

TOPIC 5: Trench Warfare

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

One image above all dominates the memory of the war on the Western Front — that of the trenches. For most of the war, after the initial more fluid battles of late 1914 and before the more open warfare that began in March 1918, the Allies and the Germans engaged in a long period of static war. From the North Sea off Belgium to the Swiss border, there stretched through Belgium and France major lines of defence which, at periodic intervals, each side would try to break through in the search for a decisive victory. In some areas of mountain and dense forest the lines were lightly held, but in others elaborate defences were constructed.

In the area of northern France held largely by British Empire forces, the trench system usually consisted of three parallel lines — front, support and reserve — connected by communications trenches. The line itself was never straight, but zigzagged to prevent a long stretch of trench being exposed to enemy fire if attacked and temporarily captured. Out beyond the trenches, thousands of kilometres of barbed wire were laid to slow enemy assaults. Behind the lines, thousands of artillery pieces were assembled on both sides to pound enemy positions and provide support in any major attacks.

Until 1918, neither side was able to bring back to the battlefield the mobility that cavalry had provided in earlier centuries, and both sides fought costly actions as they tried to break through these strong defensive lines. These were the great attrition battles of the war, whose names were remembered with horror by those who fought in them or who had lost relatives in them — the Somme, Verdun and Passchendaele. On the first day of the Somme battle alone, 1 July 1916, the British Army sustained 60,000 casualties, one-third of whom were killed.

Life in the trenches was generally miserable. Not only was there constant danger from enemy shell and sniper fire, but there was little protection from the elements. The winter of 1916–1917 on the Somme was a particularly severe one for the Australians, as described by historian Bill Gammage:

Boiling tea froze within twenty paces, hands exposed were numbed after five seconds, bread could not be cut with a knife, and water had to be chopped with an axe and carried in blocks to the line.

*Out beyond
the trenches,
thousands of
kilometres of
barbed wire were
laid to slow
enemy assaults.*

AIMS

Students at Level 1/2/3:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Know the main features/characteristics of trench warfare• Identify the main weapons used• Identify differences between the theory and the reality of trench warfare• Empathise with the experiences of soldiers in combat
Students at Level 2/3:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Critically analyse a range of representations of war

CLASSROOM STRATEGIES

Level 1/2/3	A key concept in this topic is for students to try to empathise with soldiers facing danger. A useful starting exercise might be to ask students to imagine that there is a fire in their home. There are family and friends trapped. How might they react? Would they run, stay and try to help, go and get help, leave it to others, or something else? While an artificial way of trying to explore the concept, it will help students to start to think about different possible reactions such as were experienced by soldiers in the trenches.
Level 2/3	A key element here is for students to understand that there are different ways of representing the soldiers' experience. Some emphasise the bravery, the courage and mateship. Others emphasise the horror and brutality of war. Both are represented in this topic and can be discussed by students.



AWM E01220

Australian artillerymen passing along a duckboard track in Chateau Wood, a portion of one of the battlegrounds in the Ypres area, 29 October 1917.

Soldiers on the Western Front regularly fought against the enemy.

This was called 'trench warfare', because when they were preparing to attack, the soldiers lived in trenches dug into the ground. When it was time to attack they would come out of their trenches and move towards the enemy trenches. After the attack they might be moved to the rear to rest and recover for a period of time.

