

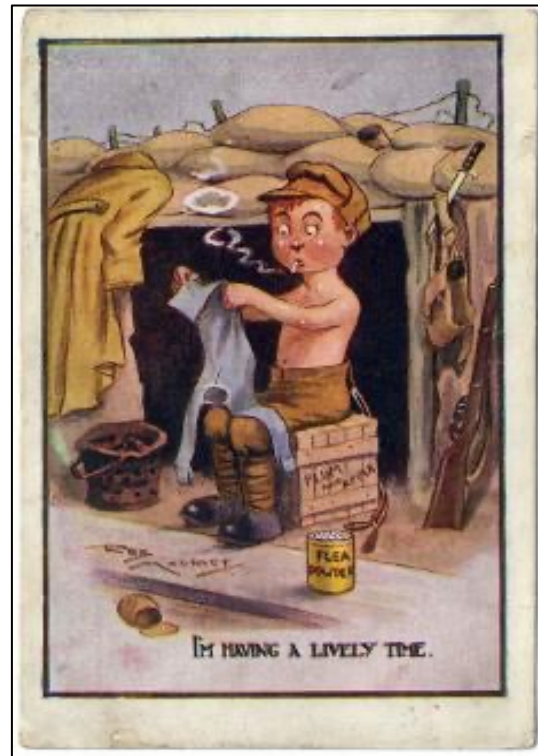
LICE IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Men in the trenches suffered from lice. One soldier writing after the war described them as "pale fawn in colour, and they left blotchy red bite marks all over the body." They also created a sour; stale smell. Various methods were used to remove the lice. A lighted candle was fairly effective but the skill of burning the lice without burning your clothes was only learnt with practice. "The things lay in the seams of trousers, in the deep furrows of long thick woolly pants, and seemed impregnable in their deep entrenchments. A lighted candle applied where they were thickest made them pop like Chinese crackers. After a session of this, faces would be covered with small blood spots from extra big fellows which had popped too vigorously."



In his autobiography, Harry Patch explains the problems he had with lice on the Western Front: "The lice were the size of grains of rice, each with its own bite, each with its own itch. When we could, we would run hot wax from a candle down the seams of our trousers, our vests - whatever you had - to burn the buggers out. It was the only thing to do. Eventually, when we got to Rouen, coming back, they took every stitch off us and gave us a suit of sterilised blue material. And the uniforms they took off, they burned them - to get rid of the lice."

Where possible the army arranged for the men to have baths in huge vats of hot water while their clothes were being put through delousing machines. Unfortunately, this rarely worked. A fair proportion of the eggs remained in the clothes and within two or three hours of the clothes being put on again a man's body heat had hatched them out.



At the Passchendaele Lieutenant Robert Sherriff described his men going into battle: "At dawn on the morning of the attack, the battalion assembled in the mud outside the huts. I lined up my platoon and went through the necessary inspection. Some of the men looked terribly ill: grey, worn faces in the dawn, unshaved and dirty because there was no clean water. I saw the characteristic shrugging of their shoulders that I knew so well. They hadn't had their clothes off for weeks, and their shirts were full of lice."

Lieutenant John Reith was very successful in dealing with lice. According to his diary: "No lice had so far come my way, but I was always in fear of them. On going into trenches I used to spray about a gallon of lysol over my bunk below the parapet and generally about the hut; now, with the receipt from home of a box of mercurial ointment, I took for the first time to wearing my identity disc, drawing the string through the ointment. I had heard that this was a louse deterrent. It made one's neck dirty but there was never a louse found."

As well as causing frenzied scratching, lice also carried disease. This was known as pyrexia or trench fever. The first symptoms were shooting pains in the shins and was followed by a very high fever. Although the disease did not kill, it did stop soldiers from fighting and accounted for about 15% of all cases of sickness in the British Army.

Henry Gregory of 119th Machine Gun company was interviewed after the war about life in the trenches. When we arrived in the trenches we got a shock when the other soldiers in the hut took their shirts off after tea. They were catching lice. We had never seen a louse before, but they were here in droves. The men were killing them between their nails. When they saw us looking at this performance with astonishment, one of the men remarked, "You will soon be as lousy as we are chum!" They spent the better part of an hour in killing lice and scratching themselves. We soon found out that this took the better part of an hour daily. Each day brought a new batch; as fast as you killed them, others took their place.

One night, as we lay in bed after doing our two hours' sentry - we did two hours on and two hours off - my friend Jock said 'damn this, I cannot stand it any longer!' He took off his tunic - we slept in these - then he took off his jersey, then his shirt. He put his shirt in the middle of the dug-out floor and put his jersey and tunic on again. As we sat up in bed watching the shirt he had taken off and put it on the floor it actually lifted; it was swarming with lice.

