**Break of Day in the Trenches**

The darkness crumbles away   
It is the same old druid Time as ever,   
Only a live thing leaps my hand,   
A queer sardonic rat,   
As I pull the parapet's poppy  
To stick behind my ear.   
Droll rat, they would shoot you if they knew   
Your cosmopolitan sympathies,   
Now you have touched this English hand   
You will do the same to a German  
Soon, no doubt, if it be your pleasure   
To cross the sleeping green between.   
It seems you inwardly grin as you pass   
Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes,   
Less chanced than you for life,  
Bonds to the whims of murder,   
Sprawled in the bowels of the earth,   
The torn fields of France.   
What do you see in our eyes   
At the shrieking iron and flame  
Hurled through still heavens?   
What quaver -what heart aghast?   
Poppies whose roots are in men's veins   
Drop, and are ever dropping;   
But mine in my ear is safe,  
Just a little white with the dust.

Isaac Rosenberg

# Life in the Trenches

Life in the trenches during the First World War took many forms, and varied widely from sector to sector and from front to front.

Undoubtedly, it was entirely unexpected for those eager thousands who signed up for war in August 1914.

### A War of Movement?

Indeed, the Great War - a phrase coined even before it had begun - was expected to be a relatively short affair and, as with most wars, one of great movement.  The First World War was typified however by its lack of movement, the years of stalemate exemplified on the Western Front from autumn 1914 until spring 1918.

Not that there wasn't movement at all on the Western Front during 1914-18; the war began dramatically with sweeping advances by the Germans through Belgium and France en route for Paris.  However stalemate - and trench warfare soon set in - and the expected war of movement wasn't restored until towards the close of the war, although the line rippled as successes were achieved at a local level.

So what was life actually like for the men serving tours of duty in the line, be they front line, support or reserve trenches?

### Daily Death in the Trenches

Death was a constant companion to those serving in the line, even when no raid or attack was launched or defended against.  In busy sectors the constant shellfire directed by the enemy brought random death, whether their victims were lounging in a trench or lying in a dugout (many men were buried as a consequence of such large shell-bursts).

Similarly, novices were cautioned against their natural inclination to peer over the parapet of the trench into No Man's Land.

Many men died on their first day in the trenches as a consequence of a precisely aimed sniper's bullet.

It has been estimated that up to one third of Allied casualties on the Western Front were actually sustained in the trenches.  Aside from enemy injuries, disease wrought a heavy toll.

### Rat Infestation

Rats in their millions infested trenches.  There were two main types, the brown and the black rat.  Both were despised but the brown rat was especially feared.  Gorging themselves on human remains (grotesquely disfiguring them by eating their eyes and liver) they could grow to the size of a cat.

Men, exasperated and afraid of these rats (which would even scamper across their faces in the dark), would attempt to rid the trenches of them by various methods: gunfire, with the bayonet, and even by clubbing them to death.

It was futile however: a single rat couple could produce up to 900 offspring in a year, spreading infection and contaminating food.  The rat problem remained for the duration of the war (although many veteran soldiers swore that rats sensed impending heavy enemy shellfire and consequently disappeared from view).

### Frogs, Lice and Worse

Rats were by no means the only source of infection and nuisance.  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.

Frogs by the score were found in shell holes covered in water; they were also found in the base of trenches.  Slugs and horned beetles crowded the sides of the trench.

Many men chose to shave their heads entirely to avoid another prevalent scourge: nits.

Trench Foot was another medical condition peculiar to trench life.  It was a fungal infection of the feet caused by cold, wet and unsanitary trench conditions.  It could turn gangrenous and result in amputation.  Trench Foot was more of a problem at the start of trench warfare; as conditions improved in 1915 it rapidly faded, although a trickle of cases continued throughout the war.

### The Trench Cycle

Typically, a battalion would be expected to serve a spell in the front line.  This would be followed by a stint spent in support, and then in reserve lines.  A period of rest would follow - generally short in duration - before the whole cycle of trench duty would start afresh.

In reality the cycle was determined by the necessities of the situation.  Even while at rest men might find themselves tasked with duties that placed them in the line of fire.

Others would spend far longer in the front line than usual, usually in the more 'busy' sectors.

As an example - and the numbers varied widely - a man might expect in a year to spend some 70 days in the front line, with another 30 in nearby support trenches.  A further 120 might be spent in reserve.  Only 70 days might be spent at rest.  The amount of leave varied, with perhaps two weeks being granted during the year.

### Stand To and the Morning Hate

The daily routine of life in the trenches began with the morning 'stand to'.  An hour before dawn everyone was roused from slumber by the company orderly officer and sergeant and ordered to climb up on the fire step to guard against a dawn raid by the enemy, bayonets fixed.

This policy of stand to was adopted by both sides, and despite the knowledge that each side prepared itself for raids or attacks timed at dawn, many were actually carried out at this time.

Accompanying stand to, as the light grew, was the daily ritual often termed the 'morning hate'.

Both sides would often relieve the tension of the early hours with machine gun fire, shelling and small arms fire, directed into the mist to their front: this made doubly sure of safety at dawn.

### Rum, Rifles and the Breakfast Truce

With stand to over, in some areas rum might then be issued to the men.  They would then attend to the cleaning of their rifle equipment, which was followed by its inspection by officers.

Breakfast would next be served.  In essentially every area of the line at some time or other each side would adopt an unofficial truce while breakfast was served and eaten.  This truce often extended to the wagons which delivered such sustenance.

Truces such as these seldom lasted long; invariably a senior officer would hear of its existence and quickly stamp it out.  Nevertheless it persisted throughout the war, and was more prevalent in quieter sectors of the line.

