fired into enemy positions. On impact they exploded and allowed the gas to escape. The aim of using gas was to clear the trenches, thus allowing attacking troops to advance and take the enemy position. Gas often caused real panic

SOURCE
3.8

among the troops. However, it was not a reliable weapon as changes in wind direction could blow it back onto the attacking side.

There were several types of gas, including chlorine, mustard, phosgene, chloropicrin and prussic acid. Gas could have horrific effects on the men at the front. Mustard gas could burn the skin and cause breathing problems; phosgene gas destroyed the lungs; and prussic acid gas attacked the nervous system. Gas could burn, blind and suffocate.

Gradually defences against gas were developed. In 1915 a urine-soaked piece of cloth sufficed but by 1918 effective gas masks had rendered gas a much less formidable weapon of war.

Examine Sources 3.9 and 3.10 for examples of how gas had a major impact on the troops in the trenches. Source 3.9 is a poem by British soldier-poet **Wilfred Owen**, who served in France from January 1916 until his death on 4 November 1918.

SOURCE
3.9

Dulce et Decorum est

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime ...
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

[*Dulce et decorum est Pro patria mori*: It is sweet and meet (fitting) to die for one's country.]

Owen, W, 'Dulce et Decorum est' in Cross, T, *The Lost Voices of World War One*, Bloomsbury, London, 1988, p. 78

SOURCE
3.10



AWM E0485-1

The impact of gas warfare on soldiers

SOURCE QUESTIONS

- 1 How does Owen manage to convey the reality of gas warfare in the first two verses of his poem in Source 3.9?
- 2 Why does Owen describe the gas victim in the poem as a man drowning?
- 3 What evidence of the impact of gas warfare is suggested in the last verse?
- 4 What is Owen's mood in this poem? Why does he consider the phrase '*Dulce et decorum est Pro patria mori*' to be an old lie?
- 5 What has happened to the troops in the photograph above?

THE TANK

Arguably the key technological development of World War I was the tank. The tank and its increasingly effective use were important factors in turning the tide of war in 1918. The German commander **General Ludendorff** emphasised this point in his speech relayed to the Reichstag in October 1918 (see Source 14.6).

Nevertheless, it took several years for the tank to achieve its potential and to be accepted by wartime commanders. **General Haig** had great doubts about its capability while **Lord Kitchener**, Britain's War Minister, described it as a pretty mechanical toy.

The first tank, the British Mark I, appeared early in 1916. Initially it terrified defending German troops but for nearly two years the tank proved ineffective. The 'willies', as they were called, were too slow, moving at only 6 kilometres per hour, which made them easy targets. Their engines were not powerful enough to move through the mud of the front and they broke down frequently.

Such a scene as shown is Source 3.11 overleaf.

SOURCE
3.11

A wrecked tank on the Western Front

SOURCE QUESTIONS

- 1 What has happened to the tank in the photograph above?
- 2 Using the source as evidence, explain why the tank seems to be of little use.
- 3 What might the men in the picture be hoping the tank could provide for them?

Not only were the early tanks ineffective, they were also hell to work in. Tank crews reported that conditions were hot, claustrophobic and incredibly noisy. If fire broke out, it was almost impossible to escape the burning wreck.

In 1916 tanks were used singly or at best in twos and threes. However, by late 1917, Allied commanders were beginning to understand the potential of the tank much better. At Cambrai on 20 November 1917 a massed Allied tank attack led by Brigadier General Elles broke through German lines, creating a 4-kilometre gap. Elles had almost 400 Mark IV tanks under his command. However, lack of supporting infantry prevented a consolidation of the breakthrough and by early December, Ludendorff's counterattack had forced Haig to withdraw British forces.

The photograph in Source 3.12 shows tanks and infantry troops preparing for action at Bellicourt, 1918.

SOURCE
3.12

Allied tanks and infantry troops preparing for action at Bellicourt, 1918

SOURCE QUESTION

In what ways could tanks such as the ones shown above assist the infantry?

