

# Life in the Trenches: WW I

## Body Lice

Men in the trenches suffered from *lice*. Where possible, the army arranged for the men to have baths in huge vats of hot water while their clothes were being put through delousing machines. Unfortunately, this rarely worked. A fair proportion of the eggs remained in the clothes and within two or three hours of the clothes being put on again, a man's body heat would hatch them out.

As well as causing frenzied scratching, lice also carried a disease called pyrexia or trench fever. The first symptoms were shooting pains in the shins, and were followed by a very high fever. Although the disease did not kill, it did stop soldiers from fighting and accounted for about 15% of all cases of sickness in the British Army.

### 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. We were all at it, for none of us escaped their vile attentions. The things lay in the seams of trousers, in the deep furrows of long thick wooly pants, and seemed impregnable in their deep entrenchments. 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.' In parcels from home, it was usual to receive a tin of supposedly death-dealing powder, but the lice thrived on the stuff.

### Private Stuart Dolded on his experiences in the trenches.

We had to sleep fully dressed, of course, this was very uncomfortable with the pressure of ammunition on one's chest restricted breathing; furthermore, when a little warmth was obtained, the vermin used to get busy, and for some unexplained reason they always seemed to get lively in the portion of one's back that lay underneath the belt and was the most inaccessible spot. The only way to obtain relief was to get out of the dugout, put a rifle barrel between the belt and rub up and down like a donkey on a gatepost. This stopped it for a bit, but as soon as one got back into the dugout and was getting reasonably warm, so would the little brutes get going again.

## Trench Rats

Corpses of dead soldiers and food scraps that littered the trenches attracted rats. One pair of rats could produce 880 offspring in a year, so the trenches were soon swarming with them.

Some of these rats grew extremely large. The rats became very bold and would attempt to take food from the pockets of sleeping men.

**Stuart Dolden, 1920**

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 on the food that they pilfered from us, and anything they could pick up in or around the trenches; they were bloated 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 out of one's mind, one could not help feeling that they fed on the dead.

**Private George Coppard, *With a Machine Gun to Cambrai* (1969)**

Rats bred by the tens of thousands and lived on the fat of the land. When we were sleeping in funk holes the things ran over us, played about, copulated and fouled our scraps of food, their young squeaking incessantly. There was no proper system of waste disposal in trench life. Empty tins of all kinds were flung away over the top on both sides of the trench. Millions of tins were thus available for all the rats in France and Belgium in hundreds of miles of trenches. During brief moments of quiet at night, one could hear a continuous rattle of tins moving against each other. The rats were turning them over. What happened to the rats under heavy shell-fire was a mystery, but their powers of survival kept place with each new weapon, including poison gas.

**Richard Beasley, interviewed in 1993.**

If you left your food, the rats would soon grab it. Those rats were fearless. Sometimes we would shoot the filthy swines. But you would be put on a charge for wasting ammo, if the sergeant caught you.

Answer the following questions using the information above.

1. Why were body lice such a problem for the soldiers in the trenches?
2. What did the army do to try and rid the soldiers of lice? Did it work?
3. How did the soldiers remove the lice? What did they do for temporary comfort?
4. Why were there so many Trench Rats during World War I?
5. How could you tell if the rats were nearby at night?
6. Why didn't the soldiers shoot the rats?