### Inspection and Chores

With breakfast over the men would be inspected by either the company or platoon commander.  Once this had been completed NCOs would assign daily chores to each man (except those who had been excused duty for a variety of reasons).

Example - and necessary - daily chores included the refilling of sandbags, the repair of the duckboards on the floor of the trench and the draining of trenches.

Particularly following heavy rainfall, trenches could quickly accumulate muddy water, making life ever more miserable for its occupants as the walls of the trench rapidly became misshapen and were prone to collapse.

Pumping equipment was available for the draining of trenches; men would also be assigned to the repair of the trench itself. Still others would be assigned to the preparation of latrines.

### Daily Boredom

Given that each side's front line was constantly under watch by snipers and look-outs during daylight, movement was logically restricted until night fell.  Thus, once men had concluded their assigned tasks they were free to attend to more personal matters, such as the reading and writing of letters home.

Meals were also prepared.  Sleep was snatched wherever possible - although it was seldom that men were allowed sufficient time to grab more than a few minutes rest before they were detailed to another task.

### Dusk: Stand To, Supply and Maintenance

With the onset of dusk the morning ritual of stand to was repeated, again to guard against a surprise attack launched as light fell.

This over, the trenches became a hive of activity.  Supply and maintenance activities could be undertaken, although danger invariably accompanied these as the enemy would be alert for such movement.  Men would be sent to the rear lines to fetch rations and water

Other men would be assigned sentry duty on the fire step.  Generally men would be expected to provide sentry duty for up to two hours.  Any longer and there was a real risk of men falling asleep on duty - for which the penalty was death by firing squad.

### Patrolling No Man's Land

Patrols would often be sent out into No Man’s Land.  Some men would be tasked with repairing or adding barbed wire to the front line.  Others however would go out to assigned listening posts, hoping to pick up valuable information from the enemy lines.

Sometimes enemy patrols would meet in No Man's Land.  They were then faced with the option of hurrying on their separate ways or else engaging in hand to hand fighting.

They could not afford to use their handguns while patrolling in No Man's Land, for fear of the machine gun fire it would inevitably attract, deadly to all members of the patrol.

### Relieving Men at the Front

Men were relieved front-line duty at night-time too.  Relieving units would wind their weary way through numerous lines of communications trenches, weighed down with equipment and trench stores (such as shovels, picks, corrugated iron, duckboards, etc.).  The process of relieving a line could take several frustrating hours.

### ...And the Smell

Finally, no overview of trench life can avoid the aspect that instantly struck visitors to the lines: the appalling reek given off by numerous conflicting sources.

Rotting carcases lay around in their thousands.  For example, approximately 200,000 men were killed on the Somme battlefields, many of which lay in shallow graves.

Overflowing latrines would similarly give off a most offensive stench.

Men who had not been afforded the luxury of a bath in weeks or months would offer the pervading odour of dried sweat.  The feet were generally accepted to give off the worst odour.

Trenches would also smell of creosol or chloride of lime, used to stave off the constant threat of disease and infection.

Add to this the smell of cordite, the lingering odour of poison gas, rotting sandbags, stagnant mud, cigarette smoke and cooking food... yet men grew used to it, while it thoroughly overcame first-time visitors to the front.

Photographs courtesy of Photos of the Great War website

**Assassination of Archduke Ferdinand, 1914**

Two bullets fired on a Sarajevo street on a sunny June morning in 1914 set in motion a series of events that shaped the world we live in today. World War One, World War Two, the Cold War and its conclusion all trace their origins to the gunshots that interrupted that summer day.

The victims, Archduke Franz Ferdinand - heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and his wife Sophie, were in the Bosnian city in conjunction with Austrian troop exercises nearby. The couple was returning from an official visit to City Hall. The assassin, 19-year-old Gavrilo Princip burned with the fire of Slavic nationalism. He envisioned the death of the Archduke as the key that would unlock the shackles binding his people to the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

A third party, Serbia, figured prominently in the plot. Independent Serbia provided the guns, ammunition and training that made the assassination possible.

The Balkan Region of Europe entered the twentieth century much as she left it: a caldron of seething political intrigue needing only the slightest increase of heat to boil over into open conflict. The shots that day in Sarajevo pushed the caldron to the boiling point and beyond.

*A Royal Murder*

Seven conspirators joined the crowd lining the Archduke's route to City Hall. Each took a different position, ready to attack the royal car if the opportunity presented itself. The six-car procession approached one conspirator, Gabrinovic (or Cabrinovic), who threw his bomb only to see it bounce off the Archduke's car and explode near the following car.

Unhurt, the Archduke and his wife sped to the reception at City Hall. The ceremonies finished, the Royal procession amazingly retraced its steps bringing the Archduke into the range of the leader of the conspiracy, Gavrilo Princip. More amazingly, the royal car stopped right in front of Princip providing him the opportunity to fire two shots. Both bullets hit home.

*Borijove Jevtic, one of the conspirators gave this eyewitness account:*

"When Francis Ferdinand and his retinue drove from the station they were allowed to pass the first two conspirators. The motor cars were driving too fast to make an attempt feasible and in the crowd were many Serbians; throwing a grenade would have killed many innocent people.

When the car passed Gabrinovic, the compositor, he threw his grenade. It hit the side of the car, but Francis Ferdinand with presence of mind threw himself back and was uninjured. Several officers riding in his attendance were injured.