USEFULNESS AND RELIABILITY

How useful would Source 3.9 be to a historian studying the war on the Western Front?

The following points give an idea of how such a question might be approached.

- *Identify the nature of the source.* It is a primary source, a poem written by a British soldier recalling the effects of a gas attack.
- *Discuss the source's reliability.* This is a first-hand, eyewitness account. Owen was a front-line soldier who spent years at the front and was actually involved in the events he is describing. Owen wrote his poem during the war and so the images he is presenting are not distant memories but recollections of very recent events. The mood of the poem is angry and bitter. Owen resents the pressure placed on young men to fight by armchair strategists back home who have no idea of the reality of modern warfare. Owen is clearly deeply emotionally involved in what he is describing; his feelings are not hidden. As you analyse this source, you must decide whether you think his lack of emotional detachment diminishes the source's reliability or whether his strong feelings, aroused by the horror of what he is witnessing, actually increase the source's reliability.
- *Refer specifically to the source's content.* This source is extremely useful for the historian studying the war on the Western Front. It provides detail on several aspects of the nature of the fighting including the use of gas, flares and artillery. It also presents an image of the conditions in which the men were fighting, including the sludge they had to march through and the dangers of gas craters. The last verse clearly shows the impact of gas on a victim. Even the bitter tone of Owen's poem is useful as it suggests the growing disillusionment felt by the troops as the war continued to drag on in its futile way.

CHAPTER 4

LIFE IN THE TRENCHES

MAIN ISSUES

▶	the physical conditions of the trenches
▶	sickness and disease in the trenches
▶	the psychological effects of trench warfare
▶	conditions for the generals behind the lines

KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

•	trench foot: a painful swelling of the feet caused by constant immersion in water
•	gangrene: decay of body tissue that can necessitate amputation to avoid the decay spreading through the body
•	corpse rats: the large rats that infested the trenches
•	gas gangrene: swelling of the body caused by the contact of a wound with a bacterium that produces germ cells in the presence of oxygen
•	frostbite: inflamed or gangrenous state of the skin caused by freezing conditions
•	shrapnel: fragments of a bomb or shell scattered by an explosion
•	shell shock: psychological effect on soldiers subjected to long periods of artillery bombardment

KEY EVENTS

+	July–November 1917: Battle of Passchendaele (also called the Third Battle of Ypres, whose battlefield became a byword for mud and despair)
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INTRODUCTION

Life in the trenches along the Western Front, be they Allied or German, was almost beyond our comprehension. The soldier on the Western Front had to contend with far more than just the constant fear of being blown apart and the terror of going over the top. Newsreels of the time betray little of the horror and squalor that trench life presented. Most newsreel films were carefully doctored pieces of propaganda that aimed to show the gallantry and high spirits of the noble Tommy or Fritz. It has been left to the photographer, the soldier poet, the soldier writer and the journalist to inform us of the reality.

The physical hardships of the trenches represent only part of the nightmare experience of the troops. Disease and sickness were ever present. Many men on the Western Front escaped physical injury and disease but went on to live the lives of mental wrecks because of their experiences.

MUD

A popular Flanders and Swann song of the 1950s in Britain contains the line: 'Mud, mud, glorious mud. Nothing quite like it for cooling the blood.' For survivors of the trenches this song must have brought back bitter memories. The men in the trenches never became used to the incessant and all-pervasive nature of the mud. It affected their whole existence: what they ate, what they drank, how they breathed, what they wore, how they walked, their health.

Northeastern France and Belgium receive frequent rain that, when combined with the clay of the trenches and the constant artillery bombardments, resulted in muddy quagmires (see the description of Passchendaele on pages 62–4).

Sources 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3 highlight what the men had to contend with.

Mud ... enveloped men of the front line. As a farm labourer at 'Akenfield', Davie was a man used to hardship, but he was in no doubt about the importance of mud. 'Did you kill men, Davie?' 'I got several.' 'What was the worst, Davie?' 'Why, the wet, of course.' Where rain met bare earth or shelled earth, it spawned feet of mud. Boyd Orr reckoned that forty Englishmen a night were drowned in it. Nicholson on the Somme saw a man stuck fast for sixty-five hours, with two men pulling on ropes finally freeing him though with his clothing sucked down by the mud.

