

WWI Primary Sources

The Trenches

Private Pollard wrote about trench life in his memoirs published in 1932.

"The trench, when we reached it, was half full of mud and water. We set to work to try and drain it. Our efforts were hampered by the fact that the French, who had first occupied it, had buried their dead in the bottom and sides. Every stroke of the pick encountered a body. The smell was awful."

Trench Foot

Many soldiers fighting in the First World War suffered from trench foot. This was an infection of the feet caused by cold, wet and unsanitary conditions. In the trenches men stood for hours on end in waterlogged conditions without being able to remove wet socks or boots. The feet would gradually go numb and the skin would turn red or blue. If untreated, trench foot could turn gangrenous and result in amputation.

Sergeant Harry Roberts, Lancashire Fusiliers, interviewed after the war.:

"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. If you are fortunate enough not to lose your feet and the swelling begins to go down. It is then that the intolerable, indescribable agony begins. I have heard men cry and even scream with the pain and many had to have their feet and legs amputated."

Disease

Dysentery, the inflammation of the large intestine caused by contaminated water, was especially a problem in the early stages of the war. The main reason for this was that it was some time before regular supplies of water to the trenches could be organized. Soldiers were supplied with water bottles, that could be refilled when they returned to reserve lines. However, the water-bottle supply was rarely enough for their needs and soldiers in the trenches often depended on impure water collected from shell-holes or other cavities.

An Australian soldier at the Somme in 1916 later wrote about how in the winter men obtained water from ice in shell-holes.

"An axe would be the means of filling the dixies (iron stewing pots) with lumps of ice. We used it for tea several days until one chap noticed a pair of boots sticking out, and discovered they were attached to a body."

Rats

Many men killed in the trenches were buried almost where they fell. If a trench subsided, or new trenches or dugouts were needed, large numbers of decomposing bodies would be found just below the surface. These corpses, as well as the food scraps that littered the trenches, attracted rats. One pair of rats can produce 880 offspring in a year and so the trenches were soon swarming with them. One soldier wrote: "The rats were huge. They were so big they would eat a wounded man if he couldn't defend himself. Two or three rats would always be found on a dead body. They usually went for the eyes first and then they burrowed their way right into the corpse."

Poison Gas

Mustard Gas was first used by the German Army in September 1917. The most lethal of all the poisonous chemicals used during the war, it was almost odorless and took twelve hours to take effect. Mustard Gas was so powerful that only small amounts had to be added to high explosive shells to be effective. Once in the soil, mustard gas remained active for several weeks.

The skin of victims of mustard gas blistered, the eyes became very sore and they began to vomit. Mustard gas caused internal and external bleeding and attacked the bronchial tubes, stripping off the

Dulce et Decorum est
by Wilfred Owen (poet and WWI soldier)
(1893-1918)

Note: The translation of the latin "Dulce et Decorum Est" is "Sweet and fitting it is." The translation of "Pro patria mori" is "To die for one's country."

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 gas-shells dropping softly 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
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.



1. How does Owen's imagery of the soldiers present the conditions of the war?

2. In the poem, what WWI warfare methods and technologies are being described?

3. What are Owen's feelings about the war? Name 2 contextual pieces of evidence from the poem.

4. What is Owen's argument about the complacency of those who believe the war to be a glorious and patriotic duty? Explain your answer with evidence from the poem.