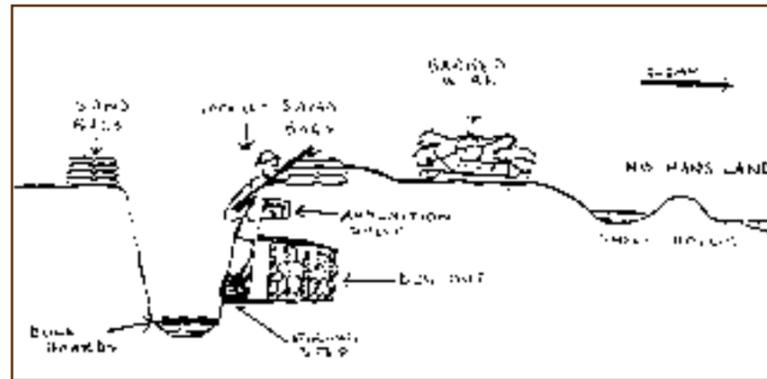


# TRENCH WARFARE

It was clear that this war was very different from previous wars where cavalry charges had broken through the enemy lines to allow the advance of the infantry. Modern weapons had changed all that. The rapid fire of machine guns could mow down advancing troops in huge numbers. Fragments of shrapnel from high explosive shells could cut a man in half. Against this hail of metal there was no protection. The soldiers quickly learned that the safest place to be was a hole in the ground. So on both sides they dug in, and soon the temporary trenches developed into permanent ones linked together with the units on either side and to the rear. By the end of 1914 an unbroken line of trenches stretched from the Channel to the Swiss border. For the next four years the war would be fought from the trenches on this strip some 400 miles long and a few hundred metres wide.

The front-line trenches might be anything from 80 to 800 metres apart; the land between them – “**No Man’s Land**” – was a strip of churned up ground, pitted with shell holes, with perhaps the skeletal remains of a few trees. The trenches were normally dug in zig-zags,



*Cross Section of a trench system*

so that if a shell landed the shrapnel blast would not spread too far. In front of each trench would be a band of barbed wire several metres wide to trap attackers, and perhaps a parapet of sandbags. A trench had to be deep enough to allow someone to walk along it without being seen. A raised **firing step**

allowed a soldier to look out across no man’s land but this was dangerous as any ruined building or shattered tree might be used as a hiding place for a **sniper**, who would shoot at anyone he saw in the opposite trench. This gave rise to the tradition among smokers that it was unlucky to accept the third light from a match; three lights would give a sniper time to aim and fire. Often periscopes were used to see what the enemy was up to.



*Plan of a trench system*

Normally the men had only short spells of duty “**up the line**”, for even when no battle was going on there would be shelling or machine gun fire. Little sleep would be had in the **dug-outs** – holes dug into the sides of the trenches. On an average day there might be hundreds of killed and wounded. Moreover, the trenches, being just holes in the ground, became very muddy in bad weather; **trench foot** where the feet became swollen and rotten with the constant damp was a common medical problem. Some men could not cope with the constant roar of guns and nearby explosions and succumbed to **shell shock**. At first they were considered to be cowards and they were often shot for this. But as more men, including officers, became shell shocked, it was recognised that this was a genuine mental illness, brought on by the stress of being under constant bombardment. In addition lice thrived in the cramped, dirty conditions and the trenches were infested with rats which fed on the corpses lying out in no man’s land. Inevitably this led to epidemics of diseases like typhoid and dysentery.



*Royal Scots Fusiliers in trench*

To the rear were usually a second and a third line of support trenches and beyond that communication trenches ran back to reserve areas, **dressing stations** for the wounded and the **field kitchens** where food was prepared. All the food, water and other supplies had to be carried to the front line along the winding communications trenches. After a tour of three or four weeks in the line, with regular spells in the front line trench, it was a welcome relief to withdraw to one of the rest areas to the rear, beyond the reach of the guns. Also safely in the rear was the **headquarters**, where the senior officers made their decisions.