Winter, D, *Death's Men*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1978, p. 96

Mud is the chief enemy and chief misery of the soldier. Mud soft and deep, that you sink into, vainly seeking a foothold on something solid: or stiff and clinging, gripping boots so firmly as sometimes to drag them off. Mud, that coats men, horses, guns, rifles, and all in a thick camouflage, so that they become almost indistinguishable from the ground. It clings to men's bodies and cracks their skins, and the slimy horror of it soaks their souls and sucks their courage. I have known those who can face an enemy barrage without flinching, who still shiver at the memory of their experiences in the mud of Flanders.

Boyd, Sergeant P, *Salvage*, Australian War Memorial Facsimile Editions, Canberra [1918] 1983, in McAndrew, M, Thomas, D and Cummins, P, *The Great War and Its Aftermath*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2001, p. 173



SOURCE
4.1

SOURCE
4.2

SOURCE
4.3

IWM E(AUS)1220

The Third Battle of Ypres (Passchendaele) 1917: Australian troops passing along a duckboard through devastated Chateau Wood

SOURCE QUESTIONS

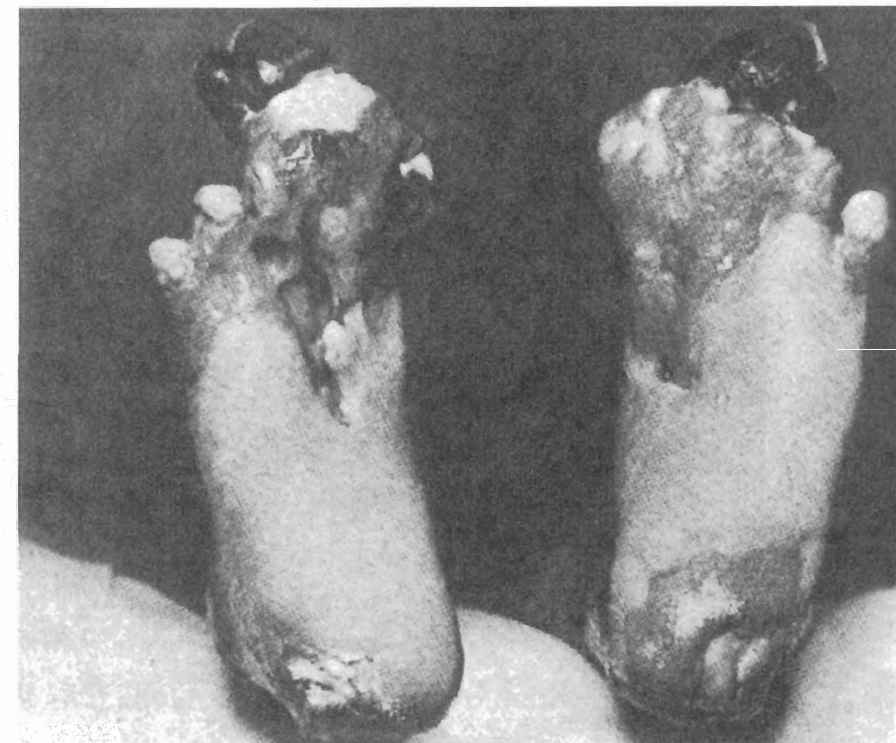
- 1 In Source 4.1, how does Davie's background highlight the severity of the conditions?
- 2 What similarities do Sources 4.1 and 4.2 share in their description of the mud?
- 3 Why might the men fear the mud more than actual battle?
- 4 Why might the men shown above be wary about walking along the duckboards?