The cars sped to the Town Hall and the rest of the conspirators did not interfere with them. After the reception in the Town Hall General Potiorek, the Austrian Commander, pleaded with Francis Ferdinand to leave the city, as it was seething with rebellion. The Archduke was persuaded to drive the shortest way out of the city and to go quickly.

The road to the maneuvers was shaped like the letter V, making a sharp turn at the bridge over the River Nilgacka [Miljacka]. Francis Ferdinand's car could go fast enough until it reached this spot but here it was forced to slow down for the turn. Here Princip had taken his stand.

As the car came abreast he stepped forward from the curb, drew his automatic pistol from his coat and fired two shots. The first struck the wife of the Archduke, the Archduchess Sofia, in the abdomen. She was an expectant mother. She died instantly.

The second bullet struck the Archduke close to the heart.

He uttered only one word, 'Sofia' -- a call to his stricken wife. Then his head fell back and he collapsed. He died almost instantly.

The officers seized Princip. They beat him over the head with the flat of their swords. They knocked him down, they kicked him, scraped the skin from his neck with the edges of their swords, tortured him, all but killed him."

*Another Perspective*

Count Franz von Harrach rode on the running board of the royal car serving as a bodyguard for the Archduke. His account begins immediately after Princip fires his two shots:

"As the car quickly reversed, a thin stream of blood spurted from His Highness's mouth onto my right check. As I was pulling out my handkerchief to wipe the blood away from his mouth, the Duchess cried out to him, 'In Heaven's name, what has happened to you?' At that she slid off the seat and lay on the floor of the car, with her face between his knees.

I had no idea that she too was hit and thought she had simply fainted with fright. Then I heard His Imperial Highness say, 'Sopherl, Sopherl, don't die. Stay alive for the children!'

At that, I seized the Archduke by the collar of his uniform, to stop his head dropping forward and asked him if he was in great pain. He answered me quite distinctly, 'It's nothing!' His face began to twist somewhat but he went on repeating, six or seven times, ever more faintly as he gradually lost consciousness, 'It's nothing!' Then, after a short pause, there was a violent choking sound caused by the bleeding. It was stopped as we reached the Konak."

References:    Brook-Shepard, Gordon, Archduke of Sarajevo (1984); Dedijer, Vladimir, The Road To Sarajevo (1966); Morton, Frederick, Thunder At Twilight (1989).

**The Beginning of Air Warfare, 1914**

As the combatants clashed in the opening days of World War I, the newly invented airplane provided each side with a "bird's eye view" of the battlefield. The value of this new reconnaissance tool was proven at the first major engagement of the war – the Battle of Mons on August 23, 1914. It was at Mons, a small industrial town in southern Belgium, where the advancing British Army collided with the Germans as they marched towards France.

From their vantage point above the battleground, a British observation team could see that the Germans were moving their forces to surround the unsuspecting British army. Alerted, the British high command ordered an immediate retreat into France. As embarrassing as the withdrawal was for the British, the move saved the army. A few days later, French aerial observers noted a shift in the movement of the German army that exposed its flanks to attack. The resulting battle of the Marne (September 5 - 12), halted the German drive into France and saved Paris.

The airplane's value as an observation platform had been proven. This revelation led to the next developmental step in air warfare - the effort to blind the enemy by shooting down its eyes in the sky. It would be months before a French pilot would strap a machinegun to the nose of his airplane to create the first true fighter plane In the interim, warfare in the air was characterized by the occupants of enemy observation planes firing at one another with pistols, rifles or, as the following account describes, throwing an unloaded revolver at an opponent's spinning propeller.

"Have you got a revolver, old boy? My ammunition's all gone."

Lt. W. R. Read was a pilot in the fledgling Royal Flying Corps. In the early days of August 1914 the Corps was ordered to transport its force of 63 planes to France and provide reconnaissance of enemy troop movements. Read kept a diary of his experiences and we join his story as he and his observer - Jackson - fly over the area of Mons, Belgium. Throughout his narrative, Lt. Read refers to his plane as "Henri:"

"One day, after our reconnaissance over Mons and Charleroi, Jackson spotted a German Taube machine. I had also seen him but we had done our job and I did not want a fight. Jackson was always bloodthirsty, however, and the following shouted conversation ensued:

Jackson: 'Look, old boy!'

'Me: 'Yes, I know.’

'Jackson: ‘I think we ought to go for him, old boy.’

Me: 'Better get home with your report.'

Jackson: 'I think we ought to go for him, old boy.'

Me: 'All right.' "

I changed course for him and, as we passed the Taube, Jackson got in two shots with the rifle. We turned and passed each other again with no obvious result. This happened three or four times. Then, ‘Have you got a revolver, old boy? My ammunition's all gone.’ I, feeling rather sick of the proceedings, said ‘Yes. But no ammo.’ ‘Give it to me, old boy, and this time fly past him as close as you can.’ I carried out instructions and, to my amazement, as soon as we got opposite the Taube, Jackson, with my Army issue revolver grasped by the barrel, threw it at the Taube's propeller. Of course it missed and then, honor satisfied, we turned for home.

*22 August.* Today the French distinguished themselves by bringing down one of their own airships. They also often fire at us and there is quite as much to fear from one's own side as from the Germans as one leaves the ground. Two machines that went out this morning on reconnaissance came back with several bullet holes in them. In one the observer was shot in the stomach. Herbert, Shekleton, Fuller and I are the 4 pilots in our Flight. We do more flying than most other flights probably because Henri is a more reliable machine and is always ready. Shek. came back last night with six shot holes in his planes. One bullet missed the petrol tank only by an inch.

