

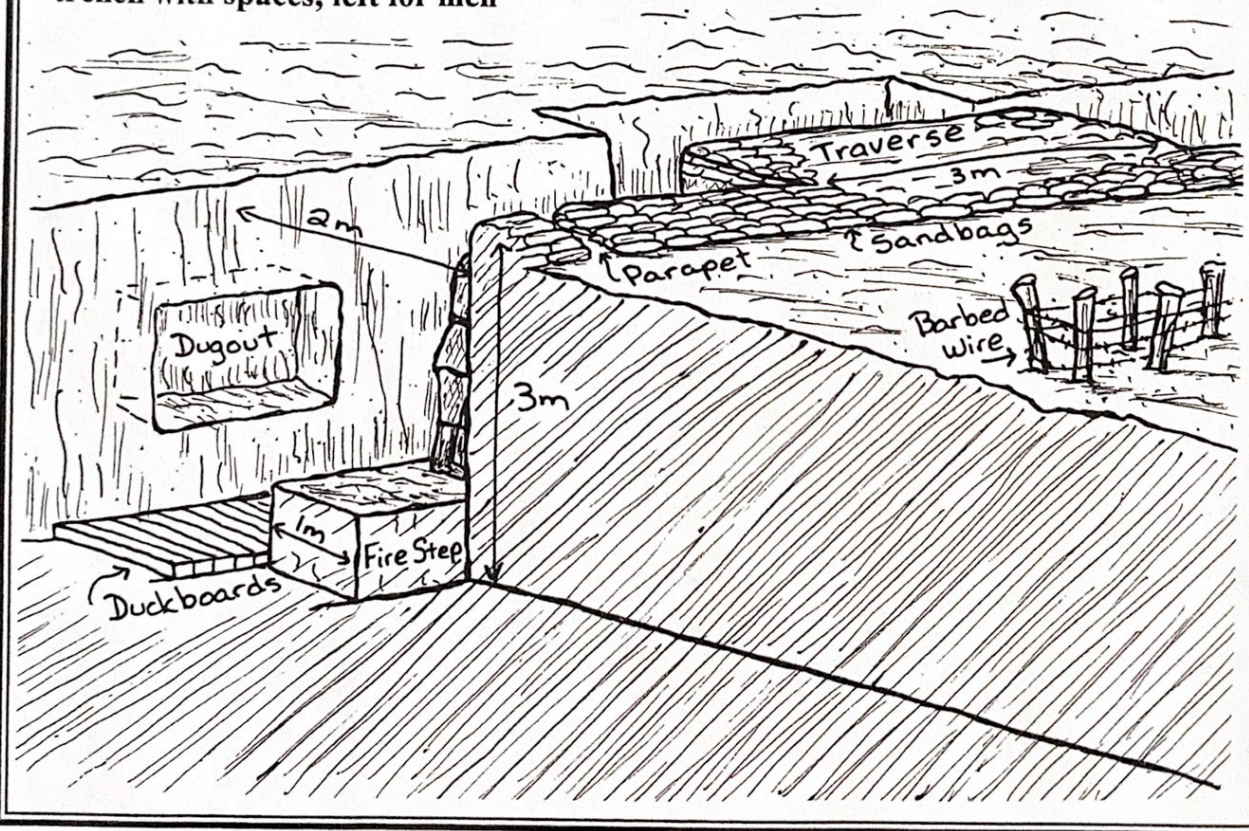
MUD, RATS AND DEATH

When news of the war in Europe reached Canada, men signed up by the thousands. To the eager men, it seemed like enlisting was “the thing to do” and all of them wanted to get into the fighting before the war was over. However, by the time that the Canadian troops had arrived in France, there were two deadly lines of trenches facing each other that ran from Switzerland to the English Channel.

A typical trench was usually about 2 to 3 meters deep and about 2 meters wide. They contained barriers called “traverses”, which prevented an enemy from capturing part of the trench and shooting down its length. Sandbags ran along the top of the trench with spaces, left for men

standing on the “firestep”, to shoot from. Usually, two more sets of parallel trenches were also built behind the front line trench. These support trenches were to be used as a “fall-back” trench in case the front line trench was taken by the enemy. They were also used for storing supplies. With tangles of razor-sharp barbed wire placed in front, heavy artillery in the rear and machine guns spaced along its length, a trench was extremely difficult to attack.

The men slept and ate in small rooms and spaces called dugouts. These hollowed out places were usually dug behind and under the trenches to protect the men from artillery fire which rained down constantly.



And the living conditions were horrific. One soldier who was there describes the trenches like this:

“Now they speak of trenches as this strange ribbon of deadly stealth across Europe. Trenches is too romantic a name... These were ditches... As time went by we had no garbage disposal, no sewage disposal - they became filthy. You threw everything you didn't want out over the parapet.... And if you ever stood at a place where, with powerful binoculars, you could look at the trenches, you saw this strange line of garbage heap wandering up hill and down dale as far as the eye could see. And in that setting the lice-ridden men lived.... year after year in a sort of garbage dump ditch ... the latrines (bathrooms) were little trenches off the main trench. These, when they became too smelly and offensive, were filled in and a new one dug; but these main trenches were held sometimes months on end. They became very sour.”

“This land of stealth went through towns and villages but mostly through abandoned farm fields, running wild with turnip and some other farm crops. A weird tangle - you would think it would come alive with animals, but no. There was nothing in it except rats, by the countless million. I don't think it was possible to exaggerate the number of rats in that stealthy land - and they added that last mad (crazy) feature. Wherever

you went, in daylight and at night, the whole place was squealing with these huge, monstrous rats living on this garbage and the dead...”

“The tension never for one moment relaxed. The stealth never relaxed day or night, winter, spring, summer, autumn. The tension never ended. You never knew at what moment one of those perfectly meaningless sounds ... would get you ... It wouldn't have taken a great deal in this dreadful, prehistoric circumstance for men to have lost heart and they never did. We had a thing called “shell shock” in our war ... A great many of us did not like the phrase ... It wasn't anything of the kind. It was just fatigue - not so much in battle as in these long intervals of living under these conditions ...”





MUD, RATS AND DEATH

Name: _____

1. Why were Canadian men eager to get to Europe at the start of the war?

2. Why do *you think* soldiers on both sides had so much difficulty in breaking through the enemy's trench system? List three reasons.
 - a) _____
 - b) _____
 - c) _____

3. Although most soldiers that died during the war were killed in battle, thousands also died of sickness and disease. Why was this?

4. List three things about the trenches that *you think* would make life the most difficult.
 - a) _____
 - b) _____
 - c) _____

5. If you were a general, describe the plan that *you* would use to attack an enemy trench system. (Remember that the trenches were not just a single line. They were a system of trenches that were all connected and protected by machine guns and artillery)

