

# TRENCH WARFARE



# **Mud and Rain**

**By Siegfried Sassoon**

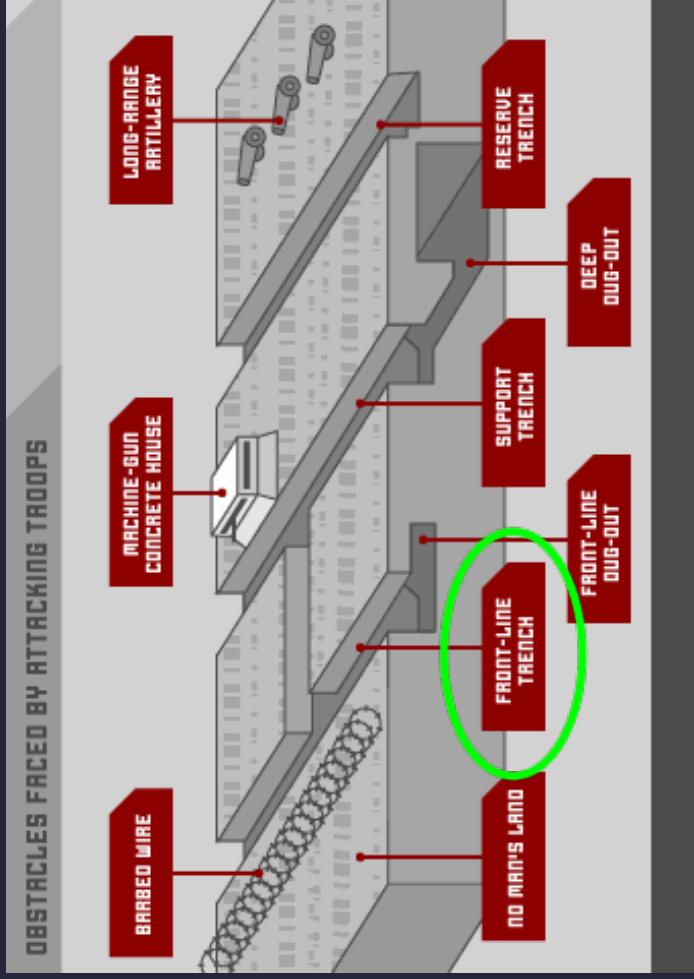
**Mud and rain and wretchedness and  
blood.  
Why should jolly soldier-boys complain?  
God made these before the roofless Flood -  
Mud and rain.**

**Mangling cramps and bullets through the  
brain,  
Jesus never guessed them when He died.  
Jesus had a purpose for His pain,  
Ay, like abject beasts we shed our blood,  
Often asking if we die in vain.  
Gloom conceals us in a soaking sack --  
Mud and rain.**

## I've a Little Wet Home in a Trench

I've a little wet home in a trench  
Where the rainstorms continually drench,  
There's a dead cow close by  
With her feet in, towards the sky  
And she gives off a terrible stench.

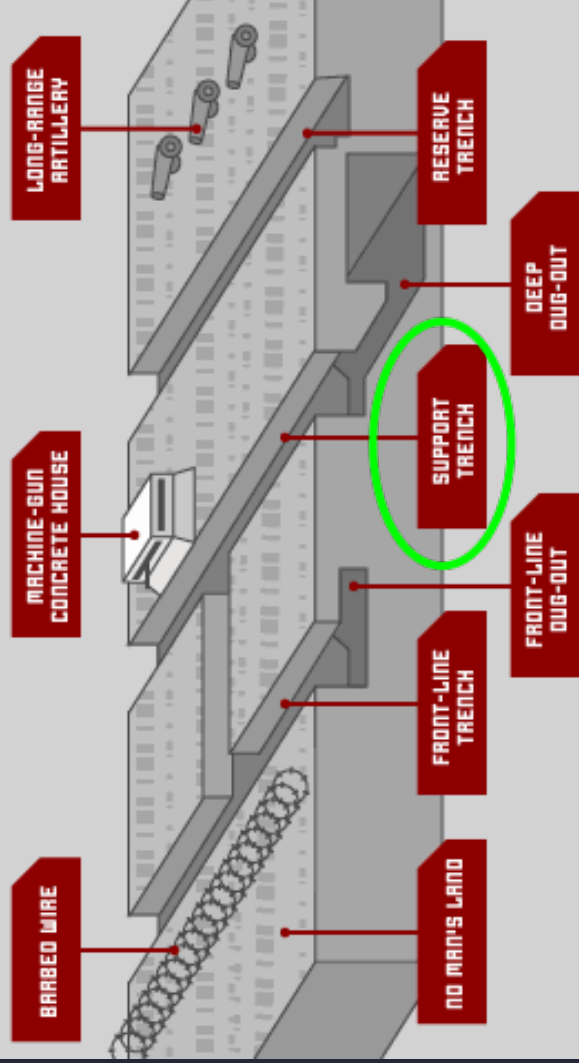
Underneath, in the place of a floor,  
There's a mass of wet mud and some straw,  
But with shells dropping there,  
There's no place to compare,  
With my little wet home in the trench.