(2) [Isaac Rosenberg, The Immortals \(1918\)](#)

I killed them, but they would not die.
Yea! all the day and all the night
For them I could not rest or sleep,
Nor guard from them nor hide in flight.
Then in my agony I turned
And made my hands red in their gore.
In vain - for faster than I slew
They rose more cruel than before.
I killed and killed with slaughter mad;
I killed till all my strength was gone.
And still they rose to torture me,
For Devils only die in fun.
I used to think the Devil hid
In women's smiles and wine's carouse.
I called him Satan, Balzebub.
But now I call him, dirty louse.

(3) Private Stuart Dolden wrote about his experiences in the trenches after the war.

We had to sleep fully dressed, of course, this was very uncomfortable with the pressure of ammunition on one's chest restricted breathing; furthermore, when a little warmth was obtained the vermin used to get busy, and for some unexplained reason they always seemed to get lively in the portion of one's back, that lay underneath the belt and was the most inaccessible spot. The only way to obtain relief was to get out of the dugout, put a rifle barrel between the belt and rub up and down like a donkey at a gatepost. This stopped it for a bit, but as soon as one got back into the dugout, and was getting reasonably warm so would the little brutes get going again.

(4) Private George Coppard, *With A Machine Gun to Cambrai* (1969)

A full day's rest allowed us to clean up a bit, and to launch a full-scale attack on lice. I sat in a quiet corner of a barn for two hours delousing myself as best I could. We were all at it, for none of us escaped their vile attentions. The things lay in the seams of trousers, in the deep furrows of long thick woolly pants, and seemed impregnable in their deep entrenchments. A lighted candle applied where they were thickest made them pop like Chinese crackers. After a session of this, my face would be covered with small blood spots from extra big fellows which had popped too vigorously. Lice hunting was called 'chatting'. In parcels from home it was usual to receive a tin of supposedly death-dealing powder or pomade, but the lice thrived on the stuff.

(5) Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That* (1929)

In the interval between stand-to and breakfast, the men who were not getting in a bit of extra sleep sat about talking and smoking, writing letters home, cleaning their rifles, running their thumb-nails up the seams of their shirts to kill lice, gambling. Lice were a standing joke. Young Bumford handed me one: "We was just having an argument as to whether it's best to kill the old ones or the young ones, sir.

Morgan here says that if you kill the old ones, the young ones die of grief; but Parry here, sir, he says that the young ones are easier to kill, and you can catch the old ones when they go to the funeral." He appealed to me as an arbiter: "You've been to college, sir, haven't you?"

(6) John Reith, *Wearing Spurs* (1966)

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(7) Robert Sherriff , *No Leading Lady* (1968)

At dawn on the morning of the attack, the battalion assembled in the mud outside the huts. I lined up my platoon and went through the necessary inspection. Some of the men looked terribly ill: grey, worn faces in the dawn, unshaved and dirty because there was no clean water. I saw the characteristic shrugging of their shoulders that I knew so well. They hadn't had their clothes off for weeks, and their shirts were full of lice.

(8) [Harry Patch, Last Post \(2005\)](#)

Lice. We were lousy. The lice were the size of grains of rice, each with its own bite, each with its own itch. When we could, we would run hot wax from a candle down the seams of our trousers, our vests - whatever you had - to burn the buggers out. It was the only thing to do. Eventually, when we got to Rouen, coming back, they took every stitch off us and gave us a suit of sterilised blue material. And the uniforms they took off, they burned them - to get rid of the lice. For the four months I was in France I never had a bath, and I never had any clean clothes to put on. Nothing.

(9) [Henry Allingham, Last Post \(2005\)](#)

We all got lice in our clothes. We used to run the seam of the shirt over a candle flame to get rid of them. Of course, you'd wash your shirt if you could - and when you did wash it, you'd hang it on a bit of line. Next thing you'd see was the lice crawling along the line.

(10) [Harriet Hyman Alonso, Robert E. Sherwood The Playwright in Peace and War \(2007\)](#)

Robert Sherwood's main trench annoyance was lice, another constant among soldiers. Filthy, wet clothing welcomed these pests, where they lodged in seams and caused constant itching. Many men also had head lice, which drove them to shave their heads, for no matter how often they washed and deloused their clothing and hair with creosote and carbolic soap, as Bobby did, they could not remove the louse eggs, which quickly hatched, starting the cycle all over again. Other trench annoyances included frogs, horned beetles, and slugs, which proliferated in the hospitable muddy environment.

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