

Photographs as History

Resources: Official First World War Photographs



Draining Trenches

In rain-soaked northern France and Belgium, trenches during much of the year degenerated into muddy ditches. This added to the misery of trench life, and could also result in the collapse of trench walls and parapets.

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Funk Hole

Two Canadian soldiers in a front line trench in the Hill 60 sector. One soldier is reclining in a dugout entrance or funk hole, a depression carved into the trench wall.

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A Dry Trench

This trench, named Netley, is a good example of a dry trench with well-maintained duckboards. Trenches in poor drainage areas like Flanders could be filled with water for weeks on end despite the best efforts of soldiers to drain them.

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Demolished German Trench

The body of a dead German soldier lies near the entrance to his dugout. While the entrance is intact, the sides of the trench have collapsed. Common items such as an entrenching tool, a water bottle, and ammunition pouches lie scattered on the ground. The numbers on the dugout frame may refer to the unit designation or to the dugout's number in relation to a trench map.

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Festubert Landscape

This photograph of the ruined battlefield near Festubert was taken in the spring of 1919. The Canadians fought at Festubert in May 1915, but no official photographers accompanied them to the front. The ground still shows the scars from the heavy fighting, four years after the battle.

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German Prisoners as Stretcher Bearers

Prisoners were often pressed into carrying the wounded off the battlefield, as shown by this photograph taken during the 1916 Battle of the Somme.

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Canadians Advance

Canadians of the 29th Infantry Battalion advance across No Man's Land through the German barbed wire during the battle of Vimy Ridge, April 1917. Most soldiers are armed with their Lee Enfield rifles, but the soldier in the middle carries a Lewis machine-gun on his shoulder.

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Vimy Fortifications

A German machine-gun emplacement of reinforced concrete on the crest of Vimy Ridge, and the Canadians who seized it.

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Passchendaele Mud

Mud, water, and barbed wire illustrate the horrible terrain through which the Canadians advanced at Passchendaele in late 1917.

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The Injured and the Dead

A wounded Canadian soldier being carried from the front past several grave markers.

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In the Mud

Troops of the Canadian 16th Machine Gun Company hold the line in atrocious conditions on the Passchendaele front in late October or early November, 1917.

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Repairing Guns

Members of the Canadian Motor Machine Gun Brigade clean and repair an assortment of machine-guns: a captured Maxim MG-08 (centre); Vickers Mk 1 (left); Lewis Mk 2 aircraft machine-gun (right). Machine-gun crews were equipped with a cleaning kit, tool kit, and spare parts wallet for each machine-gun that they were issued, and it was the crew that was responsible for minor repairs to worn or broken parts and the daily cleaning of the gun. Despite this cleaning and repair, the average lifespan of a water-cooled barrel in a Vickers machine-gun was between 15,000 and 20,000 rounds. If more rounds were fired than this, the gun would steadily lose accuracy and effectiveness.

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Resting in a Shell Hole

Exhausted Canadians rest in a shell hole during the Battle of Amiens in 1918. These six infantry soldiers must be far from the front lines as several soldiers are sitting dangerously exposed.

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Resting in Mons

Members of the 42nd Battalion take a rest in the Grand Place, Mons, on the morning of 11 November 1918. Belgian civilians welcomed the Canadians as liberators. The flags of the Allied nations are in the background, including those of Japan and the United States.

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Mustard Gas Victims

The extensive bandages on these wounded Canadian soldiers may indicate that they have suffered the effects of flame or mustard gas. Mustard gas burned the lungs, but also caused serious external blisters and disfigurement.

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Returning on a Tank

Members of the 5th Canadian Mounted Rifles return from combat piled on a tank in this posed August 1918 photograph. At the Battle of Amiens, where this photograph was taken, Canadians experimented with transporting infantry to the front inside the tanks, but carbon monoxide exhaust and the crippling heat left most of them vomiting and unable to fight.

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After a Trench Raid

This photograph, probably taken at dawn, shows three Canadian soldiers with camouflaged faces coming out of the line following a night trench raid at Avion in July 1917. The soldiers have camouflaged their faces, most likely with pieces of burnt cork. From late 1915, Canadians participated in hit-and-run assaults on German trenches, known as trench raids, to gather intelligence, capture prisoners, and kill the enemy.

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Pigeon Message

These two soldiers are sending a message by pigeon, which was an effective means to communicate from front to rear, and back again. However, pigeons could become confused in heavy artillery shelling and succumbed easily to lethal poison gas.

