

While we remember those who died, perhaps we should also remember the tens of thousands who returned from the front. Some were relatively unscathed, others badly wounded and permanently disabled.

Remembering the Great War

Some of the dimensions of the 1914-18 war to end all wars:

- The conflict cost both sides a total of 8,5 million dead. Even on the quietest days, thousands of troops were killed or wounded - a process termed "wastage" by British officers.

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- The western front soon bogged down into a stalemate from Belgium to Switzerland. Both sides built networks of trenches long enough in total, by some estimates, to circle the Earth. + German troops built the best trenches: they picked the high ground and designed their earthworks to be permanent. Sometimes their dugouts included wallpaper and varnished woodwork. Ramshackle British and French efforts were always wet and sometimes flooded. Opposing lines could be as close as seven metres.
- The front lines, especially during winter in low-lying Flanders, were a sea of trenches, craters, latrines, corpses, and vermin. Approaching troops could smell the trenches before they saw them.
- The men were small (by modern standards) and their packs heavy. The average British recruit weighed 132 pounds and carried accoutrements of 77



Of the thousands of men who returned in 1918 to pick up the threads of their lives, only a tiny number is still living today. No one knows exactly how many remain, but the number is rapidly decreasing, and it will not be long before the Great War moves out into the darkness beyond living memory.

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pounds, including a greatcoat that might weigh 20 to 50 pounds more when soggy. Wounded ~en drowned by the thousands in the mud; so did unlucky sleepers.

- By 1916, both sides had steel helmets instead of cloth hats.
- The enemy was rarely seen; his bullets and shells were more common. During heavy shelling, troops endured up to 30 shells a minute - a "thunderstorm" or "symphony" of sound that was felt as much as heard. Across the English Channel, the barrages of Flanders were plainly audible.
- Informal truces sprang up when barbed wire needed mending or there were soldiers to retrieve (the wounded might moan in no man's land for days).
- Big attacks were rarely surprises; they were preceded by heavy shelling and openings of the barbed wire. On July 1, 1916, when the British attacked in the Somme, they had 60,000 casualties - one man for every 18 inches of the front.
- Record heaps of munitions were used. For instance, south of Ypres, British miners tunnelled for a year to place a million pounds of high explosives into 21 shafts. On June 7, 1917, the complex was detonated; 19 shafts went up, burying 10,000 Germans and jolting the British prime minister 130 miles away in Downing Street. In 1955, another shaft exploded, jolting the village of Ploegsteert but causing no injuries. The last shaft, deep under Ploegsteert 'Wood, has yet to be heard from.

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- Today; bones are still being discovered. The war's battlefields will yield their metal fragments for centuries, experts say. On a rainy day in Albert, France, near the Somme, the fields give off a smell of rusting iron. (Sources: The Great War and Modern Memory, Goodbye to All That, The First Day on the Somme, EyeDeep in Hell.)