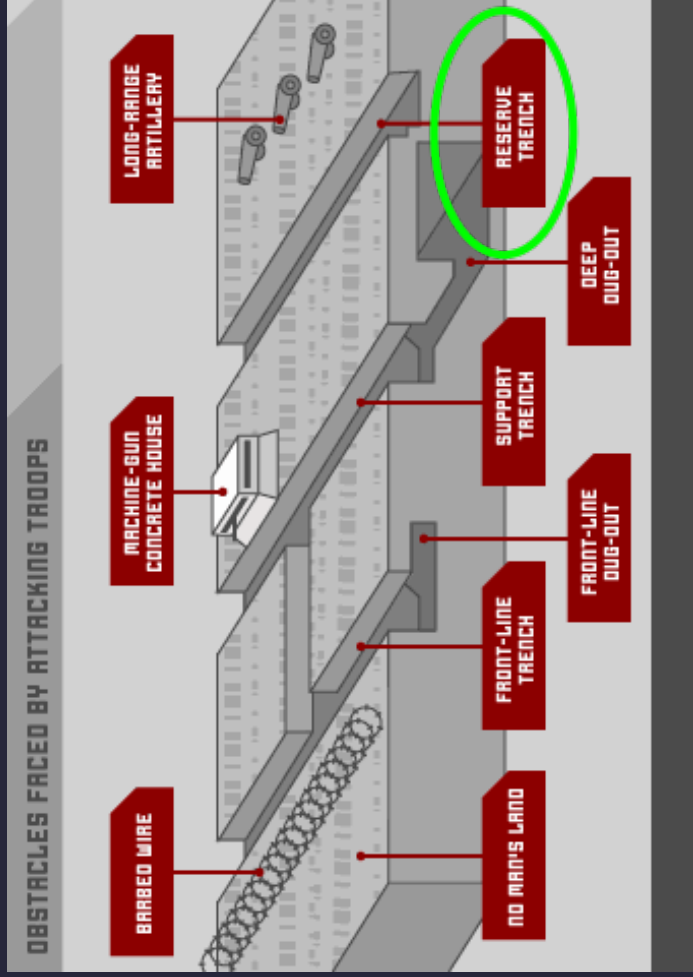
The first, the front-line trench (or firing-and-attack trench), was located from the 50 yards to 1 mile from the German's front trench.