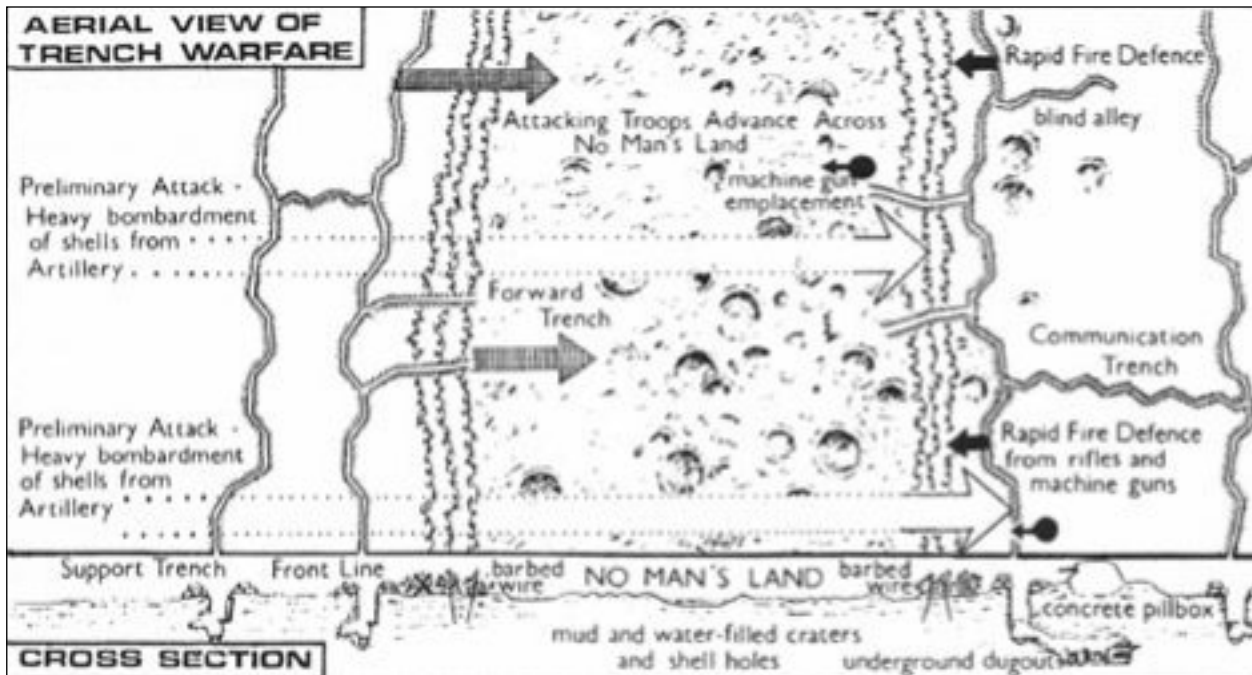
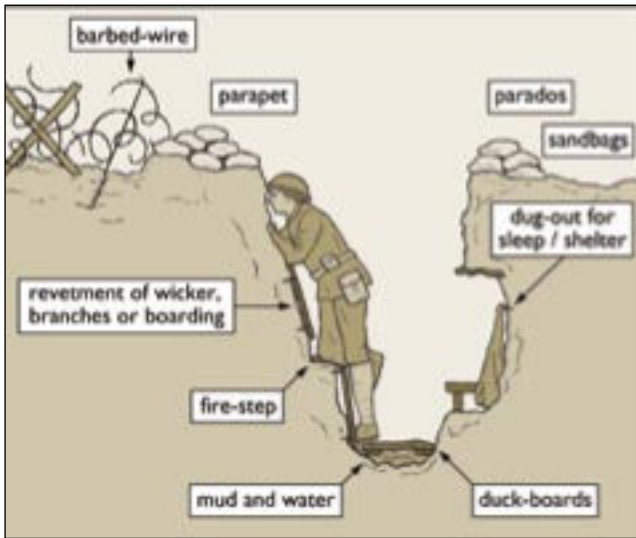


Illustration by David Simkin, *Contemporary Accounts of the First World War* by John Simkin, Tressell Publications, 1981 and in John Laffin, *Western Front 1916-1917, The Price of Honour*, Time-Life Australia and John Ferguson, Sydney, 1987, page 18.

- Think about what a battle might have been like. What sounds would there be, what smells, what would the soldiers see? Write down some words that describe what you imagine a battle might be like.

Look at the sketch of a trench, and the photographs of soldiers in trenches. Then answer the questions that follow.



