

Frank MacDonald Memorial Prize

Question 2

Trench warfare is arguably the dominant feature of World War One (WWI). The Western Front in particular was dissected by thousands of kilometres of trenches. Trench warfare is most often used in stalemates as a defensive tactic. The Western Front exemplified this, leading to millions of deaths in concentrated areas. Trench warfare was not invented in 1914 but had been utilised in some 19th century wars, such as the American Civil War (1861-1865) and the Boer War (1899-1902) (Llewellyn, Thompson, 2017). Yet, before WWI, trench warfare had only ever played a minor role in warfare. The trenches of WWI were built out of necessity, rather than strategy. They literally began with soldiers digging foxholes as shelter with their helmets. Generals still expected their armies to conform to the outdated tactics of the Franco-Prussian Wars, whilst facing advanced weaponry, a result of the arms race between Britain and Germany. This unplanned eventuation impacted every aspect of WWI, particularly its duration.

The first trenches of World War One were dug following the Battle of the Marne, on 15 September 1914. The Western Front eventually snaked in a zigzag, from Alsace, near Switzerland, all the way to the north of Belgium (History Editors, 2020). The front consisted of three trench lines. The first was the firing trench and would be situated anywhere from fifty metres to three kilometres from the enemy. Several hundreds of metres behind this trench, was the support trench, and further behind this trench, was the reserve trench. These were all connected by communication trenches, which ran perpendicular to the three main lines. 'Saps' were shallow trenches, or ditches dug into 'No Man's Land' as observation posts and artillery positions (Fussell, 1981). According to William Holmes of the London Regiment (Imperial War Museum, n.d.): "Every trench was originally built by soldiers with sandbags... They were filled with ordinary soil and tied and put one on top of the other to make a wall." (Imperial War Museum, n.d.). Life in the trenches, as Walter Hare of the West Yorkshire regiment recalled, was gruelling (Imperial War Museum, December 1916): "I was knee deep in mud... Well we slogged down this communication trench... and got to what was the front line... we were told we hadn't

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to show our heads above the parapet because there were snipers...It depressed you a bit.” (Imperial War Museum, 1916).

Descriptions of life in the frontline trenches are consistent, depicting it as muddy, loud and dangerous. Due to the static nature of trench warfare, a plethora of dangers presented themselves. It was near impossible to avoid the constant shelling. In the winter months, the trenches would fill with water and mud, and the inescapable cold persecuted the soldiers. Trenches became waterlogged, mud-filled, and infested with rats and lice (Australian War Memorial, 2021). A common disease was trench foot, caused by the extended exposure to a damp and cold environment. Fatigue and poor diet exacerbated trench foot symptoms, and amputation was often required. Trench foot led to 75,000 casualties in just the British forces alone (Atenstaedt, 2006).

WWI was fought on two fronts; the Western Front comprised of static offensives, and the Eastern, a war of movement. The failure of Germany’s Schlieffen Plan in north-western Europe resulted in a concentration of troops in a small area. The Central and Allied Powers repeatedly attempted to out-flank each other, creating a continuous front (Llewellyn, Thompson, 2017). Germany had to divide its troops in two to meet Russia in the East. The Eastern Front was almost twice as wide as the Western Front (Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2021). “In the west, the armies were too big for the land; in the east, the land was too big for the armies.” (Churchill, 1931). At the beginning of WWI, military leaders still believed in the effectiveness and nobility of offensive actions, a strategy that had dominated warfare for centuries. Strategists theorised that static defences, such as trenches, would not hold out against the newly developed machine guns and heavy artillery. However, this idyllic war of movement only developed on the Eastern Front, whilst the Western Front became one almost exclusively of trench warfare. The gruelling and futile trench battles can be attributed to the duration of WWI, neither side able to win (Dowling, 2014).

The Western Front was a war of attrition, neither side being able to gain any overwhelming advantage. The 1916 Battle of the Somme embodies the bloody futility of trench warfare on the Western Front. Weary and overstretched troops could not break lines by simply walking towards the heavily entrenched enemy protected by machine guns, artillery and poison gas. Both sides suffered losses of over one

million soldiers, only to advance a mere 5.4 km, in five months (Krause, 2015). Tactics used in the Somme, and throughout the Western Front, such as charging forward against well sighted, efficient machine guns were deadly, creating a stalemate. Only towards the end of WWI, did generals begin to utilise new strategies and all aspects of the military. This is seen in offensives on the Hindenburg Line in 1918, a series of attacks which successfully broke German lines, spearheaded by the Australian Imperial Force (Australian War Memorial, 2021).

WWI was dominated by forward assaults across no man's land, through a storm of bullets and shells. A combination of outdated strategies and advanced technology led by belligerent leaders, with poorly trained soldiers in the face of modern weaponry led to the failure of these offensive tactics. WWI is said to have been a war of attrition (Krause, 2015). Trench warfare only exaggerated this, as military strategists on both sides believed the war could be fought in the same manner as the Franco-Prussian War or the American Civil War, two conflicts fought with older weaponry, and not on the same scale as WWI. Using trenches as the primary defensive tactic only prolonged the war by hindering soldiers' ability to advance (Delaware Historical & Cultural Affairs, n.d.). Millions of soldiers died in largely futile battles fought between trenches at places like Verdun, Pozieres and Passchendaele: commanded by the British. One of the most notable allied victories in WWI was the 1918 Battle of Hamel, which successfully co-ordinated infantry, artillery, armoured vehicles and aircraft. This is widely considered as the template for, and the beginning of modern warfare. It was commanded by Australian Lieutenant General John Monash, with the objective of reclaiming the village of Hamel. In early July 1918, a small force of Australian and American forces attacked their objective, with 60 tanks, 85 aircraft and 550 heavy guns in support. In less than two hours, all objectives had been achieved with just 1,260 casualties. These tactics were repeated thereafter, pressuring the Germans into an armistice (Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2020). Historian Dr Aaron Pegram stated: "Hamel was far from the traditional battle of mud and trenches that had characterised much of the fighting on the Western Front." (Pegram, 2018). Trench warfare had influenced the length and success of battles fought on the Western Front, and the Battle of Hamel is evident of the changing tactics and attitudes of commanders. Trench warfare could not allow swift advances and effective offensives for either the Allied or the Central Powers. The

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Battle of Hamel moved away from the traditional head on assault, and these tactics were repeated to break the Hindenburg Line, leading to the Allied Victory (Australian War Memorial 2021).

Trench warfare is one of the most defining aspects of World War One and directedly influenced the duration of the war and the success of offensives. Charging directly at heavy artillery from a static defence, like trench warfare, only led to drawn-out and bloody stalemates, like the Battles of the Somme, Ypres and Verdun. Soldiers in the trenches were under constant threat of enemy bombardment, disease, and malnutrition. The stalemate only ended when enlightened commanders utilised new technology and new tactics to break free of traditional modes of trench warfare.

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