## OBSTACLES FACED BY ATTACKING TROOPS



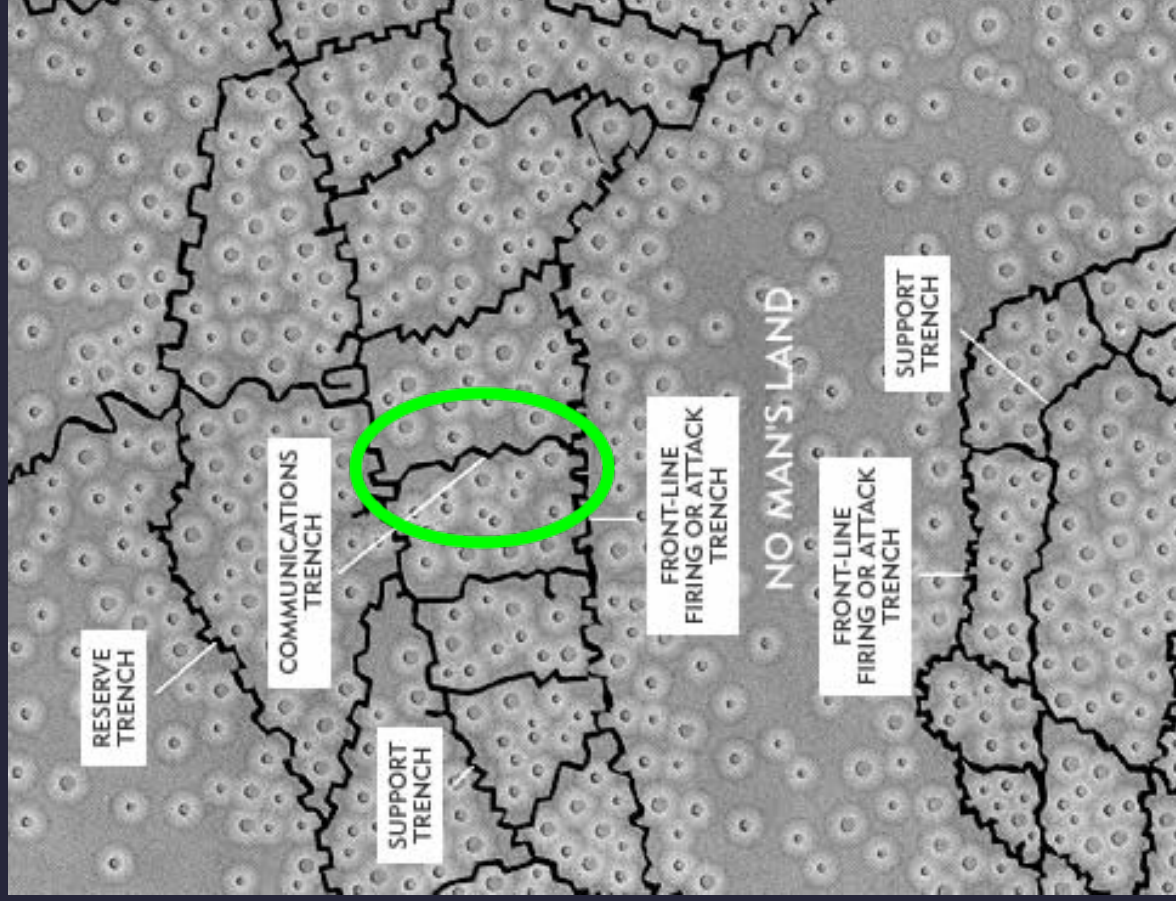
Several hundred yards behind the front-line trench was the support trench, with men and supplies that could immediately assist those on the front line.



The reserve trench was dug several hundred yards further back and contained men and supplies that were available in emergencies should the first trenches be overrun.

To keep morale as high as possible and to keep the soldiers on the front as fresh as possible, the British established a three-week rotation schedule. A week in the front trench was followed by a week in the support trench, which was followed by a week in the reserve trenches. During this third week, the men could relax with sports, concerts and plays, keeping their minds away from life on the front.