*23 August.* Went up for reconnaissance at 11.30 with Major Moss as passenger [observer]. I could not get Henri to climb at first so came down and lightened the load, then we soon got away at 3,800 feet. We found the enemy very thick to the south-east of Thuin and a battle was in progress below us. The artillery on both sides were very busy. It was very interesting to watch. In one field a French battery opened fire; it had not fired more than two rounds per gun when shell after shell from a German battery burst over them. It must have been perfect hell for the French battery and silenced them at once. On the way back some German howitzer battery opened fire on us from north-west of Thuin. One shell splinter passed through my left plane but did no damage. Some infantry in Thuin also wasted a thousand rounds or so trying to bring us down.

*'24 August.* All yesterday heavy firing to the east and northeast, and it was apparent that the enemy was pushing us back. I was sent off on to some high ground to look out for zeppelins!! NO.3 Squadron-ours-left at 2.30 pm, landed at Berlmont at 6.45 pm, then ordered to retire further back to Le Cateau. A great rush to get off as it was getting dusk. I and some others landed in a wrong field but went on to the right one afterwards. Birch in his Bleriot hit the telegraph wires in getting off and broke his machine, escaping with a shaking himself.

*'25 August.* Yesterday the Germans had a victory at Mons. Today parts of Charleroi are in flames and the enemy are turning our left flank. I went off at 11 am with Jackson as passenger. All our troops were in retreat, using every road available and making for Le Cateau. The whole of the French cavalry were retiring on Cambrai. Returned from reconnaissance at 1 pm and at 3.30 orders came to move to St Quentin. As soon as we landed a heavy rain-storm came on and swamped everything. I feel so sorry for poor Henri. It is doing him a great deal of harm, this rain and hot sun.

*'26 August.* Off on reconnaisance at 7 am with Jackson to report on engagements in the Le Cateau and Espignol area. The whole sight was wonderful - a fierce artillery engagement for the most part, we getting the worst of it. We had all the German army corps against our little force. We could see nothing of the French. I watched one of our batteries put out of action, shell after shell burst on it and then there was silence until more men were sent up and it opened up again.

'Le Cateau was in flames. We were shelled by anti-aircraft guns so I kept at 4,500 feet. We are also giving the Germans a bad time-their cavalry and infantry nearly always advanced in masses, offering as they did so a splendid target and getting mown down by the score. There was not a suitable place to land at headquarters at Bertry. In landing we skidded and as soon as we touched ground the landing chassis gave way and Henri pitched on his nose. Jackson was pitched out about ten yards ahead and I was left in the machine. Neither of us was hurt only shaken. Good old Henri, he did me well and even at the last he did not do me in. There was no time to repair the damage as shells were already falling over the town so I hurriedly removed all the instruments, guns, maps etc. and cut off the Union Jack and so left Henri in his last resting place."

References:    This eyewitness account appears in: Moynihan, Michael, People at War 1914-1918 (1973); Boyne, Walter J., The Smithsonian Book of Flight (1987); Reynolds, Quentin, They Fought for the Sky (1957); Simkins, Peter, World War I: the western front (1991).

**Christmas in the Trenches, 1914**

By the end of November 1914 the crushing German advance that had swallowed the Low Countries and threatened France had been checked by the allies before it could reach Paris. The opposing armies stared at each other from a line of hastily built defensive trenches that began at the edge of the English Channel and continued to the border of Switzerland. Barbed wire and parapets defended the trenches and between them stretched a "No-Mans-Land" that in some areas was no more than 30 yards wide.

Life in the trenches was abominable. Continuous sniping, machinegun fire and artillery shelling took a deadly toll. The misery was heightened by the ravages of Mother Nature, including rain, snow and cold. Many of the trenches, especially those in the low-lying British sector to the west, were continually flooded, exposing the troops to frost bite and "trench foot."

The treacherous monotony of life in the trenches was briefly interrupted during an unofficial and spontaneous "Christmas Truce" that began on Christmas Eve. Both sides had received Christmas packages of food and presents. The clear skies that ended the rain further lifted the spirits on both sides of no-mans-land.

The Germans seem to have made the first move. During the evening of December 24 they delivered a chocolate cake to the British line accompanied by a note that proposed a cease fire so that the Germans could have a concert. The British accepted the proposal and offered some tobacco as their present to the Germans. The good will soon spread along the 27-mile length of the British line. Enemy soldiers shouted to one another from the trenches, joined in singing songs and soon met one another in the middle of no-mans-land to talk, exchange gifts and in some areas to take part in impromptu soccer matches.

The high command on both sides took a dim view of the activities and orders were issued to stop the fraternizing with varying results. In some areas the truce ended Christmas Day in others the following day and in others it extended into January. One thing is for sure - it never happened again.

"We and the Germans met in the middle of no-man's-land."

Frank Richards was a British soldier who experienced the "Christmas Truce". We join his story on Christmas morning 1914:

"On Christmas morning we stuck up a board with 'A Merry Christmas' on it. The enemy had stuck up a similar one. Platoons would sometimes go out for twenty-four hours' rest - it was a day at least out of the trench and relieved the monotony a bit - and my platoon had gone out in this way the night before, but a few of us stayed behind to see what would happen. Two of our men then threw their equipment off and jumped on the parapet with their hands above their heads. Two of the Germans done the same and commenced to walk up the river bank, our two men going to meet them. They met and shook hands and then we all got out of the trench.

