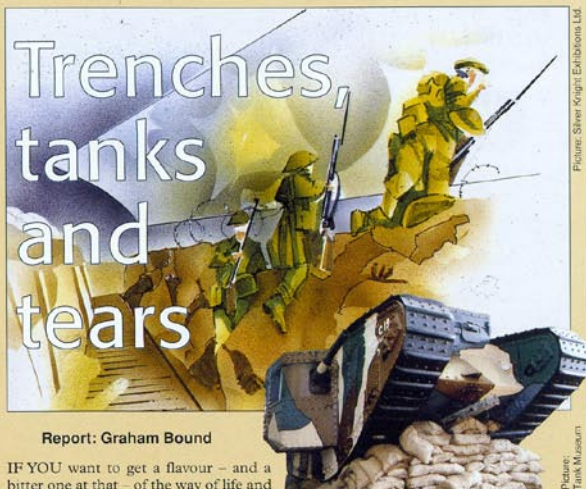


Museum focus



Picture: Steve Wright Exhibitions Ltd

Picture: Tank Museum

Report: Graham Bound

IF YOU want to get a flavour – and a bitter one at that – of the way of life and death on the Western Front during the First World War, make your way to Bovington.

This month, the curators of the nation's greatest collection of armoured fighting vehicles opened an elaborate and remarkably realistic recreation of British and German defensive systems; a maze of trenches, tunnels and evocative panoramas takes visitors into what theme park designers might call "the trench experience".

This attempt to reproduce the more tolerable aspects of a typical Tommy's journey to hell begins in an upbeat recruiting office. The burly effigy of a recruiting sergeant comes to life as you approach, querying (half-heartedly, as they probably did) whether you are really 18 and old enough to fight. The path continues past wounded men being evacuated from the front, the first glimpse young Tommy might have had of the Western Front's mincing machine.

A little further on in a British trench a soldier, deafened by shell-fire and his spirit gone, huddles in a funk-hole, risking a bullet from his own side but still ignoring the exhortation to go over the top. Fat rats feed near his feet.

The climax of the exhibition is in a German trench (notably better-built than those of the British) over which one of the original stalemate-breakers, a Mk II tank, rears crazily, apparently blasting and crushing the enemy into submission.

The danger of such an exhibition is

Over the top, main picture: British soldiers leave their trench in the Tank Museum's new exhibition

The stalemate-breaker, inset. A Mk II tank poised to crush a German trench

that it will either fail to adequately portray the horror or do it so vividly that visitors will be disturbed by the experience. The designers seem to have walked this tightrope reasonably well: the exhibition is not fun, but neither is it horror.

As always when one peers into the history of the First World War it is the personal tragedies which linger in the mind. Into this category falls a display of photos and documents. There are copies of two letters written to a mother.

A loyal and idealistic son and soldier, Pte Arthur Morrow, writes to her in an undated letter: "Don't be down-hearted and think that I am fighting for your liberty and freedom. I am not afraid to go."

The second came from a Casualty Clearing Station and was written some time later by the matron: "Your son was sent down to this hospital this afternoon, very badly wounded. He passed away a short time after he was admitted, he was quite unconscious. We found a letter in his pocket with this address. He also had a testament in his pocket which you had given him."

The Tank Museum, more used to dealing with the cold, hard technology of armoured vehicles, does well to let human frailty, suffering and compassion emerge from its new exhibition.

The Tank Museum in Bovington, Dorset, has opened a remarkable new exhibition about trench warfare on the Western Front

Kitstop

Waiti

Report: Anthony Stone
Picture: Mike Weston

IN 30 seconds the whistles will blow and this soldier is going "over the top". He is an infantryman in the Middlesex Regiment and his job is to clear the German trench 150 yards away.

He has been in the front line for eight hours. Typically, attacking troops were in position for less than 24 hours. Front-line troops were in the trenches for five to seven days. There were relatively brief periods of exposure.

Although you might think he is in the worst possible place in all the world, Tommy Atkins sees things slightly differently. He thinks things could be worse. He could be in the second wave. Then he would have to scramble into no man's land carrying barbed wire, duck boards, rations, and petrol tins full of water. Being unencumbered gives him a fighting chance.

He is 27 and has been in the Army since 1915. Since conscription was introduced in 1916 he has lost two members of his family... a brother in his teens and an uncle in his late 40s.

By 1918 the Army would take conscripts between the ages of 18 and 50. The youngest British soldier killed during the war was 14, the oldest in his 60s. The attrition rate was so devastating that by 1915 the Army lowered its height requirement to 5ft 2in. Some units had special trenches dug so that small soldiers, issued with short-butt rifles, could see over the top.

All the comforts...

Tin rations of bully beef, corn beef, and pork and beans. The French would trade their rations of bread and sausage. They were not impressed by bully beef and referred to it as monkey. British troops called the mixture of pork and beans dog's vomit because of its colour and texture. Tin food was heavy and awkward. Biscuit rations usually smashed to thicken stew.

