

Bombardment

Major Walter Vignoles, Grimsby Chums, attempted to describe this great artillery noise in his letters:

“The noise is terrific, as we are just in front of some of the guns, the shells passing over us. I cannot describe the noise accurately; it is a series or succession of huge bangs, developing at times into a continuous roar. This ceaseless bombardment of the enemy lines has been going on now for some days, and as our fellows say, we have given him some stick. The whole air throbs with the sound; it seems to come in huge sudden stabs. It is impressive to watch the vicious puffs of smoke as the shells explode on the enemy’s lines, smoke of all colors from white to green and black and yellow; at night times it is even more impressive as the lines are outlined in the darkness with the bursting of shells.”



Killing: A Moral Decision

Private Jack Sweeney killed two Germans during a trench raid on the British lines in the small hours of 21 November 1916. He was in a dug-out with the two other officers servants when the raid began after a flurry of shells and shouting.

“They began to throw bombs down into the dug-out but we were safe as long as we kept clear of the stairs. Presently I heard someone coming down the stairs – I shouted “Who are you?” He said something but I pulled my trigger and he said no more, he rolled down to me with two men very much alive following him up. I let go at them, one I killed, the other died later, the other two servants shot five, and one was wounded.

“The German that I shot who died afterwards was a fine looking man, I was there when he died, poor chap – I did feel sorry but it was my life or his. He was speaking but none of us could understand a word he said. To tell you the truth I had a tear myself – I thought to myself perhaps he has a mother or dad or a sweetheart and a lot of things like that, I was really sorry I did it but God knows I could not help myself.”

Lieutenant R. A. Chell, 10th Essex Regt, killed his first enemy in September 1915 at Mametz on the Somme. He spotted a bulletproof sniper’s plate on the other side of a newly created crater about seventy yards away.

“After about fifteen minutes quiet watching – with my rifle in a ready position – I saw a cap-less bald head come up behind the plate. The day was bright and clear and I hadn’t the slightest difficulty in taking a most deliberate aim at the very center of that bright and shiny plate—but somehow I couldn’t press the trigger: to shoot such a ‘sitter’ so deliberately in cold blood required more moral courage than I possessed. After a good look round he went down and I argued with myself about my duty. My bald headed opponent had been given a very sporting chance and if he were fool enough to come up again I must shoot him unflinchingly. I considered it and in minutes he came up again with added boldness and I just did my duty. The instantaneousness of that man’s death: aim and trigger pressure were as deliberate as when I’d been grouping at 100 yards at test ranges in 1913 and 1914 and that bald head was a perfect target. Still, I felt funny for days and the shooting of another German at ‘stand-to’ the next morning did nothing to remove those horrid feelings I had.”

From Private Paul Hubbard:

“We had strict orders not to take prisoners, no matter if wounded. My first job was when I had finished cutting some of their wire away, to empty my magazine on three Germans that came out of their deep dugouts, bleeding badly, and put them out of their misery. They cried for mercy, but I had my orders, they had no feeling whatever for us poor chaps.”

Private, later Sergeant, Hubbard committed suicide in 1929: the official verdict at his inquest was that his death was the result of shellshock. According to his family, the episode that above all preyed on his mind was this terrible incident on 1 July 1916. It is fair to say that the Somme continued to claim its victims long after the battle was officially over: Hubbard was one of them.

Trench Life

Trench Foot

A flooded dug-out in a front-line trench occupied by the English in March 1917: it was conditions such as these that gave rise to trench foot. Sergeant Harry Roberts spent six days and nights holding a flooded strategic front-line trench before the opening of the some offensive and came out with trench foot. This is his description of that painful condition:

“If you have never had trench feet described to you, I will tell you. 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. I was one of the lucky ones but one more day in that trench and it may have been too late.”



The Rats

There are millions!! Some are huge fellows, nearly as big as a cat. Several of our men were awakened to find a rat snuggled down under the blanket alongside them!

- Major Walter Vignoles

There are the greatest old rats in the trenches that you ever saw. They are so tame they won't run away but just toddle along in front of you just out of reach. One of our men went up to it the other day and punted it like a football.

- Second Lieutenant Geoffrey Lillywhite

Where the rats came from was a mystery. Good regiments like ours kept their trenches clean and tidy, so far as they could, and the only unwelcome smell was the salutary if unpleasant one of chloride of lime in all the appropriate places. But they were everywhere. There was one old man who was quite well known in our sector. I met him one day in a communication trench. He could walk on top of the mud into which I sink every step. He was enormous, with ferocious and venomous eyes, and I freely admit I flattened myself against the trench wall and let him go past, which he did with out turning his head.

- Lieutenant Cyril Drummond, 135 Battery Royal Field Artillery

Whilst asleep during the night we were frequently awakened by rats running over us. When this happened too often for my liking I would lie on my back and wait for a rat to linger on my legs, then violently have my legs upwards, throwing the rat into the air; occasionally I would hear a grunt when the rat would land.

- Driver R. L. Venables

In one of the dug-outs the other night, two men were smoking by the light of the candle, very quiet. All at once candle moved and flickered. Looking up they saw a rat was dragging it away. Another time we were very quiet and saw a rat washing itself like a cat just behind the candle, as big as a rabbit.

- Private Frank Bass

Gas

"A strange green vapor, a surging mass of agonized fugitives, a four-mile gap without a living defender." So wrote Liddell Hart of 22 April 1915, the date of the first significant use of poison gas in war. The location was the Ypres Salient. The gas, launched by the Germans on a favorable wind at dusk, was chlorine. The bulk of it fell on an Algerian division, which panicked and took a French territorial division with it. Only darkness, the curious unreadiness of the Germans to exploit their advantage, and the prompt action of the Canadians in attempting to seal the gap prevented a worse disaster for the Allied Powers.

Lance Sergeant Elmer Cotton described the effects of chlorine gas in his 1915 notebook:

"It produces a flooding of the lungs – it is an equivalent death to drowning only on dry land. The effects are these – a splitting headache and terrific thirst (to drink water is instant death), a knife-edge pain in the lungs and the coughing up of a greenish froth off the stomach and the lungs, ending finally in insensibility and death. The color of the skin turns from white turns a greenish black and yellow, the tongue sticks out and the eyes assume a glassy stare. It is a fiendish death to die."

Cotton was not talking from theory; he himself experienced a gas attack in 1915. His company of Northumberland Fusiliers was attached to a battalion for trench training when they received orders to reinforce the front. On the way, they passed an advanced dressing station:

"Propped up against a wall was a dozen men – all gassed – their colors were black, green, and blue, tongues hanging out and eyes staring – one or two were dead and others beyond human aid, some were coughing up green froth from their lungs – as we advanced we passed many more gassed men lying in ditches and gutterways – shells bursting all around."

A gas
attack in
1917.





A soldier suffering from burns from mustard gas.