Buffalo Bill [the Company Commander] rushed into the trench and endeavoured to prevent it, but he was too late: the whole of the Company were now out, and so were the Germans. He had to accept the situation, so soon he and the other company officers climbed out too. We and the Germans met in the middle of no-man's-land. Their officers was also now out. Our officers exchanged greetings with them. One of the German officers said that he wished he had a camera to take a snapshot, but they were not allowed to carry cameras. Neither were our officers.

We mucked in all day with one another. They were Saxons and some of them could speak English. By the look of them their trenches were in as bad a state as our own. One of their men, speaking in English, mentioned that he had worked in Brighton for some years and that he was fed up to the neck with this damned war and would be glad when it was all over. We told him that he wasn't the only one that was fed up with it. We did not allow them in our trench and they did not allow us in theirs.

The German Company-Commander asked Buffalo Bill if he would accept a couple of barrels of beer and assured him that they would not make his men drunk. They had plenty of it in the brewery. He accepted the offer with thanks and a couple of their men rolled the barrels over and we took them into our trench. The German officer sent one of his men back to the trench, who appeared shortly after carrying a tray with bottles and glasses on it. Officers of both sides clinked glasses and drunk one another's health. Buffalo Bill had presented them with a plum pudding just before. The officers came to an understanding that the unofficial truce would end at midnight. At dusk we went back to our respective trenches.

...The two barrels of beer were drunk, and the German officer was right: if it was possible for a man to have drunk the two barrels himself he would have bursted before he had got drunk. French beer was rotten stuff.

Just before midnight we all made it up not to commence firing before they did. At night there was always plenty of firing by both sides if there were no working parties or patrols out. Mr Richardson, a young officer who had just joined the Battalion and was now a platoon officer in my company wrote a poem during the night about the Briton and the Bosche meeting in no-man's-land on Christmas Day, which he read out to us. A few days later it was published in The Times or Morning Post, I believe.

During the whole of Boxing Day [the day after Christmas] we never fired a shot, and they the same, each side seemed to be waiting for the other to set the ball a-rolling. One of their men shouted across in English and inquired how we had enjoyed the beer. We shouted back and told him it was very weak but that we were very grateful for it. We were conversing off and on during the whole of the day.

We were relieved that evening at dusk by a battalion of another brigade. We were mighty surprised as we had heard no whisper of any relief during the day. We told the men who relieved us how we had spent the last couple of days with the enemy, and they told us that by what they had been told the whole of the British troops in the line, with one or two exceptions, had mucked in with the enemy. They had only been out of action themselves forty-eight hours after being twenty-eight days in the front-line trenches. They also told us that the French people had heard how we had spent Christmas Day and were saying all manner of nasty things about the British Army."

References: This eyewitness account appears in Richards, Frank, Old Soldiers Never Die (1933); Keegan, John, The First World War (1999); Simkins, Peter, World War I, the Western Front (1991).

**The Sinking of the Lusitania, 1915**

It had been a very successful run. The German submarine *U-20* had entered the Irish Sea on May 5 and now, the morning of May 7, the submarine claimed its third victim. The *U-20* had only three torpedoes left in its arsenal and was low on fuel. As a result, Captain Walter Schwieger, the ship's commander, decided to steer for the open waters of the Atlantic and home. He was unaware that his greatest prize was steaming straight for him and that his actions that day would ultimately bring America into the war.

The *Lusitania* had left New York City on May 1 bound for Liverpool. On the afternoon of May 7 she was steaming off the coast of Ireland within easy sailing distance of her destination. Known as the "Greyhound of the Seas," the *Lusitania* was the fastest liner afloat and relied on her speed to defend against submarine attack. However, she was not running at full speed because of fog. Nor was the ship taking an evasive zigzag course. It was a sitting duck and was headed straight into the sights of the *U-20*.

The two ships converged at about 2 pm. After stalking his prey for an hour, Captain Schwieger unleashed one torpedo that hit its target amidships. The initial explosion was followed quickly by a second, more powerful, detonation. Within 20 minutes the great liner had slipped under the water, taking 1,198 victims with her. Among the dead were 138 Americans. Many in the United States were outraged. A declaration of war was narrowly averted when Germany vowed to cease her policy of unrestricted submarine warfare that allowed attacks on merchant ships without warning. However, American public opinion had turned against Germany and when she resurrected her unrestricted submarine warfare policy in February of 1917, America decided to go to war.

"Great confusion arose on the ship. . ."