AWM EZ0009



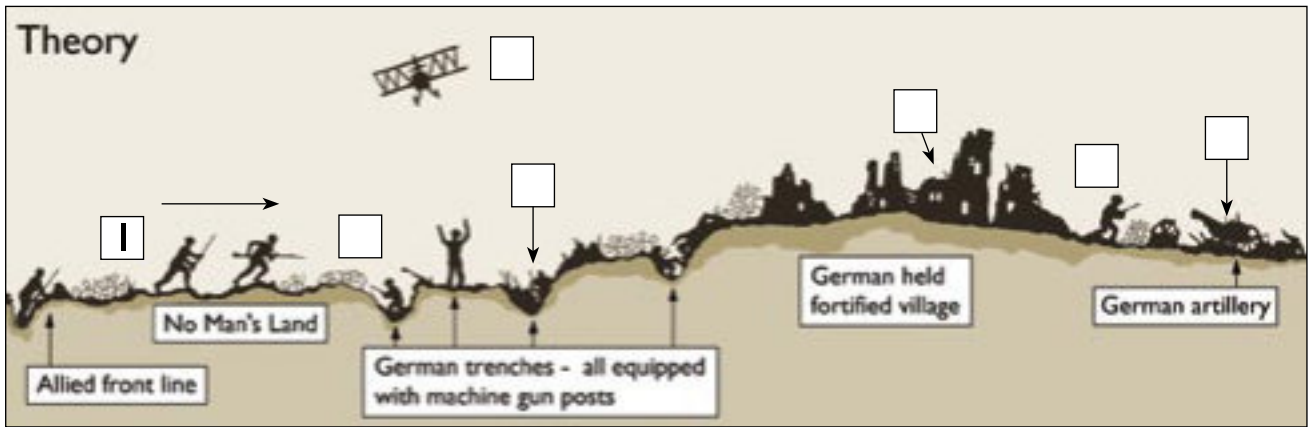
AWM E00739



AWM E00825

- 1) What is the main purpose of a trench?
- 1) Do you think there would be problems with:
 - cooking
 - water
 - washing
 - sleeping
 - keeping warm
 - keeping cool
 - flies
 - boredom
- 1) The photographs show different types of trenches and conditions. Why do you think these differences existed?
- 1) List the words that best describe life in the trenches to you.

Look at the sketch of soldiers in the trenches below. It shows the soldiers on the left (Allied soldiers) attacking the soldiers on the right (German soldiers).



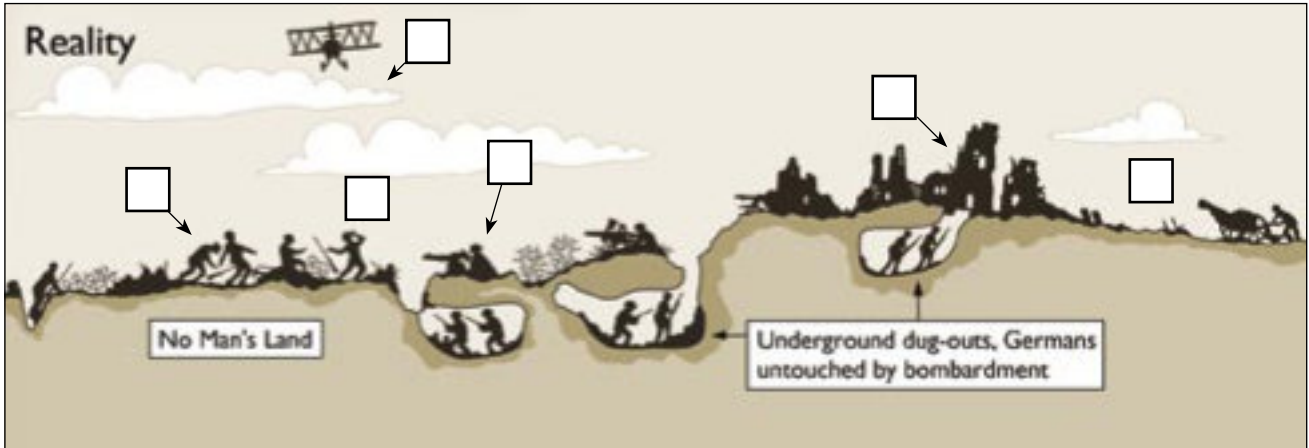
Here are seven descriptions of what the Allied soldiers are doing. They are not in the correct order.