SICKNESS AND DISEASE

It was not uncommon for the men in the trenches to have to stand for days at a stretch in knee-deep water. The lack of drainage and the often incessant rain meant that the trenches were frequently full of water. This led to the condition of **trench foot**. Trench foot was a painful swelling of the feet caused by constant immersion in water. In some cases the toes could rot off and the condition often progressed to **gangrene**, which would frequently lead to amputation.

Source 4.4 shows a severe case of trench foot.

It was not only water that filled the trenches. The water at the bottom of a trench soon developed into an unbelievable putrid concoction of human and military detritus. The stench of the trench, the smell of cordite (an explosive) and gas often induced vomiting. At the height of battle men had no choice but to urinate and excrete where they stood. Diarrhoea, and, even worse, dysentery,

SOURCE
4.4

Trench foot

SOURCE QUESTIONS

- 1 What appears to have happened to the man's feet in the photograph above?
- 2 Why would trench foot be of such concern to the military authorities of both sides?

were common ailments suffered by the troops. Decomposing bodies were allowed to float on the surface of the water until a safe time could be found to deal with them. At the height of summer these corpses attracted swarms of flies. The combined effect of this effluent was to create ideal conditions for disease.

In Source 4.5, Paul Nash, an official British war artist, describes what he saw at the front, in a letter from November 1917.

[I have just returned, last night, from a visit to Brigade Headquarters up the line, and I shall not forget it as long as I live ... The rain drives on, the stinking mud becomes more evilly yellow, the shell holes fill up with green-white water, the roads and tracks are covered in inches of slime, the black dying trees ooze and sweat and the shells never cease. They alone plunge overhead, tearing away the rotting tree stumps, breaking the plank roads, striking down horses and mules, annihilating, maiming, maddening, they plunge into the grave which is this land; one huge grave, and cast upon it the poor dead.

Paul Nash, in a letter dated 18 November 1917, taken from the *Flanders Fields Museum, Ypres, Guide Book*, p. 28

SOURCE QUESTIONS

- 1 What image does Nash manage to create in the previous extract?
- 2 List the effects Nash presents of the war's impact on the Western Front environment.

SOURCE
4.5

Not surprisingly, such conditions brought on disease and sickness. Historian Denis Winter makes the point that common diseases of the time, such as measles, mumps and diphtheria, occurred at rates no worse than in civilian life. However, the troops experienced far higher rates of ailments such as frostbite, meningitis, tuberculosis and venereal disease.

Poor sanitation and often limited medical facilities led to a high rate of infection. In that pre-antibiotics age, an inability to deal adequately with infection frequently caused gangrene.

Source 4.6 suggests the difficulties faced by medical teams trying to deal with the effects of battle.

SOURCE
4.6

On the next floor below are the abdominal and spine cases, head wounds and double amputations. On the right side of the wing are the jaw wounds, gas cases, nose, ear, and neck wounds. On the left the blind and the lung wounds, pelvis wounds, wounds in the joints, wounds in the testicles, wounds in the intestines. Here a man realizes for the first time in how many places a man can get hit.

Two fellows die of tetanus. Their skin turns pale, their limbs stiffen, at last only their eyes live stubbornly. Many of the wounded have their shattered limbs hanging free in the air from a gallows; underneath the wound a basin is placed into which the pus drips. Every two or three hours the vessel is emptied. Other men lie in stretching bandages with heavy weights hanging from the end of the bed. I see intestine wounds that are constantly full of excreta. The surgeon's clerk shows me X-ray photographs of completely smashed hip-bones, knees, and shoulders.

A man cannot realize that above such shattered bodies there are still human faces in which life goes its daily round. And this is only one hospital, one single station; there are hundreds of thousands in Germany, hundreds of thousands in France, hundreds of thousands in Russia.

Remarque, EM, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Little Brown, Boston, 1929, pp. 265-6

SOURCE QUESTIONS

- 1 What impression is Remarque trying to convey in the extracts above?
- 2 How useful would these extracts be to a historian studying the physical impact of the war on soldiers at the front?