Captain Schwieger kept a diary of the voyage. We join his story as he first catches sight of the Lusitania in the early afternoon of May 7, 1915:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| "2 pm | Straight ahead the 4 funnels and 3 masts of a steamer with a course at right angles to ours. . . Ship is made out to be a large passenger liner. |
| 3:05 pm | Went to 11m and ran at high speed on a course converging with that of the steamer, in hopes that it would change course to starboard along the Irish Coast.  The steamer turned to starboard, headed for Queenstown and thus made it possible to approach for a shot. Ran at high speed till 3 pm in order to secure an advantageous position. |
| 3:10 pm | Clear bow shot at 700 m. . . angle of intersection 90 [degrees] estimated speed 22 nautical miles.  Shot struck starboard side close behind the bridge. An extraordinary heavy detonation followed, with a very large cloud of smoke (far above the front funnel). A second explosion must have followed that of the torpedo (boiler or coal or powder?).  The superstructure above the point of impact and the bridge were torn apart; fire broke out; light smoke veiled the high bridge. The ship stopped immediately and quickly listed sharply to starboard, sinking deeper by the head at the same time.  Great confusion arose on the ship; some of the boats were swung clear and lowered into the water. Many people must have lost their heads; several boats loaded with people rushed downward, struck the water bow or stern first and filled at once.  On the port side, because of the sloping position, fewer boats were swung clear than on the starboard side.  The ship blew off steam; at the bow the name “Lusitania” in golden letters was visible. It was running 20 nautical miles. |
| 3:25 pm | Since it seemed as if the steamer could only remain above water for a short time, went to 24m. and ran toward the Sea. Nor could I have fired a second torpedo into this swarm of people who were trying to save themselves. |
| 4:15 pm | Went to 11m and took a look around. In the distance straight ahead a number of life-boats were moving; nothing more was to be seen of the *Lusitania*. The wreck must lie 14 nautical miles from the Old Head of Kinsale light-house, at an angle of 358 degrees to the right of it, in 90m of water (27 nautical miles from Queenstown) 51 degrees 22’ 6” N and 8 degrees 31’ W. The land and the lighthouse could be seen very plainly. |
| 4:20 pm | When taking a look around, a large steamer was in sight ahead on the port side, with course laid for Fastnet Rock. Tried to get ahead at high speed, so as to get a stern shot. . . |
| 5:08 pm | Conditions for shot very favorable: no possibility of missing if torpedo kept its course. Torpedo did not strike. Since the telescope was cut off for some time after this shot the cause of failure could not be determined. . . The steamer or freighter was of the Cunard Line. |
| 6:15 pm | . . . It is remarkable that there is so much traffic on this particular day, although two large steamers were sunk the day before south of George’s Channel. It is also inexplicable that the *Lusitania* was not sent through the North Channel." |

References:    Walter Schwieger’s diary is part of the collection of the National Archives: Record Group 45: Naval Records Collection of the Office of Naval Records and Library, 1691 – 1945. Other references: Hickey, Des & Smith, Gus, Seven Days to Disaster (1982); Simpson, Colin, The Lusitania (1972).

**U-boat Attack, 1916**

Prior to World War I, prevailing naval opinion considered the submarine an ineffective weapon for blockading an enemy country. Submarines, filled with exposed piping and crammed with machinery, had no space to take prisoners aboard. Additionally, the submarine could never carry enough sailors to provide crews to man captured ships. Therefore, the submarine was considered a useless weapon against civilian shipping.

In February 1915 the German government announced its solution to the problem -- unrestricted submarine warfare. The Germans realized they didn't have to capture a merchant ship, just sink it - crew and all. They declared a war zone around the British Isles within which they would sink any allied merchant vessel on sight. Fifty ships were hit between February and September including the liner *Lusitania*. One hundred thirty-eight Americans were among the 1,198 lives lost in the *Lusitania* sinking. American public opinion was outraged, many clamoring for war. President Wilson protested to the Germans. Afraid that America might join the war, and mindful that they didn't have enough subs to do the job right, the Germans suspended their campaign -- but only temporarily.

In February 1917, with U-boats available in quantity, the Germans again declared their policy of unrestricted submarine warfare. This time not only allied but neutral ships (such as those of the U.S.) would be sunk on sight. It was a big gamble. The Germans knew it would bring America into the war. But, they reasoned they could starve the Brits out first. It was a gamble they almost won. By April, when America declared war , Britain was almost on its knees. Over 1,030 merchant ships had been sunk and Britain was only six weeks away from starvation. The introduction of the escorted convoy helped saved the day. Ship losses dropped dramatically and the supply route from America to Britain began to flow.

"I saw that the bubble-track of the torpedo had been discovered."

Adolf K.G.E. von Spiegel commanded a German U-boat during the First World War. He published his memoirs in 1919. Here he describes the attack on a cargo vessel in April 1916.

"The steamer appeared to be close to us and looked colossal. I saw the captain walking on his bridge, a small whistle in his mouth. I saw the crew cleaning the deck forward, and I saw, with surprise and a slight shudder, long rows of wooden partitions right along all decks, from which gleamed the shining black and brown backs of horses."

'Oh heavens, horses! What a pity, those lovely beasts!'

'But it cannot be helped,' I went on thinking. 'War is war, and every horse the fewer on the Western front is a reduction of England's fighting power.' I must acknowledge, however, that the thought of what must come was a most unpleasant one, and I will describe what happened as briefly as possible."

'Stand by for firing a torpedo!' I called down to the control room.'

'FIRE!'

" A slight tremor went through the boat - the torpedo had gone."

"The death-bringing shot was a true one, and the torpedo ran towards the doomed ship at high speed. I could follow its course exactly by the light streak of bubbles which was left in its wake."

"I saw that the bubble-track of the torpedo had been discovered on the bridge of the steamer, as frightened arms pointed towards the water and the captain put his hands in front of his eyes and waited resignedly. Then a frightful explosion followed, and we were all thrown against one another by the concussion, and then, like Vulcan, huge and majestic, a column of water two hundred metres high and fifty metres broad, terrible in its beauty and power, shot up to the heavens."

'Hit abaft the second funnel,' I shouted down to the control room."

"All her decks were visible to me. From all the hatchways a storming, despairing mass of men were fighting their way on deck, grimy stokers, officers, soldiers, groom, cooks. They all rushed, ran, screamed for boats, tore and thrust one another from the ladders leading down to them, fought for the lifebelts and jostled one another on the sloping deck. All amongst them, rearing, slipping horses are wedged. The starboard boats could not be lowered on account of the list; everyone therefore ran across to the port boats, which in the hurry and panic, had been lowered with great stupidity either half full or overcrowded. The men left behind were wringing their hands in despair and running to and fro along the decks; finally they threw themselves into the water so as to swim to the boats."