- 1. Number them in the correct order from 1-7 that tells the story of what is happening.
- 2. Then write the number in the box where that action is happening.

One example has been done for you.

1	Allied soldiers are advancing.
	The Allied soldiers destroy the German guns.
	The Allied soldiers have an aeroplane above the area that tells them what is happening.
	The Germans run away.
	The Allied soldiers cut the enemy barbed wire.
	The Allied soldiers destroy the enemy trenches and capture the Germans.
	The Allied soldiers destroy the enemy village.

Now look at the same scene, as it probably happened. The Allied soldiers have not done what they wanted to do.



Why did their attack fail? Look at numbers 1-6, and write in what the sketch shows happening. For example, you might write — ‘Some Allied soldiers are shot before they can get to the enemy.’

1	
2	
3	
4	
5	
6	

What was battle like for the soldiers?

▶ Look at these photographs and list your impressions and reactions to them about what war was like.



AWM E00807



AWM E03149



AWM E00777



AWM E01056

THE LANDSCAPE

This type of warfare also had an effect on the physical environment of the area.

- 1 Look at the illustrations below and make a list of words that describe the effect of the war on the landscape.



Aerial view of the town of Zonnebeke, 7 June 1917, before a major action. AWM J00188



Aerial view of the town of Zonnebeke, 14 September 1917, after a major action. AWM J00189



Mule team bogged in thigh deep mud near Potijze Farm in the Ypres Sector, 19 October 1917. AWM E00962A



Scene on the Menin road beyond Ypres, 14 September 1917. AWM E00700A



Pozières, France, before the war. AWM G01534i



Pozières, France, destroyed during a battle in 1916. AWM A05776

- 1 List a number of words that describe the environment during war.
- 1 How do you think soldiers might have felt during trench warfare?
- 1 How do you think they reacted to battle conditions?

Some soldiers left records of how they felt about and reacted to trench warfare.

- 1) Look at the seven descriptions of aspects of battle from Australian soldiers who experienced it. In a group, have each member read one or more of the extracts. That person has to report to all other members on the extract/s they have read. They must explain what the document is telling us about the nature of battle, what personal qualities the writer shows, and what the reader's reaction is to that extract — for example you might be proud of the bravery of the person, or shocked at the pain that is described, or ashamed of the brutality that might be shown. After all members have reported on their documents, complete this sentence: 'These extracts tell me that ...'

SOURCE A

I can't sleep now because –
Six shells are bursting around here every minute
Guns are belching out shells, with a thunderous sound each time
The ground is shaking with each explosion
I am wet and the ground on which I rest is wet
My feet are cold, in fact I'm all cold with my two skimpy blankets
I am covered with dirt
I am hungry
I see no chance for a better tomorrow.

SOURCE B

One of our officers got shell shock under all the shelling and he cried like a child. Some were calling out for their mother.

SOURCE C

The mud was so bad that last time we were here one of our officers rode into a shell hole and he disappeared. He had to be pulled out by ropes.

SOURCE D

I am on my way to hospital suffering trench feet due to being up to my knees in water for 72 hours.

SOURCE E

The country around here is very much knocked about by Artillery and shell holes are the worry of our lives – one cannot walk 10 metres in the dark without tumbling into one. Barbed wire entanglements are scattered about, and at night we have to keep our eyes open, otherwise we get caught in it ... Grave yards are everywhere and no matter where one looks he sees little white crosses.

SOURCE F

Private William Harold Aundrick, Private Arthur Corbett, Private Hubert Allen Nason, all 25th Battalion, 11 November 1916.

During attack on German position North of FLERS during 5th and 6th November, 1916 these men upon orders given, worked continuously for 30 hours carrying in wounded from NO MAN'S LAND despite heavy machine gun, shell and snipers' fire. They showed great determination under most trying circumstances working mostly in daylight. They are suffering still from their exertions. Military Medal each.

