

## Trench Warfare in the First World War

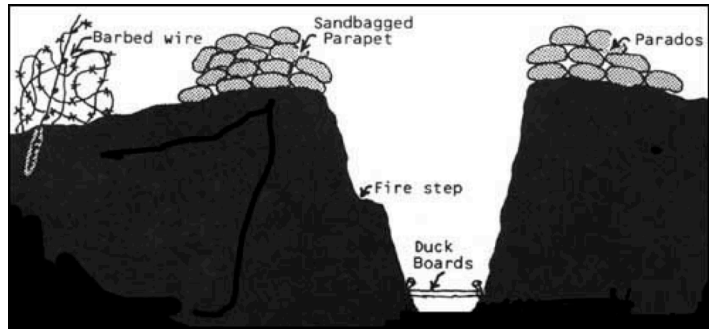
When the Germans attacked in Belgium they quickly beat the armies defending the borders and managed to get into France very quickly. The British and French generals, uncertain about how to stop the German advance decided to ‘dig in’ and ordered the construction of Trenches to act as a barrier against the attack. The soldiers dug a hole about three yards wide and two yards deep. Boards were placed on the ground to act as drainage. On the side of the trench facing the enemy a ‘fire step’ was cut into the wall. This was for soldiers to shoot from. Sandbags were placed at the top of the trench. This would stop the trench caving in if a bomb went off nearby. It also provided more protection from bullets. In front of the trench barbed wire was rolled out. This was to stop soldiers being able to charge at the trench. The diagram below shows you what a trench might have looked like: The trench would be equipped with men armed with rifles and bayonets. At regular intervals along the trench there were machine gun posts.

### Trench Warfare in the First World War

#### The Trench: Important points

Advantages: easy to make, easy to defend, cheap to build, don’t need lots of men to defend them.

Disadvantages: wet, cold, hard to get in an out of without being seen by the enemy. Trenches were very dirty and unhygienic as there was no running water or flushing toilets.



#### Task 1: Complete the chart below and question below

What Soldiers might have thought about trenches	
Things they Like	Things they might dislike

Question: What were some problems for soldiers living in the trenches?:

### Living Through The War: The Battle of the Somme:

The Battle of the Somme started in July 1st 1916. It lasted until November 1916. For many years those who lead the British campaign have received a lot of criticism for the way the Battle of the Somme was fought – especially General Sir Douglas Haig, commander of the British troops. This criticism was based on the appalling casualty figures suffered by the British and the French. By the end of the battle, the British Army had suffered 420,000 casualties including nearly 60,000 on the first day alone. The French lost 200,000 men and the Germans nearly 500,000. Ironically, going over the top at the Somme was the first taste of battle many of these men had, as many were persuaded to volunteer by posters summoning these men to arms to show their **patriotism**.

The battle at the Somme started with a weeklong artillery **bombardment** of the German lines. 1,738,000 shells were fired at the Germans. The logic behind this was so that the artillery guns would destroy the German trenches and barbed wire placed in front of the trenches. In fact, the Germans had deep dugouts for their men and all they had to do when the bombardment started was to move these men into the relative safety of the deep dugouts. When the bombardment stopped, the Germans would have known that this would have been the signal for an infantry advance. They moved from the safety of their dugouts and manned their machine guns to face the British and French.

The Allied troops climbed out of their trenches and moved over **no-mans land** towards the German front lines. Many were gunned down in no man’s land. However due to the huge number of troops attacking the German line soldiers did get through. They were followed by cavalry. This was not a great success. The muddy conditions made horses slow and riders easy targets. The man to man combat that followed was bloody and horrific. By the end of the battle, in November 1916, the British lost 420,000, the French lost nearly 200,000 men and the Germans 500,000. The allies gained 7 miles.



*British soldiers going "over the top" during the Somme*



*British Machine Gun*

General Haig was a supporter of the theory of **attrition** - that eventually you would grind down your enemy and they would have to yield. He saw the military success of the battle as all-important. However, it did have dire political and social consequences in Britain. Many spoke of the "**lost generation**". Many people found it difficult to justify the near 88,000 Allied men lost for every one mile gained in the advance.

**"The Daily Chronicle" newspaper published this report on the battle on July 3rd:**

At about 7.30 o'clock this morning a vigorous attack was launched by the British Army. The front extends over some 20 miles north of the Somme. The assault was preceded by a terrific bombardment, lasting about an hour and a half. It is too early to as yet give anything but the barest particulars, as the fighting is developing in intensity, but the British troops have already occupied the German front line. Many prisoners have already fallen into our hands, and as far as can be ascertained our casualties have not been heavy.

**However, those who fought there knew what really happened: George Coppard, machine gunner at the Battle of the Somme**  
 The next morning (July 2nd) we gunners surveyed the dreadful scene in front of us...it became clear that the Germans always had a commanding view of No Man's land. (The British) attack had been brutally repulsed. Hundreds of dead were strung out like wreckage washed up to a high water-mark. Quite as many died on the enemy wire as on the ground, like fish caught in the net. they hung there in grotesque postures. Some looked as if they were praying; they had died on their knees and the wire had prevented their fall. Machine gun fire had done its terrible work.

**Task 2: Read the two reports and record five things that each reports say about the battle. Then answer the question below.**

Newspaper Article	Eye-witness account of George Coppard

Question: Which source do you trust the most, the eye-witness account or the newspaper article? Why?

**Task 3: This is Field Marshall's Haig last message to his troops in 1919.**

From the information in the source and using all your background knowledge do you think General Haig adequately justifies the use of attrition in order to defeat Germany?

“Each commander seeks to wear down the power of resistance of his opponent and to pin him to his position. The greatest possible pressure against the enemy's whole front must be maintained, then every man, horse and gun is required to co-operate, so as to defeat the enemy and create success. In every stage of the wearing-out struggle losses will necessarily be heavy on both sides, for in it the price of victory is paid. If the opposing forces are equal there is no way to win. When armies of millions are engaged, with the resources of great Empires behind them, it will inevitably be long. To this stage belong the great engagements of 1916 and 1917 which wore down the strength of the German Armies.”