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Unloading Heavy Shells

Soldiers unload howitzer shells from a truck. A horse team appears to be waiting in the background to pull the shells closer to the front, probably along roads impassable to trucks.

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Pack Horses

Members of the 20th Battery, Canadian Field Artillery, stand beside their pack horses, loaded with 18-pounder shells. This photograph was taken before the Battle of Vimy Ridge in April 1917. At Vimy, the Canadian gunners had an estimated 1.6 million shells and every one had to be carried forward to the guns.

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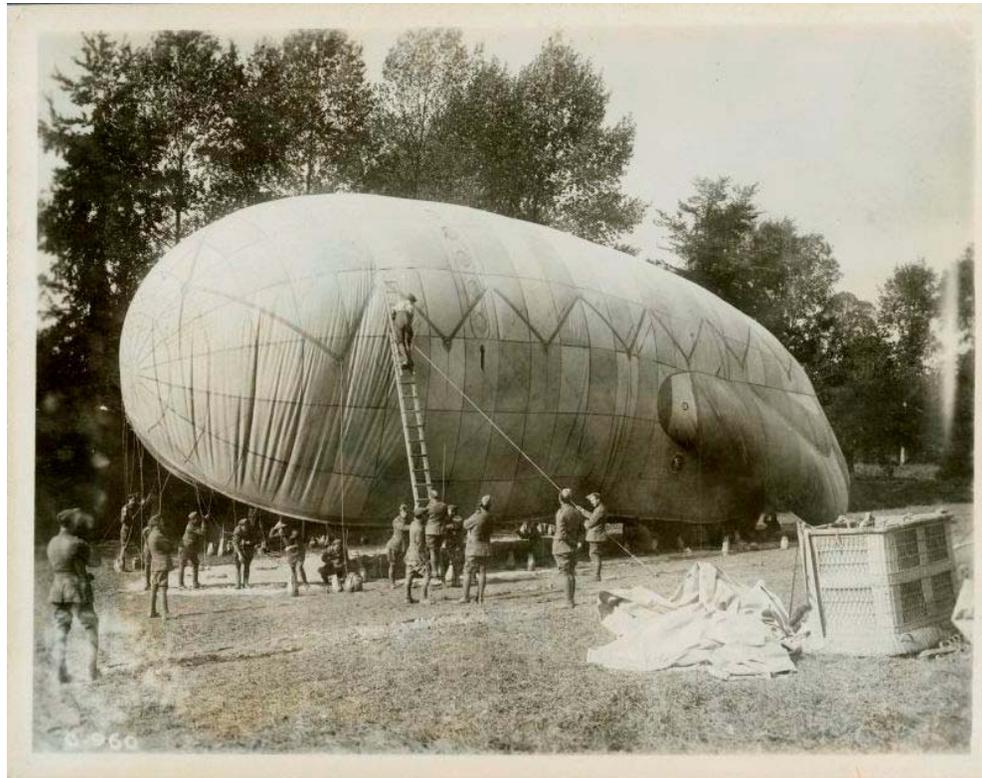
Washing Day

Two soldiers work on their laundry. Approximately 1,000 black soldiers served in the Canadian Expeditionary Force during the First World War, most of them in Nova Scotia's No. 2 Labour Battalion. Labour battalions worked behind the lines, carrying out essential support and supply roles.

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Kite Balloons

Helium-filled kite balloons offered important intelligence for forces on the ground. They were tethered to a spot behind the lines and winched up and down. An observer stood in a wicker basket below the balloon to study and photograph the front from hundreds of metres in the air. The ropes hanging from the balloon were used by ground crew to secure the balloon when it was winched down.

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Returning from the Front

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A war-weary and muddied Canadian returns alone from the front. Cigarette in mouth, the soldier glares in the direction of the photographer.

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Break Before Moving Up the Line

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A Canadian soldier sits with his dog, reading the day's paper. The packed equipment suggests that he is waiting to move up the line and to the trenches.

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Entertaining Comrades

A Canadian soldier entertains comrades with a homemade instrument. Music and singing were popular pastimes.

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Getting into Character

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A member of the Maple Leaf Concert Party in France applies lipstick and gets set to perform. Without women at the front, men took on the role of female characters. These cross-dressing performers were extremely popular with the soldiers.

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Pull!



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An officer urges on soldiers of the 72nd Battalion, The Seaforth Highlanders of Canada in the tug of war finals at the Canadian Championship Athletic Meet in France in 1917.

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