SOURCE G

24/8/16

Dearest Beat and Bill,

Just a line ... you must be prepared for the worst to happen any day. It is no use trying to hide things. I am in terrible agony ... Tomorrow I shall know the worst as the dressing [on his wounded leg] was to be left for 3 days and tomorrow is the third day it smells rotten. I was hit running out to see the other officer who was with me but badly wounded ... I got two machine gun bullets in the thigh ... The Stretcher Bearers could not get the wounded out any way other than over the top and across the open. They had to carry me four miles with a man waving a red cross flag in front and the Germans did not open fire on us. Well dearest I have had a rest, the pain is getting worse and worse ... So cheer up dear I could write on a lot but I am nearly unconscious. Give my love to Dear Bill and yourself, do take care of yourself and him.

Your loving husband

Bert

Lieutenant HW Crowle died a few hours after writing this letter.

(Source A, extract from the letters of John A Raws, AWM 2DRL/0481;

Sources B-D and G, adapted from Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1990, chapter 6;

Source E adapted from KM Lyall, *Letters From an Anzac Gunner*, KM Lyall, 1990, page 72;

Source F, *Commonwealth of Australia Gazette*, 11 October 1917)

Here are more descriptions of trench warfare from Australian soldiers.

- 1 Look at the descriptions of aspects of battle from Australian soldiers who experienced it. For each, complete the sentence 'These extracts help me understand that...'

SOURCE A

I shall never forget the mad intoxication one seems to be in [during battle] ... you see absolutely no danger & will do almost anything, for the roar of the guns are ringing in your ears, & you can smell the salty fumes from the powder stinging your nostrils, & ... the shouts of the boys & the ... ghostly lights of the many coloured flares ... these are moments when I reckon a man lives 10 minutes of this seems to be at the time worth a year of ordinary life, but the reaction sets in afterwards & nearly all men feel a faintness come over them ... but this don't last long either & you are soon itching for another smack at the rotten Hun.

SOURCE B

Falling everywhere & the boys struggling through the mud bogged nearly to the knees ... [In the German wire, I] got badly cut all over & ended up by getting hung up in the staff for all the world like a sack of wool chucked onto a heap of barb wire, but I felt nothing at the time for my blood was running hot & we only thought of getting in their trench, the fighting by this time was very fierce, shells, mortars, & worse than all liquid fire bombs were falling among us like hail ... I had one of the most thrilling minutes of my life for I was rushing ... down a shallow trench ... When ... a Hun rushed out at me & made a desperate lunge at my body. ... his bayonet slid down my rifle & stuck in the fleshy part of my leg ... a sharp stinging pain went through my body ... but I kept my block & before he could draw his rifle back for another attempt I shot him dead.

SOURCE C

All day long the ground rocked & swayed backwards and forwards from the concussion ... men were driven stark staring mad & more than one of them rushed out of the trench over towards the Germans ... Any amount of them could be seen crying and sobbing like children their nerves completely gone ... We were nearly all in a state of silliness & half dazed but still the Australians refused to give ground ... Men were buried by the dozen, but were frantically dug out again some dead and some alive.

SOURCE D

There were dead and wounded everywhere ... I had to sit on top of a dead man as there was no picking and choosing ... I saw a shell lob about twelve yards away and it ... lifted [two men] clean up in the air for about 6 feet and they simply dropped back dead ... one or two of the chaps got shell shock and others got really frightened it was piteous to see them ... One great big chap got away as soon as he reached the firing line and could not be found ... I saw him in the morning in a dug out and he was white with fear and shaking like a leaf.

(All sources quoted in Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1990, pages 171-2, 180, 191-2, 283)

One soldier, Lieutenant John Raws, was a journalist before the war. He wrote several revealing letters to family members before he was killed in 1916. Here are some extracts from those letters.