LICE

There was not a soldier in the trenches during the war who did not have lice. Winter describes them thus: 'They looked like little translucent lobsters and fed twelve times daily by holding onto clothing fibres with their six feet as they drank blood' (Winter, D, *Death's Men*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1978, pp. 96-7). Once embedded in a man's uniform, they had the ability to torment their host night and day. They bred voraciously and proved resistant to all forms of control. The men never became used to lice and their constant biting forced the men to scratch continually. Lice were more than just irritants. Constant scratching caused the skin to break and sores to develop. In the trenches' unhygienic conditions this was not just uncomfortable but dangerous. Boils, impetigo and ulcers could develop.

Sources 4.7 and 4.8 give two differing views of the lice problem.

Jack, like most of the men, scratched almost all the time, unconsciously, and gradually less aware that he did so. Not all of them were resigned. Tyson had once been driven so frantic that the medical officer ordered him to have fifteen days' rest. The constant irritation had proved more wearing to him even than the sound of heavy guns or the fear of dying ... By the time they had reached their billets Jack felt the first irritation on his skin. Within three hours the heat on his body as he marched had hatched the eggs of hundreds of lice that had lain dormant in the seams of the shirt. By the time he reached the front his skin was alive with them.

Faulks, S, *Birdsong*, Vintage, London, 1994, pp. 346, 347.

SOURCE
4.7

SOURCE
4.8

BE IN THE FASHION.

Why have Cats, Dogs, Canaries, Rabbits, Parrots, etc.?

LICE!

EVERY CONCEIVABLE SHADE SUPPLIED:—BLUE BACKS, BLACK BACKS, RED BACKS, GREY BACKS, WHITE BACKS. ¶ ALSO IN A DELICATE PINK SHADE AND WITH VARIEGATED STRIPES. ¶ PURE THOROUGH-BREDS FROM OUR OWN SEAMS. ¶ MOST CLINGING, AFFECTIONATE, AND TAKING WAYS. ¶ VERY PROLIFIC, HARDY, AND WILL LIVE ANYWHERE. ¶ ONCE YOU HAVE THEM YOU WILL NEVER BE WITHOUT.

In Dainty Pochettes at 2/- per Thousand.

Write at once to **E. R. M. CRACK,**

Telegraphic Address: "Hitchy Koo."

CHAT VILLA, CRUMBY.

Satirical poster from the Western Front

SOURCE QUESTIONS

- 1 What impression is given of the men's reaction to lice in Source 4.7?
- 2 What was liable to happen to Jack once he had been at the front for a few days?
- 3 How does the poster above draw humour out of the lice problem?
- 4 Why do you think the men at the front created such posters?

RATS

If lice were the constant unseen companions of the men in the trenches, rats were their constant visible companions. The rats that infected the Western Front were unlike anything the men had seen before. Known as 'trench rats' or 'corpse rats', these vermin were often the size of small dogs. They had no nationality, being willing to feast on the corpse of a Frenchman or a German.

Rats did not limit their interests to the dead. A sleeping soldier was an equally good target as a dead soldier. Food could never be left out as it would attract rats. Yet, as with the discomfort of lice, the horror of rats often brought out the humour of the men in the trenches. There are many accounts of soldiers describing their competitions to kill rats and the ingenious ways in which they worked at this. Some soldiers even developed some affection for 'their rats' and gave them names.

Source 4.9 below gives a first-hand account of a soldier's experience with rats.

SOURCE 4.9

The outstanding feature of the Armentieres sector was the extraordinary number of rats. The area was infested with them ... It was impossible to keep them out of the dugouts even. They grew fat on the food that they pilfered from us, and anything they could pick up in or around the trenches; they were bloated and loathsome to look at ... One night a rat ran across my face. Unfortunately my mouth happened to be open and the hind legs of the filthy little beast went right in.

Dolden, AS, *Cannon Fodder*, Blandford Press, 1980, in Fewster, S, *The First World War*, Longman, Harlow, 1990, p. 25

GAS GANGRENE

The soils of northern France contain manure that has a bacillus in it. A *bacillus* is a bacterium that produces spores (germ cells) in the presence of oxygen. If this bacillus comes into contact with a wound, which was quite easy given the constant mud, it caused a condition referred to as **gas gangrene**. This ailment has nothing to do with gas.

