**Number 5**

**The Trenches**

The Site: All Along the Western Front

The Story:

Apart from the first weeks of the war, the reality of the Western Front proved to be very different from what most men had expected. This was not to be a war of movement and glamour but of stasis and killing at a distance, as a result of the industrial technology of long-range rifles, machine guns, barbed wire, gas, and shelling. The massive amounts of munitions required for an offensive meant that new defensive positions could be dug before an attacker could bring up sufficient guns and supplies to press home an advantage. This created an environment not seen on such a scale before, a barren ‘lunar’ landscape, which had a depressing and disorienting effect on the men fighting in it, especially when first experienced.

Primary Source from a junior officer’s memoirs: “When moving about in the trenches you turn a corner every few yards, which makes it seem like walking in a maze. It is impossible to keep your sense of direction and infinitely tiring to proceed at all. An old battlefield, like that of the Somme, became a labyrinth of trenches without any plan.

As if being shot and shelled were not bad enough, the front line trenches themselves offered a constant reminder of death. The men were living in a charnel house of decomposing flesh, rats and flies, and many veterans went to their graves haunted by the images of corpses. The newly dead, or those in life-like positions, had the worst effect, and tended to undermine morale, no matter how tough or experienced the observer.

The unburied dead, of course, encouraged vermin, as did the inability of the front line men to keep themselves clean – there were no baths or showers in the trenches – with lice and fleas to add to the discomforts of rats and flies. Under such circumstances, parasitic illnesses were common, such as trench fever – spread by lice excreta – and scabies – caused by mites. Chest and stomach infections were also frequent, as was the incidence of venereal disease, caught by the men whilst ‘resting’ at base camps. In previous wars, of course, disease had usually been a bigger killer than the enemy, although this was not the case on the Western Front.

Through the wonders of modern medicine, hygiene and nutrition managed to allow a high recovery rate from illness and injury (that is, when men could be swiftly got to an aid station), that very success also ensured that enough fit men were always available to allow the fighting to continue for over four years. As well as death, injury, disease, and parasites, men had to deal with the discomforts of living more or less out in the open. They found extremes of temperature and rain, and the mud it caused, amongst the worse crosses to bear. All of this was aggravated by tiredness.

1. What is Trench Warfare
2. Why did Trench warfare become so common during WWI?
3. How did Trenches affect morale (confidence, enthusiasm for their cause, and discipline in following orders) and health of the soldiers?