

Over 1.65 million men in the British Army were wounded during the First World War. Of these, around 240,000 British soldiers suffered total or partial leg or arm amputations as a result of war wounds. Most of these men were fitted with artificial limbs.

Trench Foot

Many soldiers fighting in the First World War suffered from trench foot. This was an infection of the feet caused by cold, wet and insanitary conditions. In the trenches men stood for hours on end in waterlogged trenches without being able to remove wet socks or boots. The feet would gradually go numb and the skin would turn red or blue. If untreated, trench foot could turn gangrenous and result in amputation. Trench foot was a particular problem in the early stages of the war. For example, during the winter of 1914-15 over 20,000 men in the British Army were treated for trench foot.

The only remedy for trench foot was for the soldiers to dry their feet and change their socks several times a day. By the end of 1915 British soldiers in the trenches had to have three pairs of socks with them and were under orders to change their socks at least twice a day. As well as drying their feet, soldiers were told to cover their feet with a grease made from whale-oil. It has been estimated that a battalion at the front would use ten gallons of whale-oil every day.

Lice

Men in the trenches suffered from lice. One soldier writing after the war described them as "pale fawn in colour, and they left blotchy red bite marks all over the body." They also created a sour; stale smell. Various methods were used to remove the lice. A lighted candle was fairly effective but the skill of burning the lice without burning your clothes was only learnt with practice. George Coppard described how this worked: "The things lay in the seams of trousers, in the deep furrows of long thick woolly pants, and seemed impregnable in their deep entrenchments. A lighted candle applied where they were thickest made them pop like Chinese crackers. After a session of this, my face would be covered with small blood spots from extra big fellows which had popped too vigorously."

In his autobiography, Harry Patch explains the problems he had with lice on the Western Front: "The lice were the size of grains of rice, each with its own bite, each with its own itch. When we could, we would run hot wax from a candle down the seams of our trousers, our vests - whatever you had - to burn the buggers out. It was the only thing to do. Eventually, when we got to Rouen, coming back, they took every stitch off us and gave us a suit of sterilised blue material. And the uniforms they took off, they burned them - to get rid of the lice."

Where possible the army arranged for the men to have baths in huge vats of hot water while their clothes were being put through delousing machines. Unfortunately, this rarely worked. A fair proportion of the eggs remained in the clothes and within two or three hours of the clothes being put on again a man's body heat had hatched them out.

At the Passchendaele Lieutenant Robert Sherriff described his men going into battle: "At dawn on the morning of the attack, the battalion assembled in the mud outside the huts. I lined up my platoon and went through the necessary inspection. Some of the men looked terribly ill: grey, worn faces in the dawn, unshaved and dirty because there was no clean water. I saw the characteristic shrugging of their shoulders that I knew so well. They hadn't had their clothes off for weeks, and their shirts were full of lice."

Lieutenant John Reith was very successful in dealing with lice. According to his diary: "No lice had so far come my way, but I was always in fear of them. On going into trenches I used to spray about a gallon of lysol over my bunk below the parapet and generally about the hut; now, with the receipt from home of a box of mercurial ointment, I took for the first time to wearing my identity disc, drawing the string through the ointment. I had heard that this was a louse deterrent. It made one's neck dirty but there was never a louse found."

As well as causing frenzied scratching, lice also carried disease. This was known as pyrexia or trench fever. The first symptoms were shooting pains in the shins and was followed by a very high fever. Although the disease did not kill, it did stop soldiers from fighting and accounted for about 15% of all cases of sickness in the British Army.