Source 4.10 is a doctor's description of a gas gangrene wound.

SOURCE 4.10

After forty-eight hours the edges of the wound begin to swell up ... The cut surface takes on a curious half-jellied, half-mummified look; then the whole wounded limb begins to swell up and distend in the most extraordinary fashion, turning, as it does, first an ashy white and then a greenish colour. This is because the tissues are being literally blown out with gas.

Ringer, RE, *2 Unit Modern History Outlines*, Core Study, Pergamon, Sydney, 1989, p. 73

SOURCE QUESTION

With an ignorance of things medical, how might a soldier react and interpret his condition if he was suffering the symptoms referred to in the extract above?



CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Why was gas gangrene likely to be a problem in the trenches of World War I?

THE COLD

France and Belgium do not experience a winter as cold as Russia's. Temperatures do not regularly fall to -40°C . However, in the trenches winter temperatures were known to fall to -15°C . For the soldier forced to spend weeks on end in a trench, the cold caused unbelievable hardship. Denis Winter describes cold as the soldier's greatest enemy. It was impossible to escape and no amount of additional clothing was able to keep it out. The combination of cold and wet made life particularly unbearable. The intense cold brought its own problems. **Frostbite** affected many men and often led to infection, gangrene and later amputation. The cold made sleep almost impossible.

Sources 4.11 and 4.12 give an idea of the impact of the cold.

Though these winters gave the men the most prolonged experience of cold, each night tested the men. Wrote Drinkwater: 'Anyone who has not stood all night in a muddy trench with sodden clothing cannot know the sheer ecstasy of the first gleam of sunshine. To feel its warmth penetrating one's chilled bones is something beyond my power to describe.'

Winter, D, *Death's Men*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1978, p. 96

SOURCE 4.11

Exposure

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knife us
Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent
Low, dropping flares confuse our memory of the salient
Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous
But nothing happens.

Watching, we hear the mad gusts tugging on the wire,
Like twitching agonies of men among its brambles.
Northward, incessantly, the flickering gunnery rumbles,
Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war.
What are we doing here?

Tonight, this frost will fasten on this mud and us,
Shrivelling many hands, puckering foreheads crisp.
The burying-party, picks and shovels in shaking grasp,
Pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are ice,
But nothing happens.

Owen, W, extract from the poem 'Exposure', written in 1917, in Cross, T, *The Lost Voices of World War One*, Bloomsbury, London, 1988, p. 80

SOURCE 4.12

SOURCE QUESTIONS

- 1 What does Winter mean when he says 'each night tested the men'?
- 2 Nothing is happening but they have to keep alert. Why?
- 3 Nothing is happening but they are constantly aware of war. How?
- 4 Using the extract above and your own knowledge, explain how the men at the front were affected by the cold.



THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ANGLE

The suffering of the men in the trenches was not only physical. The effects of the nature of battle and the conditions in which they had to fight had major short-term and long-term psychological effects. This was hardly surprising. The vast majority who fought along the Western Front were men for whom the violence and savagery of battle was totally alien to everything they had ever experienced. Farmers, clerks, machine operators and students had been taken from their fields, offices, factories and colleges. After a short, and often impersonal and brutal, period of training they were transported to France and thrown into the trenches. These ordinary men suddenly had to cope with the incessant din of an artillery barrage, the sight of human flesh torn apart and the stench of the sickening cocktail of a trench's contents. Many were unable to cope and cracked under the strain.

Weaponry had been developed to such a fine art by 1914 that it had become possible to inflict the most gruesome wounds on one's enemy. Read Source 4.13, which describes the effects of **shrapnel**. While Faulks' novel *Birdsong* is a fictional story, his research has enabled him to write evocatively about the experience of the ordinary soldier.

