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<http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/timeline/>

The first thing was it smelled bad. It smelled bad because there were open latrines everywhere. There were bodies rotting everywhere. Nothing could be done about them. You could throw a shovel full of quick lime on them to take some of the smell away, but the odor of the trenches was appalling. It's hard to imagine people living for years in the middle of that smell. That's what they had to endure. Then, of course, no bunks, no places to lie down when you weren't on duty; so you lay in the mud, in a hole cut in the side of the trench, or in a dugout if you were an officer or an NCO.

As all military people know, the best time for attacking is in the early morning; partly because you have the advantage of darkness in forming the troops up, and you also have the advantage of a full day in which you can prosecute the development of the attack before it gets dark again. Both sides, both the German and the British, had morning stand-to, which is short for stand-to-arms. And, in the darkness as dawn was just about to open up, they would each stand on their firing steps in the trenches, which puts you about this high above the trench, and it was still dark. You stood there with your loaded rifle waiting for an attack from the Germans. And, the Germans did the same thing. And, when it was fully light, about a half-hour after stand-to, it was clear that no attack was gonna happen that morning. So, you stood down and had breakfast, usually eating it on the firing trench, which was like a building bench in the trench you were occupying. There's nothing to do all day, except listen to the bangs as the shells went off everywhere. And, the object of each side was to try to put mortar shells into the enemy trench and destroy it or blow it up, or kill the people in it. So, there's constant noise and bombardment all day long. Now, one couldn't stay forever in the trenches. You stayed usually about a week. Then you were rotated back with another unit, and a fresh unit came up for its week of trench duty.

Rats. I haven't talked about rats and lice. There were rats the size of cats. Both the Germans and the British were troubled with rats. The rats ate corpses, then they came in and snuggled next to you while you were sleeping. And, they ate your own food, and they were filthy creatures. And, they also carried disease -- bubonic plague primarily. Many people think that the great flu epidemic of 1919, and following, which affected the United States, had something to do with bubonic plague which was being carried by these trench rats. Actually, more American troops died of flu than of bullets and shell fragments in the war.

You never see your enemy, and the only thing you can see is the sky up above actually. Sky study becomes one of your few amusements. You look at the sky constantly from the opening of the trench, because you can't look out to the side. All of your view is vertical. You consequently get very interested in birds for the first time, because those are the only animated things you can see, except for rats and lice, or other human beings. You never see the enemy at all, except when he's attacking, or you're attacking and you get close to him. So, it's a curious, almost studious isolation that the troops are in. They're isolated from the setting and they're isolated, of course, from home, they're isolated from normal pursuits, and so on. You could read in the trenches sometimes, but pretty hard to do with all the explosions going off all the time.