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Trench Warfare During WWI & WWII

Today I'm going to be talking about how Trench Warfare was fought during the first two great wars in Europe and western Russia. I will be explaining the strategies and tactics used in this kind of warfare that proved vital in key battles during the time period. Also, I will be going into some of the key allied victory's that had to fight through these rough conditions.

Furthermore, I will be going into detail about military technology for the time. Including weapons, artillery, aircraft, poison gas, tanks, and other key pieces of technology that played an important role in not only surviving the war but winning.

First, I will go into some detail about how trench warfare was fought. There were essentially three lines to each sector of battle, first being named the "Line of Resistance" where the "first defense is made against the enemy's attacks in the support points on the line". Where troops usually were put to observe and provide security. Most trenches also had some sort of "doubling trench" where back up troops rested and prepared for their duty on the first line, which had shelters and were more complex. The second being a "Support Line" which served as reserves and headquarters of the battalion commanders. Then the third line which is referred to as "covering line of the artillery" because it "defends the batteries distributed behind it, it also contains the reserve troops of a sector". Another detail mentioned was "This is also where the headquarters were for the colonel and all other depots of a sector" were located (Solbert).

Furthermore, I will be discussing the conditions and routines of trench warfare, particularly on the Somme front before the chaos really erupted. Troops started the day before dawn, and usually at first light would “stand to” against the enemy followed by “morning hate” where troops would fire large amounts of ammunition and firepower, which in theory would give both sides a “quiet day” as far as the number of casualties. After their “stand to” soldiers would usually then prepare their breakfast, shave, and wash. The remainder of the day for the men on the front lines would usually consist of soldiers trying to catch up on sleep while taking turns keeping security. Fresh food was hard to come by in the trenches, usually food came in canned rations and on special occasions they would be treated to warm dinners from the second and third reserve lines. As night fell on the trenches in Somme was when the behind the scenes work went on, such as repairs to trenches, and bringing in the next day’s rations. Only at night was it considered safe to be above ground level. Parties of soldiers would go out to fix barbed wire reinforcements in no man’s land, again even through the night soldiers took turns sleeping to keep guard. (Middlebrook)

Second, I will be discussing some of the battles that involved trench warfare and how allies were able to gain the upper hand. The first most notable battle was the battle of Somme, which soldiers on both sides had been anticipating and preparing for leading up to the attack. The largest responsibilities leading up to the attack came down to the front line, digging out plenty of trenches. But more important was the job that was required of the artillery men, where they had

to “have a gun, howitzer, or mortar every 17 yards.” Where more shells were planned to be fired in one week than in the first 12 months of the war combined. The bombardment started on June 24th with the assault planned for the 29th, each morning of the bombardment gunners consecutively fired off rounds and motors for 80 minutes from every available gun. Also included in the plan was that the day of the attack the bombardment would only last 65 minutes. In theory tricking the Germans to think that there was still another 15 of motor fire while the allied troops marched over no mans land. Due to bad weather the assault got postponed until July 1st, where at 7:30 the first whistles blew from British commanders, and them yelling “over the top”. In total more than 84 battalions, and more than 66,000 troops had attacked in the first hour. Nearly half of that number became casualties within in the first hour, roughly 30,000 soldiers. The battle ended up lasting into autumn of 1916, allied forces ended up taking 3 heavily fortified German villages, Montauban, Mametz and Fricourt. As well as a total of around 62,000 casualties, essentially for every yard of the 16-mile front 2 British soldiers had lost their lives. (M.)

Furthermore, I will be discussing some of the key allied victory’s that shifted the tide during the war, first being, the battle of Amiens. Which took place August 1918; in this battle allied troops learned from the previous battles of Somme in 1916 and Passchendaele in 1917 to approach from a different tactical view. In this battle allied forces eschewed a preliminary bombardment that kept up with the first wave ground assault. Also, during this battle over 500 tanks were deployed, that ended up helping to turn the tide in our favor. The tanks during this battle proved vital for our success, they were able to plow through barbed wire and were not

fazed by machinegun fire. On top of tanks, ground troops and artillery we also had to the support of the air force during this battle. This “combined arms” style of fighting proved successful and ended up punching a 15-mile gap in the German defensive line. Also allied troops ended up capturing over 15,000 German troops in the process. (Phelan)

So all in all Trench warfare proved to be a battle all its own as far as strategy, living conditions and continuous bombardment. Soldiers, generals and officers had to come up with new plans and tactics to overcome the German forces and to be able to do so without a staggering loss of life. New military technology and weapons also played a large role in how the battles were fought, and what could be done to gain the upper hand. These early battles proved to be some of the most gruesome and bloodiest battles in history, showing the true courage and determination of allied troops given possibly the worst war time conditions and odds not stacked in their favor.

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