

Self-inflicted Wounds - or SIWs as they were known - comprised a highly serious wartime military offence. Such wounds most often took the form of rifle shots to the hand or foot, the aim being to effectively disqualify the recipient from further front-line service. In the British Army wounds which resulted in hospitalisation at home were often termed 'Blighty Ones' and thus sometimes perversely sought after.

While many - if not most - such self-inflicted wounds went undetected, the consequences for the individual concerned were ominous should suspicions of foul play be raised and confirmed by medical officers.

In an attempt to determine guilt military authorities would strive to determine the type and nature of bullet which caused a given wound - if the bullet was 'home grown', i.e. not fired from an enemy weapon, then the outlook was dark indeed in the absence of clear evidence to the contrary: if found guilty of a self-inflicted wound in the British Army the ultimate penalty was capital, i.e. death by firing squad.

In the British Army some 3,894 men were found guilty of SIW; in practice none were executed but instead sent to prison for lengthy periods.

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For many veterans who were asked to recall their memories of life in the trenches the overriding feature that lingered in the mind was the problem - and horror - of trench rats.

Rats - brown and black - thrived literally in their millions among trenches in most Fronts of the war, be it Eastern, Italian, Gallipoli - but primarily the Western Front. Trench conditions were ideal for rats. Empty food cans were piled in their thousands throughout No Man's Land, heaved over the top on a daily basis.

Aside from feeding from rotting food littered in such cans, rats would invade dug-outs in search of food and shelter. Most soldiers who served on the Western Front would later recall how rats grew in boldness, stealing food that had been lain down for just a few moments. Rats would also crawl across the face of sleeping men.

As they gorged themselves on food so they grew, with many rats reportedly growing to the size of cats. George Coppard, writing in *With a Machine Gun to Cambrai* (1969), recalled the ceaseless rattling of tin cans during the night, the sound of rats constantly ferreting in No Man's Land.

However the feature which caused revulsion among soldiers was the knowledge that rats openly fed on the decaying remains of comrades killed while advancing across No Man's Land. Attacking - and eating - the eyes of a corpse first, rats would steadily work their way through the remainder of the body in a short space of time.

Disgusted and often feeling a horror of their presence, soldiers would devise various means of dealing with the rat problem. Although shooting at rats was strictly prohibited - it being regarded as a pointless waste of ammunition - many soldiers nevertheless took pot shots at nearby rats in this manner. Attacking rats with bayonets was also common. However the rat population was not noticeably diminished by such techniques - a pair of rats were capable of producing some 800 offspring within a single year.

*All information on this handout was found at <http://firstworldwar.com>*