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LIFE IN THE TRENCHES

Modern History: recount from W.W.I

Life in the trenches during the First World War was miserable, especially in the wet weather. Then long time living into trenches with bad hygiene and sanitation there were many diseases, from which the people died very often in considerable numbers. Writings and Memoirs from witness and soldiers living and fighting in trenches in W.W.I on Western Front are related to these horrible endurance by people.

Is know that the trench warfare dominated the First World War, as the principal military strategy, then, the mechanization on the battlefield not existed, and armies of infantry moved on feet, as the Roman legions. Then that strategy of trenches warfare was more advantageous for defense not for offensive, but the generals of armies insisting more on the offensives, enormous number of soldiers were killed by machine guns from the enemy placed for firing into their trenches.

Thus, the wounded people will have to die in their trenches for infections, diseases, flood, mud, without adequate treatment, and, in the winter time for cold and snow. But the soldiers life in trenches was affected by many other causes of infections from other sources as, rats invasions who carried bacillus from dead horses, rotting corpses and misery from around. The rats attacked wounded people who still were alive but unable to move. The rats epidemic was throughout the W.W.I a horrible situation.

Rats, the size of small cats, were a common sight, its fed off the innumerable corpses exposed or half buried in the earth. Both the brown and the black rats were to be found. They were everywhere and odious for its rapacity. Both these species are natives of central Asia, but since they infest ship, have been carried to nearly all parts of the world. Breeding several times a year, bearing ten or more youngs at a time, multiplying fantastic, became dangerous not only for carrying diseases, but for international agricultural economy. USA, reported some \$100,000,000 worth of foodstuff annually. They eat eggs, poultry even game birds. With their strong teeth they gnaw

through hard wood and even lead pipes. The spread of bubonic plague has been traced directly to rats, the plague bacillus spread by fleas infect the rat and it carry than to men's habitat.

Thus, in the trenches warfare where the corpses of dead people were rotted, and half-buried into mud, the rats were a really epidemic. The churned mud was knee-deep when heavy rain falls. The duckboard track was more often sank under mud, then when wet snow had begun to fall and turned into rain, some parts of the land were soon a bog of mud to get drowned in.

When the stretcher-bearer at the Battle of Somme saved a wonder soldier, and there were thousands of wounded men in 1916, the trenches were only a source of infection and aggravation for wound occurring the death. A typical British battalion lost about thirty men per month through death, of two common ailments known as, "trench foot" and "trench fever."

Constant immersion of feet in mud and water caused the disease of "trench foot". The legs would swell, blister and turn red or blue. In severe cases the foot turned mushroom white and it was not uncommon for the entire sole of a man's foot to fall away when boots were removed by medics. It means that the gangrene would set in, and amputations were common. Sanitation was poor, the only remedy was to coat the foot with foul-smelling grease made from whale oil.

But the sanitary conditions were crude and even the rain that fell was not enough to wash away the debris of rotting corpses, excreta, urine, and all rubbish discarded by the soldiers. Finally, the life was unsupportable in trenches, and the smell was there unbearable. Smoke from fires and the stale sweat of men living in confined airless dugouts, made impossible a personal hygiene.

The clothing became impregnated with bacilli of a so named disease, "gas gangrene", which was deadly. Although the disease has nothing to do with poison gas, the soils of northern France, where the trenches were crossing all over, was full of organic manure, which contained a bacillus common to a horse's intestines. When a small portion of rags or of fabric infested with this sort of bacillus would be forced into the wound, the infection will occur very soon.

A doctor described the symptoms: "After forty-eight hours the edges of the wound begin to swell up and turn, making it gape... The wound surface takes on a curious half-jellied, half-mummified look; then the whole wounded limb begins to swell up and distend in the most extraordinary fashion, turning, as it does so, first an ashy white and then a greenish colour. This is because the tissues are being literally blown out with gas..."

Surgery for "gas gangrene" was pioneered preventive with some success, but very painful. It was to remove all tissue and around the wound, and then sluiced with a saline wash to prevent re-infection. But, many times the wound developed a gangrene which needed the amputation of foot or hand, or the wounded will die if it occur on the other part of body.

Living long time into trenches, how was the case on the Western Front, under artillery bombardments, and fear of death, cases of psychological trauma and mental breakdown for some men occurred, known as the, "shell-shock", and it was often a gradual accumulation of stress. To deal with this problem, divisional rest stations were established from 1916, with a capacity for 500-1000 people. Soldiers stayed there for about two weeks, were well fed, rested on a program of exercise and returned to battlefields.

Both armies, German and Allied, in theory were well fed. But some witness and writings of former soldiers described that full allocation of food did not always reach the men. Nor was the quality particularly good. There was the situation when by lack of potatoes, the soldiers eat chestnuts and a disease of dysentery inflamed the intestines.

Hot food was very occasionally. The field kitchens carried hot food to the trenches in metal pannikins, jam tins and even petrol cans. The Germans suffered badly as a result of the Allied blockade and their own limited agricultural resources, and meat rations were cut after June 1916, "meatless days" were declared and horseflesh substituted for beef and pork. Army biscuits had to be smashed with a hard object before being eaten, but soaking or boiled needed, because to eat its uncooked sometimes was impossible.

The fresh bread distributed to soldiers was backed not early of eight days. Rum was distributed in some cases to soldiers from the first fighting trenches to encourage them to stand up on the fire steps, at

assaults, or just to compensate the cold weather, which was another trauma for soldiers living into trenches.

British army did not provide hot food into trenches until late in 1915, but there were not lacks of canned and tinned food, only to reach the first trenches was difficult in general.

Anyhow, the trench warfare, the soldiers living into trenches was a boring life, tedious, ugly, dangerous, traumatic, in a word speaking a troglodyte existence, the life of soldier appeared to be of a cave-man.

The other disease, which covered all combatants' armies and their allies too, into their trenches were the lice. Trench fever, about I said before, was a lice transmitted disease. Attempts to disinfect were made, but there could not prevent the return of these lice. A common symptom of that "trench fever" was acute shooting pain in the skins, after which a high fever set in. It was not fatal but an infected soldier could be off duty for up to three months. Then "nits" infested men's hair, and then there were also itch mites, scabies coming by the scratching of infected sores.

The National Encyclopedia, New York, 1932, explain that the lice are known to be carriers of typhus fever, trench fever, and relapsing fever. True lice are wingless insects. They develop without metamorphosis. The body is flattened, the head free and horizontal. Each leg is provided with a claw for clinging to hairs of the host. Eggs, known as "nits" are glued to the host's hairs, for that the soldiers cut their hair to throw these eggs. As parasitic insect, its mouthparts are fitted for piercing and sucking blood. Three species are parasitic upon man; "the body-louse, the head-louse, the crab-louse." The lice can be destroyed with kerosene.

The other psychological trauma suffered by men living long time into trenches, especially on the West Front in the W.W.I, was so named, "repetitive strain injury", an injury consisting of repetition of bombardment, which press neurotic the brain, can be and a monotonous and unstoping rain on the trenches, which can be at same time a cold rain.

The daily casualties, and terrible injuries met at any offensive, again was a source of mental stress when people lost their nerves, committing even suicide into trenches or attacking the commander. Conditions at the Front sometimes were so critical, brutal and

inhuman, that even after the W.W.I ended, many former combatants in trenches were carrying traumatic problems, mentally or physically.