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Artifact Backgrounder

## Barbed Wire



### DEFINITION

**Barbed wire** is a fencing material that is manufactured in long coiled strands and punctuated at regular intervals with sharp twisted points or edges. It was used widely before the First World War as inexpensive agricultural fencing material, and it served throughout the war as a battlefield obstacle. While the styles of **barbed wire** varied, it was widely used by all forces during the First World War.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

**Barbed wire** saw military use during the 20th century's earliest conflicts, most notably the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905). Upon the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, the training manuals of all major armies included sections on **barbed wire** obstacles. For example, the British Army's *Field Service Pocket Book* of 1914 described the procedure for constructing barbed wire entanglements in conjunction with other defensive fortifications.

Throughout the war, the battlefield witnessed an incredible increase in the volume of **barbed wire** entanglements. **Barbed wire** was ideally suited to trench warfare waged along very wide fronts. With finite numbers of soldiers available to garrison the front lines, wire could be used to prevent the enemy forces from easily accessing key terrain. It was relatively cheap, it could be rapidly installed with minimal skill and tools, and it could be used on all types of terrain with little preparation required.

## EVOLUTION/DEVELOPMENT

**Barbed wire** obstacles served four basic purposes:

1. to delay enemy troops while they were under fire
2. to restrict the enemy's capacity to manoeuvre
3. to force enemy soldiers into zones where they would be most vulnerable to defensive fire
4. to disorganize enemy attacks

In the British Empire forces, **barbed wire** was supplied in coils ranging in length from 45 to 110 metres. A 45-metre coil weighed about 7 kilograms. Most barbed wire entanglements were laid in the areas beyond the forward trenches ("no man's land") and, therefore, in view of the enemy. Installing barbed wire was almost always done at night and silence was of utmost importance.

Early in the war, ordinary wooden posts were used to hold wire entanglements in place but the act of hammering the posts into the ground created a great deal of noise. These wooden

posts were soon replaced with steel screw pickets, also known as "silent" pickets. A screw picket was turned into the ground by inserting a piece of wood through a loop at the top of the shaft and twisting it in a circular motion, like a large corkscrew.

The upper sections of the screw pickets were made with up to four loops through which strands of wire could be easily threaded. Wire was also strung on various other types of pre-fabricated wooden frames that could be rapidly and quietly assembled.

### DID YOU KNOW?

Some farmers in France and Belgium still use silent pickets recovered from First World War battlefields to run fences on their land.

Soldiers on the offensive faced **barbed wire** obstacles of some form in virtually every type of attack. In general, there were four ways to overcome wire:

1. Destruction by artillery fire or aerial bombardment: It was difficult to fully destroy **barbed wire** entanglements using this method, as a massive volume of accurate shelling or bombing was required. This tactic achieved better results as the war progressed and as weapons improved but barbed wire remained a formidable obstacle.
2. Demolition by hand-placed explosive charges: This was relatively effective, assuming that the assault troops had rehearsed carefully, and knew exactly what type of obstacles they would encounter.
3. Removing or cutting the wire by hand: This was not always feasible during an attack, as it was time consuming, and left the individual open to enemy fire during a battle. However, assault troops often did carry and use wire cutters.
4. Going over top of the wire: This could be quite effective, but it involved carrying heavy and bulky equipment (ladders or portable bridging material) into battle.

## VOCABULARY LIST

**Aerial bombardment:**

The delivery of bombs against a target by aircraft. During the First World War, aircraft were employed to bomb enemy positions on the battlefield, but also to attack the enemy's home front (towns and cities in the enemy's country), often far beyond the battlefield.

**Artillery:**

Weapons that use mechanical or explosive (chemical) energy to project munitions over distances ranging from hundreds of meters to dozens of kilometers. Generally speaking, any device that fires a projectile with a calibre (diameter) of 2 cm or greater is considered an artillery weapon.

**Assault troops:**

The troops who lead an attack against an enemy position.

**British Empire forces/troops:**

In the context of the First World War period, this term refers to all military forces associated with the British Empire, including troops from colonies, self-governing nations (such as Canada or Australia), and various other territories under British influence or protection. Soldiers of many nationalities and ethnicities served with the British Empire forces, including English, Welsh, Scottish, Irish, Canadian, Australian, New Zealand, South African, Indian, Egyptian and Chinese personnel, as well as Aboriginal peoples from Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

**Forward trenches:**

The trenches that were situated closest to the enemy on the battlefield. These would be the starting points for attacks against enemy positions, and the first lines of defence in the event of an enemy attack.