In theory soldiers were allowed to have blankets from October to March but in practice there was nowhere to carry them. Greatcoats were discouraged because they made soldiers look like Germans and were too bulky. Leather jerkins, of the type worn until recently by dustbin men, were popular after 1915.

Soldier thanks the National Army Museum for the loan of the uniform and equipment and for its assistance with this feature. The kit is modelled by LCpl Mark Howe, 1 PWRR, the regimental antecedents of which include the Middlesex Regiment.

ing for the whistle

There was no protection apart from that afforded by the **steel helmet**, which was only introduced in 1916. This might or might not deflect a bullet. The helmet was designed to protect the head from explosions outside the trench. After its introduction, the number of injuries actually went up, but the number of fatalities declined. This was because of the safety-belt syndrome. The safer you feel, the

faster you drive. The Army experimented with steel breastplates but the men could not move easily. The helmet was worn with the chinstrap at the back. If worn the other way around, apocryphal stories suggested that in an explosion the disc-shaped helmet would jerk back and break the neck. So it was worn the wrong way round, which meant if Atkins ran or fell over, his helmet came off.

Two **ID tags** made of vulcanised fibre, one circular and one octagonal, attached to a cord and worn around the neck. They carried the soldier's name, number, religion and unit. The circular tag was taken off if he was killed and the other stayed with the corpse to aid identification. This became standard after the battles of 1916 when so many bodies were left in no man's land. Soldiers could also buy aluminium tags from the Army Service Corps which were attached to the wrists. They did not rot or burn.

Bayonet: 17.5in-long, normally carried in the scabbard on the left hand side. As a weapon for clearing trenches it was without equal.

Wire cutters: The jaws acted as a guide for the wire. The weapon was pushed forward to complete the cutting action.

Top pockets in the **tunic** were supposed to contain two grenades, but more usually these were replaced with postcards, pencils, pipe or cigarettes. Grenades would be passed up to the bombers at the front when required. **AB 64 pay book** inside the top left-hand pocket contained the soldier's will, qualifications and record of inoculations.

Small box respirator in the ready position. First introduced in 1915.

1908 Mills Web equipment. It could carry 150 rounds of small arms ammunition.

Short Magazine Lee Enfield (SMLE) MkIII*. A simplified version of the complex weapon first introduced before the First World War. Sighted to 2,000 yards, expected to fire 15-20 rounds per minute, loading from five-round charges. In 1914 a soldier firing a Lee Enfield is recorded loosing off 37 rounds in a minute and hitting 22 bulls'eyes.

Leather sling, frequently with a single round in the little slider which kept the strap in place when it expanded in the wet.

Field dressing sewn into right front flap, almost under the butt of his weapon, and always in the same place for every man.

Handle of the entrenching tool. The head of the entrenching tool was carried in his webbing pouch on his back.

Puttees, derived from an Indian word meaning bandages. These strips of material covered the gap in the boots and also kept the lower leg warm and dry. Remarkably effective, but being made of wool, once they got wet, they stayed wet. They were the successors to gaiters and splat-dashers worn in 17th and 18th century.

Steel-shod ammunition boots, made with the flesh side outwards, so they could absorb dubbin to make them waterproof.

Patches system of different badges was used to allow officers to identify a soldier's battalion and division. Sometimes worn in the middle of his back, above his haversack. On the first day of the Somme NCOs wore tin triangles fastened on their packs so they could be seen by aerial observers.

Haversack contained groundsheet and a cape for wet weather. A tin mug was carried upside down with a spare pair of socks inside to keep them dry. D-shaped **mess tins** were also carried on haversack's back, so there was no chance of keeping quiet. Inside, a **hold-all** contained a sewing-kit, knife, fork spoon, cut-throat razor (or if he was lucky a safety razor), shaving brush, comb and tin opener. There was also a cloth for cleaning the weapon.

Bag for unconsumed portion of day's rations.

Cotton **bandoleer** carried at least another 50 rounds. This was worn over the top of everything else so the soldier could take it off and throw it to whoever needed more ammunition.

Standard wool **trousers** in khaki, an Urdu word meaning dusty. The dye was originally from India and made from tea or mud. This colour blended in better than the blue-grey of the German Army uniform.

Water-bottle, not shown, but worn on the right side, contained two pints of water, cold tea . . . or wine, if he could scrounge it off the French. British soldiers were given a rum ration in cold and wet weather and frequently before troops went over the top. Other than that, alcohol in the front line was discouraged. Troops were given their allowance unless the CO was teetotal, in which case they got pea-soup powder.

The alcohol was delivered in big ceramic jars inscribed SRD - Service Rum Depot and not, as Tommy Atkins believed, Seldom Reaches Destination. Water was delivered in old petrol tins and so always tasted of petrol, chloride and lime. The Germans took over wine bottling plants and used the bottles for carrying water. When the British took over a German trench it looked as if there had been a massive party!

Typical weight of kit was 72lb (33kg).