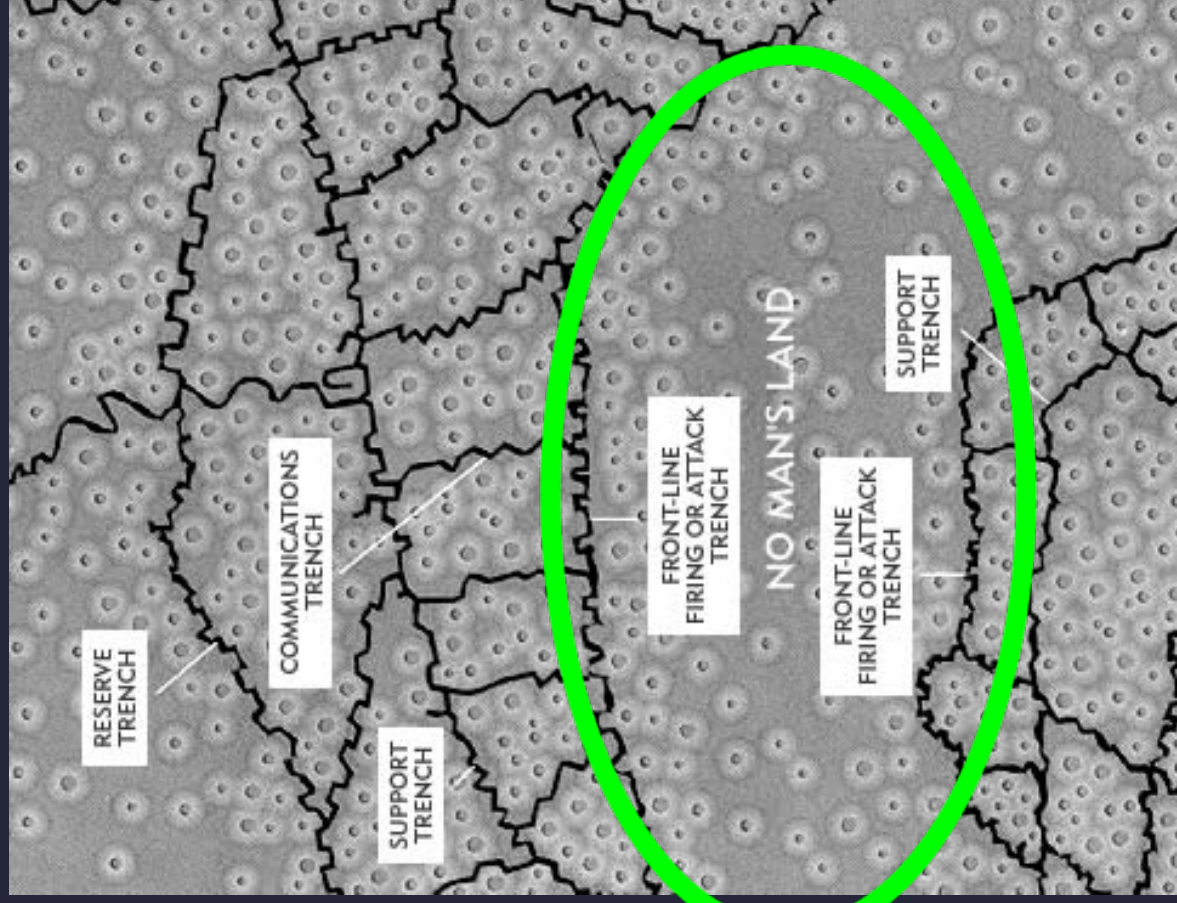


Connecting these trenches were communication trenches, which allowed movement of messages, supplies, and men among the trenches. Some underground networks connected gun emplacements and bunkers with the communication trenches.

By mid-November 1914, the territory between the opposing front trenches was marked with huge craters caused by the shelling; nearly all vegetation was destroyed. Whenever possible, both sides filled this land with barbed wire to slow down any rapid advances by the enemy. The machine gun and the new long-range rifles made movement in this area almost impossible.

"[the bodies] we could not get from the German wire continued to swell ... the color of the dead faces changed from white to yellow-gray, to red, to purple, to green to black."

Robert Graves, poet, novelist, critic





# Timing of Movements at the Front

Both sides quickly recognized that assaults against the enemy trenches were suicide if begun in broad daylight, so attacks tended to take place just before dawn or right at dawn. Poison gases tended to be more effective in the mornings, as the colder air and absence of wind allowed the gases to stay closer to the ground for longer periods of time.

Except for artillery shelling, daytime was relatively safe for the soldiers on the front line. Once the sun went down, men crawled out of their trenches to conduct raids, investigate the layout of the terrain, and eavesdrop near the enemy lines to pick up information on their strengths, weakness and strategies.

## Poison Gas

- Chlorine gas: Within seconds of inhaling its vapour it destroyed the victim's respiratory organs, bringing on choking attacks.
- Phosgene gas: Had many of the same effects as chlorine except that it did not cause the choking and coughing that chlorine gas did, therefore more of it was inhaled. The effects of phosgene gas often appeared about 48 hours after inhalation.
- Mustard gas: Caused internal and external blisters on the victim. The chemical remained potent in soil for weeks after its release. This could backfire on troops who used the gas and then captured the trench they had attacked with the gas.



## THE FOOD

It was often difficult to get hot food to the front lines so rations consisted of bully beef (preserved meat), tea, hard biscuits, and bread which was often stale by the time it got to the soldiers.

The soldiers in the trenches often drank impure water that was collected in shell holes or other cavities leading to dysentery.



# Lice



- Lice were a never-ending problem, breeding in the seams of filthy clothing and causing men to itch unceasingly.
- Even when clothing was periodically washed and deloused, lice eggs invariably remained hidden in the seams; within a few hours of the clothes being re-worn the body heat generated would cause the eggs to hatch.
- Lice caused Trench Fever, a particularly painful disease that began suddenly with severe pain followed by high fever. Recovery - away from the trenches - took up to twelve weeks. Lice were not actually identified as the culprit of Trench Fever until 1918.
- A lit candle was fairly effective in killing lice but it took a great deal of skill not to set your hair on fire in the process



## Rat Facts from the Trenches

- Rats would often grow to the size of cats.
- They would become increasingly bold running across the faces of sleeping soldiers and stealing food that had been put down only moments before.
- Soldiers were not supposed to shoot the rats because it was considered a waste of ammunition.
- It wouldn't have made a difference anyway; a single pair of rats could produce 880 offspring in one year.



## Seasonal Problems

In the winter, the ground would freeze and become hard. The discomfort was probably not much compared to the fall when the rains would often fill the trenches with water to waist height.



## A few extra facts

- The British Army treated 20,000 soldiers for trench foot during the winter of 1914-15.
- A total of 3,894 men in the British Army were convicted of self-inflicted wounds. A firing-squad offense -- none were executed, but all served prison terms.
- One-third of all casualties on the Western Front may have been killed or wounded in a trench.