"Then - a second explosion, followed by the escape of white hissing steam from all hatchways and scuttles. The white steam drove the horses mad. I saw a beautiful long-tailed dapple-grey horse take a mighty leap over the berthing rails and land into a fully laden boat. At that point I could not bear the sight any longer, and I lowered the periscope and dived deep."

References:    Hough, R., The Great War at Sea (1983); Spiegel, Adolf K.G.E. von, U-boat 202 (1919).

**Gas Attack, 1916**

The First World War accelerated the development of new technologies designed to improve the ability to kill an enemy: the machine gun, the tank, the airplane, the zeppelin, and gas to name a few. the machine gun, the tank, the airplane, the zeppelin, and gas to name a few. Among these, gas was probably the crudest, certainly the most capricious - a change in wind direction could spell disaster. Initially, gas cylinders were simply placed along the front lines facing the enemy trenches. Once the wind was deemed favorable, the cylinders were opened and the gas floated with the breeze, carrying death to the enemy. Later, gas was packed into artillery shells and delivered behind enemy lines. No matter the method of delivery, its impact could produce hell on earth. Chlorine and phosgene gases attacked the lungs ripping the very breath out of its victims. Mustard gas was worse. At least a respirator provided some defense against the chlorine and phosgene gases. Mustard gas attacked the skin - moist skin such as the eyes, armpits, and groin. It burned its way into its victim leaving searing blisters and unimaginable pain.

First introduced by the Germans, gas warfare was soon embraced by all the combatants. By the end of the war, one in four of the artillery shells fired on the Western Front contained gas.

*Over The Top*

Arthur Empey was an American living in New Jersey when war consumed Europe in 1914. Enraged by the sinking of the Lusitania and loss of the lives of American passengers, he expected to join an American army to combat the Germans. When America did not immediately declare war, Empey boarded a ship to England, enlisted in the British Army (a violation of our neutrality law, but no one seemd to mind) and was soon manning a trench on the front lines.

Emprey survived his experience and published his recollections in 1917. We join his story after he has been made a member of a machine gun crew and sits in a British trench peering towards German lines. Conditions are perfect for an enemy gas attack - a slight breeze blowing from the enemy's direction - and the warning has been passed along to be on the lookout:

"We had a new man at the periscope, on this afternoon in question; I was sitting on the fire step, cleaning my rifle, when he called out to me: 'There's a sort of greenish, yellow cloud rolling along the ground out in front, it's coming ---'

But I waited for no more, grabbing my bayonet, which was detached from the rifle, I gave the alarm by banging an empty shell case, which was hanging near the periscope. At the same instant, gongs started ringing down the trench, the signal for Tommy to don his respirator, or smoke helmet, as we call it.

Gas travels quietly, so you must not lose any time; you generally have about eighteen or twenty seconds in which to adjust your gas helmet.

A gas helmet is made of cloth, treated with chemicals. There are two windows, or glass eyes, in it, through which you can see. Inside there is a rubber-covered tube, which goes in the mouth. You breathe through your nose; the gas, passing through the cloth helmet, is neutralized by the action of the chemicals. The foul air is exhaled through the tube in the mouth, this tube being so constructed that it prevents the inhaling of the outside air or gas. One helmet is good for five hours of the strongest gas. Each Tommy carries two of them slung around his shoulder in a waterproof canvas bag. He must wear this bag at all times, even while sleeping. To change a defective helmet, you take out the new one, hold your breath, pull the old one off, placing the new one over your head, tucking in the loose ends under the collar of your tunic.

For a minute, pandemonium reigned in our trench, - Tommies adjusting their helmets, bombers running here and there, and men turning out of the dugouts with fixed bayonets, to man the fire step.

Reinforcements were pouring out of the communication trenches.

Our gun's crew was busy mounting the machine gun on the parapet and bringing up extra ammunition from the dugout.

German gas is heavier than air and soon fills the trenches and dugouts, where it has been known to lurk for two or three days, until the air is purified by means of large chemical sprayers. We had to work quickly, as Fritz generally follows the gas with an infantry attack. A company man on our right was too slow in getting on his helmet; he sank to the ground, clutching at his throat, and after a few spasmodic twistings, went West (died). It was horrible to see him die, but we were powerless to help him. In the corner of a traverse, a little, muddy cur dog, one of the company's pets, was lying dead, with his two paws over his nose.

It's the animals that suffer the most, the horses, mules, cattle, dogs, cats, and rats, they having no helmets to save them. Tommy does not sympathize with rats in a gas attack.

At times, gas has been known to travel, with dire results, fifteen miles behind the lines.

A gas, or smoke helmet, as it is called, at the best is a vile-smelling thing, and it is not long before one gets a violent headache from wearing it.

Our eighteen-pounders were bursting in No Man's Land, in an effort, by the artillery, to disperse the gas clouds.

The fire step was lined with crouching men, bayonets fixed, and bombs near at hand to repel the expected attack.

Our artillery had put a barrage of curtain fire on the German lines, to try and break up their attack and keep back reinforcements.

I trained my machine gun on their trench and its bullets were raking the parapet. Then over they came, bayonets glistening. In their respirators, which have a large snout in front, they looked like some horrible nightmare.

All along our trench, rifles and machine guns spoke, our shrapnel was bursting over their heads. They went down in heaps, but new ones took the place of the fallen. Nothing could stop that mad rush. The Germans reached our barbed wire, which had previously been demolished by their shells, then it was bomb against bomb, and the devil for all.

Suddenly, my head seemed to burst from a loud 'crack' in my ear. Then my head began to swim, throat got dry, and a heavy pressure on the lungs warned me that my helmet was leaking. Turning my gun over to No. 2, I changed helmets.

