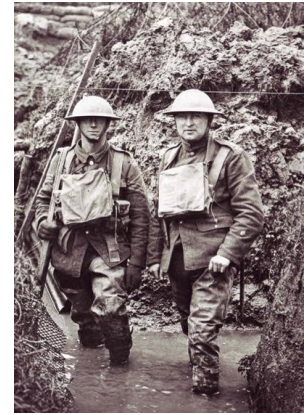


Trench Systems



Trench systems were to some extent a reflection of local conditions, and the continuous lines most associated with the war were by no means their only form. In very mountainous terrain the lines were generally less complete and might consist of a series of mutually supporting mountain-top strong-points. Not all trench systems were below ground but might rather be built up. This could be because the bedrock was near the surface and too difficult to dig through or the water table might be too near the surface so that sunken trenches would be waterlogged. This was true especially on the most northerly part of the Western Front in Belgium, where there was a high water table and the Belgians had deliberately flooded much of the low-lying area near the coast in 1914.



Trenches evolved as the war progressed. They were originally little more than connected scrapes in the ground and not designed for permanent occupation but, once the fronts had become static in late 1914, the defense systems became deeper and more complex. The Germans – probably the most skilled exponents of trench building – began digging second trench lines from late 1915 and a third was added thereafter.

The first line, the one nearest the enemy, was the fire trench, the main line of resistance; the second was the support trench; and the third was the reserve. All trenches usually zigzagged or had angular fire-bays to minimize the impact of shellfire and prevent an enemy from firing directly down them. Sandbags were added for more protection, wooden shoring placed to prevent the sides from collapsing, and duckboards laid to aid drainage. Repair work to trench systems was needed on an almost constant basis.



As the war progressed, the Germans devised a new, deeper line of defense. The hope was that the lines would be tougher to break through. The most formidable example of defense in depth was the Hindenburg Line, which ran along the northern and central sector of the Western Front. It was begun in September 1916 and was still under construction in late 1918.