SOURCE 4.13

The wall of the trench had caved in and barbed wire had been blown back and was hanging over the churned earth. There was a sound of groaning. Stretcher-bearers were trying to clear the debris to get to the wounded men. Stephen took a trenching tool and began to dig. They pulled out a man by his shoulders. It was Reeves. His expression was more vacant than usual. His rib cage was missing on one side where a large piece of shell casing stuck out from under his breastbone ... A few yards further on they disinterred Wilkinson ... He prepared words of encouragement as he came alongside. But as the stretcher-bearers lifted him, they turned his body and Stephen saw that his head was cut away in section, so that the smooth skin and the handsome face remained on one side, but on the other were the ragged edges of skull from which the remains of his brain were dropping on to his scorched uniform.

Faulks, S, *Birdsong*, Vintage, London, 1994, pp. 154–5

Source 4.14 provides another glimpse of the impact of technology on the men at the front.

SOURCE 4.14

Companies of Royal Engineers, composed of specially selected British coal miners, worked in shifts around the clock digging tunnels towards the German line. When a tunnel was completed after several days of sweating labour, tons of explosive charges were stacked at the end and primed ready for firing ... At the moment of the explosion the ground trembled violently in a miniature earthquake. Then like an enormous pie crust rising up, slowly at first, the bulging mass of earth crackled in thousands of fissures as it erupted ... Hundreds of tons of earth hurled skywards to a height of three hundred feet or more, many of the lumps of great size. A state of acute alarm prevailed as the deadly weight commenced to drop ...

Coppard, G, *With a Machine Gun to Cambrai*, HMSO, London, 1969, in Fewster, S, *The First World War*, Longman, Harlow, 1990, p. 55

SOURCE QUESTION

How useful would sources 4.13 and 4.14 be to a historian studying the impact of modern technology on the men of the Western Front?



OVER TO YOU

- 1 How do you think the men in the trenches would react to such things happening to their colleagues?
- 2 Do you think they would become immune to the sight of such horror or would they more likely be unable to cope with such continual horror?



SHELL SHOCK



One of the great films made about World War I was the 1957 Stanley Kubrick classic *Paths of Glory* starring Kirk Douglas. There is a powerful scene in which a French general is inspecting the men in the trenches on the eve of going over the top. He is there to raise morale and attempts to buoy up the troops with tidbits of small talk. He approaches one soldier and attempts to talk to him. The soldier has a glazed look and clearly is unaware of what is going on, what is being said and even who is talking to him. The captain explains that this soldier has shell shock. The general explodes, insisting that there is no such thing as **shell shock** and orders the sick soldier to be removed.

The scene is instructive as it highlights the official attitude early in the war to shell shock. The military authorities adamantly refused to recognise shell shock and accused those who displayed symptoms of malingering and, worse, cowardice.

Shell shock was caused by the stresses created by the nature of war at the front. It manifested itself in a variety of ways:

- Some men became violent and angry and had to be physically restrained.
- Some men turned inwards and totally refused to communicate.
- Some would gaze out blankly as if in another world.
- Others might shake, mumble and slobber.

Sources 4.15 and 4.16 illustrate how men could be affected by shell shock.

... the 'shell-shocks' sat about, dumb, or making queer, foolish noises, or staring with a look of animal fear in their eyes. From a padded room came a sound of singing. Some idiot of war was singing between bursts of laughter. It all seemed so funny to him, that war, so mad! ... The nervous cases were the worst and in greatest number. Many went raving mad. The shell-shock victims clawed at their mouths unceasingly, or lay motionless like corpses with staring eyes, or trembled in every limb, moaning miserably and afflicted with great terror.