The trench started to wind like a snake, and sandbags appeared to be floating in the air. The noise was horrible; I sank onto the fire step, needles seemed to be pricking my flesh, then blackness.

I was awakened by one of my mates removing my smoke helmet. How delicious that cool, fresh air felt in my lungs.

A strong wind had arisen and dispersed the gas.

They told me that I had been 'out' for three hours; they thought I was dead.

The attack had been repulsed after a hard fight. Twice the Germans had gained a foothold in our trench, but had been driven out by counter- attacks. The trench was filled with their dead and ours. Through a periscope, I counted eighteen dead Germans in our wire; they were a ghastly sight in their horrible-looking respirators.

I examined my first smoke helmet, a bullet had gone through it on the left side, just grazing my ear, the gas had penetrated through the hole made in the cloth.

Out of our crew of six, we lost two killed and two wounded.

That night we buried all of the dead, excepting those in No Man's Land. In death there is not much distinction, friend and foe are treated alike.

After the wind had dispersed the gas, the R. A. M. C. got busy with their chemical sprayers, spraying out the dugouts and low parts of the trenches to dissipate any fumes of the German gas which may have been lurking in same."

References:    Empey, Arthur Guy, Over The Top (1917); Lloyd, Alan, The War In The Trenches (1976).

**A Death at the Battle of the Somme, 1916**

The Battle of the Somme was one of the costliest engagements of the First World War. In the summer of 1916 the line of trenches demarcating the Western Front stretched from the English Channel across the length of France to the Swiss border. At Verdun, near the middle of this line, French and German troops were bogged down in a battle of attrition. The objective of the Somme offensive was to relieve the pressure on Verdun and to push the British line forward.

The attack began July 1, 1916 with a predominately British force clambering out of its trenches and crossing No Man's Land under withering German machinegun and artillery fire. The attack soon stalled and deteriorated into disaster. On that day the British suffered almost 60,000 casualties making it the bloodiest day in British military history. Undeterred, the British command ordered the assault to continue the next day with the hope of breaking through the German lines. This attempt and the others that followed through the summer and fall months produced no break through. Finally, with the approach of winter in November, the battle was abandoned.

The final tally included 420,000 British casualties, 200,000 French and the Germans 500,000. The reward for this effort was the six-mile movement of the British front line into German territory.

Among the French troops waiting to assault the German trenches on July 1 was an American named Alan Seeger. He had graduated from Harvard in 1910 and had spent two years in Greenwich Village before moving to Paris. Alan Seeger was a poet and he thrived in the bohemian atmosphere of Paris's Left Bank. When war broke, Seeger joined the French Foreign Legion in order to defend the country he loved so much. He did not abandon his poetry. One of his compositions during this period was an eerily prophetic poem entitled "Rendezvous with Death:"

*I have a rendezvous with Death*

*At some disputed barricade,*

*When Spring comes back with rustling shade*

*And apple-blossoms fill the air--*

*I have a rendezvous with Death*

*When Spring brings back blue days and fair.*

Seeger kept his appointment with death on July 1, 1916 - the first day of the Battle of the Somme. He was 28 years old.

"The Supreme Experience"

Seeger kept a diary of his experiences in the French Foreign Legion. This, along with his letters, was published in 1917. His final letter was written to a friend as he waited along with his company to be called up to join the opening attack of the Battle of the Somme:

"June 28, 1916.

We go up to the attack tomorrow. This will probably be the biggest thing yet. We are to have the honor of marching in the first wave.

I will write you soon if I get through all right. If not, my only earthly care is for my poems. I am glad to be going in first wave. If you are in this thing at all it is best to be in to the limit. And this is the supreme experience."

"..that was the last time I saw my friend"

The rest of Alan Seeger's story is told through the words of a friend:

"At 8 o'clock on the morning of July 1st there was roll call for the day's orders and we were told that the general offensive would begin at 9 without us, as we were in reserve, and that we should be notified of the day and hour that we were to go into action. When this report was finished we were ordered to shell fatigue, unloading 8 inch shells from automobile trucks which brought them up to our position.

All was hustle and bustle. The Colonial regiments had carried the first German lines and thousands and thousands of prisoners kept arriving and leaving. Ambulances filed along the roads continuously. As news began to arrive we left our work to seek more details; picking up souvenirs, postcards, letters, soldiers' notebooks, and chatting all the time, when suddenly a voice called out: 'The company will fall in to go to the first line.'

About 4 o'clock the order came to get ready for the attack. None could help thinking of what the next few hours would bring. One minute's anguish and then, once in the ranks, faces became calm and serene, a kind of gravity falling upon them, while on each could be read the determination and expectation of victory. Two battalions were to attack Belloy-en-Santerre, our company being the reserve of battalion. The companies forming the first wave were deployed on the plain. Bayonets glittered in the air above the corn, already quite tall.

The first section (Alan's section) formed the right and vanguard of the company and mine formed the left wing. After the first bound forward, we lay flat on the ground, and I saw the first section advancing beyond us and mak.. ing toward the extreme right of the village of Belloy-en-Santerre. I caught sight of Seeger and called to him, making a sign with my hand.

He answered with a smile. How pale he was! His tall silhouette stood out on the green of the cornfield. He was the tallest man in his section. His head erect, and pride in his eye, I saw him running forward, with bayonet fixed. Soon he disappeared and that was the last time I saw my friend. . . ."

References: Keegan, John, The Face of War (2001); Seeger, Alan, Letters and Diary (posthumously published 1917).