8.6 Trench warfare

The main fighting of World War I took place in and around the trenches of the Western Front. By 1915 these stretched over 500 kilometres, from the Belgian coast through to the Swiss Alps, and were home to millions of troops. Trench warfare produced no winners; rather, it was a defensive tactic that led to continual ‘stalemate’. Over four years the armies of both sides lived and died in them. When the fighting was at its heaviest, tens of thousands of men could be killed or wounded in a single day.

Most battlefield trenches contained many defensive structures. The most commonly used arrangement was the three-line trench system. This allowed front-line trenches for firing at the enemy, support trenches where troops could be rested, and reserve trenches to hold reinforcements and supplies. Communication trenches linked all three trench lines, allowing for easier movement of troops and information. Some German trenches extended up to ten metres underground.

A Trenches were generally designed in a zigzag pattern; this helped to protect the trench against enemy attack. Each bend could be defended separately if necessary and explosions could be contained.

B Trench toilets were called latrines. They were usually pits 1.5 metres deep, dug at the end of a short gangway. Each company had two sanitary personnel whose job it was to keep the latrines in good condition. Officers gave out sanitary duty as a punishment for breaking army regulations.

C The British army employed 300,000 field workers to cook and supply the food for the troops. However, in many instances there was not enough food for the workers to cook. Rations were regularly cut and of a poor standard. The bulk of the diet in the trenches was bully beef (canned corned beef), bread and biscuits.

D Sandbags filled with earth were used to shore up the edges of the trenches; they also helped to absorb bullets and shell fragments. The men packing and then stacking the filled bags worked in pairs and were expected to move 60 bags an hour.

E Machine guns were one of the most deadly weapons. They were able to fire 400–500 bullets every minute.

F Fire steps and scaling ladders were needed to enable the troops to go ‘over the top’ of the trenches. Going ‘over the top’ refers to the orders given to troops to leave the trenches and head out into no man’s land in an attempt to attack the enemy trenches.

G Each soldier was issued with a kit containing nearly 30 kilograms of equipment. This included a rifle, two grenades, 220 rounds of ammunition, a steel helmet, wire cutters, field dressing, entrenching tool (a spade), a heavy coat, two sandbags, rolled ground sheet, water bottle, haversack, mess tin, towel, shaving kit, extra socks and preserved food rations. The weight made it very difficult to move quickly, and many men chose to share gear to minimise their load.
Chapter 8: World War I (1914–1918)

**EXPLANATION AND COMMUNICATION**

1. Why did the armies build a three-line trench system, often in a zigzag pattern?
2. Suggest why the trench system was ultimately unsuccessful as a military tactic.
3. Expand this concept map to describe why weather played such a key role in the conditions of the trenches.

**PERSPECTIVES AND INTERPRETATIONS**

4. Discuss as a class some of the problems you think the soldiers in the trenches would have faced each day.
5. Imagine you are a soldier who has been blinded in the trenches. Describe what you would hear, smell and feel.
6. Using sticks, string, cardboard and small mirrors, design and construct a periscope that would enable you to see over the top of an obstacle without lifting your head. Explain in a paragraph why such a device was needed (and often made) by those fighting in trenches.
7. Working in small groups, and referring to Source 1 (a secondary source), construct a trench diorama. Elect a group spokesperson to talk to the class about one aspect of your model (e.g. its advantages or disadvantages).

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**Activities**

**H** Barbed wire was used extensively throughout the trench system. While it helped to protect the trenches, it made it very difficult to attack the opposing trench. In the dark of night, soldiers were sent out to cut sections of wire to make it easier for the attacking soldiers in morning raids. Minor cuts and grazes caused by the barbed wire often became infected in the unsanitary conditions of the trenches.

**J** Duckboards were wooden planks placed across the bottom of trenches and other areas of muddy ground. They enabled soldiers to stand out of the mud. The trench system was constantly waterlogged, particularly during the winter months. Duckboards were the only way of protecting the men from contracting the dreaded trench foot and from sinking deep into the mud.

**I** No man’s land was the space between the two opposing trenches. It was protected by rows of barbed wire. It could be anywhere from 50 metres to one kilometre wide.

**K** The use of mustard gas and other chemical weapons meant that all soldiers needed to have gas masks near at hand. Until all troops could be issued with masks, many soldiers used urine-soaked material to help keep out the deadly gas. Mustard gas was almost odourless and took 12 hours to take effect. It was so powerful that small amounts, added to high-explosive shells, were effective. Once in the soil, mustard gas remained active for several weeks.

**L** Long, cold, wet winters and hot, dry summers would have made life in the trenches horrendous. Snow, rain and freezing temperatures drastically slowed combat during the winter months. Lack of fresh water, scorching sun with limited coverage, and the stench of dead bodies and rubbish would have made the hotter months unbearable.

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**stalemate** a term that comes from the game of chess, meaning a situation in which neither side can gain a winning advantage

**trench foot** a painful, swollen condition caused by feet remaining wet for too long; if gangrene set in, the feet would have to be amputated

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**Student workbook 8.4**