

Hygiene and Medical Concerns: Rats, Lice, and Trench Foot

Source A - Sergeant A. Vine, diary entry (8th August, 1915)

The stench of the dead bodies now is awful as they have been exposed to the sun for several days, many have swollen and burst. The trench is full of other occupants, things with lots of legs, also swarms of rats.

Source B - After the war Stuart Dolden wrote an account of life in the trenches.

The outstanding feature of the trenches was the extraordinary number of rats. The area was infested with them. It was impossible to keep them out of the dugouts. 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. Some were nearly as big as cats. We were filled with an instinctive hatred of them, because however one tried to put the thought of one's mind, one could not help feeling that they fed on the dead.

Source C - Henry Gregory of 119th Machine Gun company was interviewed after the war about life in the trenches.

When we arrived in the trenches we got a shock when the other soldiers took their shirts off. They were catching lice. The men were killing them between their nails. When they saw us looking at this performance with astonishment, one of the men remarked, 'You will soon be as lousy as we are chum!' They spent the better part of an hour in killing lice and scratching themselves. One night, as we lay in bed after doing our two hours' sentry, my friend Jock said 'damn this, I cannot stand it any longer!' He took off his tunic then his shirt. As we sat up in bed watching the shirt he had taken off actually lifting; it was swarming with lice.

Source D - Private George Coppard, *With A Machine Gun to Cambrai* (1969)

A full day's rest allowed us to clean up a bit, and to launch a full scale attack on lice. I sat in a quiet corner of a barn for two hours delousing myself as best I could. The things lay in the seams of trousers, in the deep furrows of long thick woolly pants. A lighted candle applied where they were thickest made them pop like Chinese crackers. After a session of this, my face would be covered with small blood spots from extra big fellows which had popped too vigorously. Lice hunting was called 'chatting'.

Source E - 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.

Source F - At the age of 92, Arthur Savage was asked about his memories of life in the trenches.

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.

Source G [Feet suffering from Trench Foot](#)

Concussion and PTSD: Shell Shock

Source H - Corporal Henry Gregory served with the 119 Machine Gun Company.

It was while I was in this Field Hospital that I saw the first case of shell-shock. The enemy opened fire about dinner time, as usual, with his big guns. As soon as the first shell came over, the shell-shock case nearly went mad. He screamed and raved, and it took eight men to hold him down on the stretcher. With every shell he would go into a fit of screaming and fight to get away.

It is heartbreaking to watch a shell-shock case. The terror is indescribable. The flesh on their faces shakes in fear, and their teeth continually chatter. Shell-shock was brought about in many ways; loss of sleep, continually being under heavy shell fire, the torment of the lice, irregular meals, nerves always on end, and the thought always in the man's mind that the next minute was going to be his last.

The Trenches

Source I– [Cross section of a trench, look at Source 20](#)

Source J– Captain Impey of the Royal Sussex Regiment wrote this account in 1915.

The trenches were wet and cold and at this time some of them did not have duckboards or dug-outs.

The battalion lived in mud and water.

Source K– 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.

Source L– letter to his father, Jonathan Priestley (December, 1915)

The communication trenches are simply canals, up to the waist in some parts, the rest up to the knees. There are only a few dug-outs and those are full of water or falling in. Three men were killed this way from falling dug-outs. I haven't had a wash since we came into these trenches and we are all mud from head to foot.

Source M– Bruce Bairnsfather, *Bullets and Billets* (1916)

It was quite the worse trench I have ever seen. A number of men were in it, standing and leaning, silently enduring the following conditions. It was quite dark. It was raining, and the trench contained over three feet of water. The men, therefore, were standing up to the waist in water. They were all wet through and through, with a great deal of their equipment below the water at the bottom of the trench. There they were, taking it all as a necessary part of a great game; not a grumble nor a comment.