Gibbs, P, *Now It Can Be Told*, Harper & Brothers, London, 1920, pp. 350, 438

When men did crack, they often showed the most diverse responses to identical pressures. Myers noted one incident in which a shell had hit a dugout. Only two men survived. One wandered in the open with his clothes off, believing that he was going to bed. After just four days at a field ambulance station he was back in service. The other man was in a coma for a fortnight with rigid limbs. On the seventeenth day he sat up and said, 'Did you see that one, Jim?' then relapsed, remaining deaf and mute. In a final hysterical seizure he shouted battlefield orders, then came round to his normal condition. Another man who came under Myers was a soldier who had seen his

SOURCE 4.15



SOURCE 4.16



closest friend killed at his side. He went into a tearful semi-stupor, showed no reflexes and took no notice of pinpricks. After two days, however, he got out of bed and talked to his orderly quietly about his old civilian life but retained no memory whatsoever of anything in his war hitherto.

Winter, D, *Death's Men*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1978, p. 136

SOURCE QUESTIONS

- 1 Describe the differences in the men's psychological reactions to the stress of war.
- 2 In the extract above, the first man was back at the front within four days. What does this suggest about the nature of treatment for shell-shock victims during the war?
- 3 What does the third victim seem to have done to escape the horror of war?
- 4 Why do you think soldiers' experiences of shell shock were so varied?

For some men the trauma of the war left them once they returned to civilian life. For others it stayed with them forever. The rat-a-tat-tat sound of a 1920s model motorcycle was often enough to lead an ex-soldier to throw himself onto the ground in order to seek cover from what he perceived was a burst of enemy machine-gun fire. As late as 1938, there were 32 000 World War I veterans being treated in psychiatric hospitals.

The lesson of World War I was learned. As War World II approached, British authorities expected military psychological casualties to be three times as high as physical casualties. It was assumed that *millions* of civilians would suffer psychologically from the stress of the expected aerial bombing.

BACK AT THE CHATEAU

The Western Front commanders rarely, if ever, ventured anywhere near the front. They remained ignorant of the true nature of life in the trenches. For them there was no mud, cold, pestilence or lice. They remained safely ensconced in their chosen French chateau savouring the delights of vintage French wine and elegant French cuisine. An afternoon canter through the countryside might allow them to hear the distant guns. Such behaviour increased the distance between commander and private and increased the resentment felt by the men at the front.

Faulks highlights this situation in Source 4.17.

SOURCE 4.17

[Stephen is a captain who has been given an opportunity to escape the trenches for a few hours to mix with his 'superior' officers, well behind the lines.]

'What's this stuff?' said [Colonel] Barclay holding up a bottle to the light. 'Gevrey-Chambertin. Hmm, tastes all right, though I don't know why we can't have white wine with fish.'

'There was no white wine in the cellar, sir', said the Colonel's batman, a small white-haired Londoner. 'But I knew you were partial to a bit of fish. Trout, sir. From the local river.'

'Very well, Davis', said Barclay, refilling his glass.

A thin stew followed, then ripe cheese and fresh bread. Lunch went on past three o'clock, when they went to the sun-filled room with coffee and cigars ...

The colonel's batman brought brandy, and Stephen thought of the men in his platoon and the way they conjured cups of tea on tiny spirit stoves in damp trench walls. A sullen decorator called Studd used to fix a piece of cheese on his bayonet to entice the rats, then pull the trigger. Stephen felt that he was betraying them by eating and drinking in this elegant house ...

Faulks, S, *Birdsong*, Vintage, London, 1994, pp. 211-12

SOURCE QUESTIONS

- 1 What conclusion might be drawn from the fact that Colonel Barclay is complaining at the lack of white wine?
- 2 How does the author use cheese to highlight the vastly different worlds of the commander and the soldier at the front?
- 3 Why does Stephen feel guilty?
- 4 What do you think might be the attitude of the men at the front to Stephen's brief period of comfort and good food?

AS A MATTER OF FACT: CHECK YOUR HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE

Under the following headings, list the various discomforts and ailments the men in the trenches had to contend with:

- 1 Physical discomforts
- 2 Medical ailments
- 3 Psychological effects

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

War affected the men in other ways. In groups, research the following topics, produce a handout for the rest of your class and then report back to the class.

- 1 Mutiny on the Western Front
- 2 The issue of desertion
- 3 The use of court martials
- 4 The use of humour among the troops