- “You have no idea of the hell and horror of a great advance, old fellow, and I hope you never will have. We fought and lived as we stood, day and night, without even overcoats to put on at night & with very little food. The place was not littered but covered with dead & as we were under continuous fire & were moving about a lot, and when still were in very narrow, shallow trenches, we could do no burying. The last meal I had was one I shook from a dead German.”
- “One feels on a battlefield such as this one can never survive, or that if the body lives the brain must go forever. For the horrors one sees and the never-ending shock of the shells is more than can be borne. Hell must be a home to it.”
- “The Australian casualties have been very heavy – fully 50 per cent in our brigade, for the ten or eleven days. I lost, in three days, my brother and two best friends, and in all six out of seven of all my officer friends (perhaps a score in number) who went into the scrap – all killed. Not one was buried, and some died in great agony. It was impossible to help the wounded at all in some sectors. We could fetch them in, but could not get them away. And often we had to put them out on the parapet to permit movement in the shallow, narrow, crooked trenches. The dead were everywhere. There had been no burying in the sector I was in for a week before we went there.”
- “One or two of my friends stood splendidly, like granite rocks round which the seas stormed in vain. They were all junior officers. But many other fine men broke to pieces. Everyone called it shell shock. But shell shock is very rare. What 90 per cent get is justifiable funk, due to the collapse of the helm – self-control!”
- “My battalion has been at it for eight days and one-third of it is left – all shattered at that. And they’re sticking it still, incomparable heroes all. We are lousy, stinking, ragged, unshaven, sleepless. Even when we’re back a bit we can’t sleep for our own guns. I have one puttee, a dead man’s helmet, another dead man’s gas protector, a dead man’s bayonet. My tunic is rotten with other men’s blood and partly splattered with a comrade’s brains. It is horrible but why should you people at home not know?”
- “We got away as best we could. I was again in the rear going back and again we were cut off and lost. I was buried twice, and thrown down several times – buried with dead and dying. The ground was covered with bodies in all stages of decay and mutilation, and I would, after struggling free from the earth, pick up a body by me to try to lift him out with me, and find him a decayed corpse. I pulled a head off – was covered with blood. The horror was indescribable.”
- “Shrapnel, minewerfers, whizz-bangs, bombs, lachrymose shells, gas shells, - and thousands of gaping dead. The stench, and the horridness of it can but be mentioned. I have sat on corpses, walked on corpses and pillaged corpses. I got many interesting German souvenirs and could have secured cartloads from their trenches, but I lost most that I took, and usually was too busy to pick up anything. I lost nearly all my equipment and clothes and with them my curiosities but I brought back one bonzer souvenir that I did not expect to bring back – myself.”

(Letters of Lieutenant John A Raws, AWM 2DRL/0481)

- ▮ Are there any aspects of Lieutenant Raws’ experiences and reactions that surprise you?
- ▮ Were all soldiers brave? Did all show courage? Discuss your ideas.
- ▮ For soldiers who survived the war, what problems can you anticipate they might face after the war?



AWM E00572

Captain C EW Bean, Official War Correspondent, in Gird trench, near Gueudecourt in France, during the winter of 1916-1917.

We rely on images for information about what war was like. Images are representations — meaning that they are somebody's version of what it was like. Representations rely on selecting some key elements to present to the viewer, and often are created to pass on a message.

Look at the following representations of war on the Western Front as experienced by Australians and answer these questions on each one:

- What does the image show?
- What are they doing?
- What message do you think the images give to the viewer?
- Who is in it?
- What are your reactions to it?

PHOTOGRAPHS

The top image is not a single photograph, but a composite of several. The photographer, Frank Hurley, explained why he created such photographs:

To include the event on a single negative, I have tried and tried, but the results are hopeless. Everything is on such a vast scale. Figures are scattered. The atmosphere is dense with haze and smoke. Shells will not burst where required. It might as well be a rehearsal in a paddock. It is impossible to secure full effects of this bloody war without composite pictures. It's unfair to our soldiers.

(War photographer Frank Hurley, quoted in Lennard Bickel, *In Search of Frank Hurley*, Macmillan, 1980, page 61.)



AWM E05988A



AWM E05429

RECONSTRUCTIONS



Part of a diorama on 'Ypres, 1917' in the Australian War Memorial, Canberra.



Diorama of soldier in mud in the Australian War Memorial, Canberra.

ART



AWM ART02927

Australian infantry attack in Polygon Wood, Fred Leist, 1919



AWM H00563

The Battle of Polygon Wood, A Pearce, c. 1920

- Why do you think representations of the same subject can be so different? Explain your views.