

Body Lice

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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. 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.

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.

Source A: Punch, 1915



BRITISH OFFICER AS SEEN BY
THE MILITARY TAILOR.

AS HE ACTUALLY APPEARS ON
LEAVING FOR THE FRONT.

AFTER THREE WEEKS IN
THE TRENCHES.

Body Lice

Source B: Private George Coppard, *With A Machine Gun to Cambrai* (1969)

A full day's rest allowed us to clean up a bit, and to launch a full scale attack on lice. I sat in a quiet corner of a barn for two hours delousing myself as best I could. We were all at it, for none of us escaped their vile attentions. 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. Lice hunting was called 'chatting'. In parcels from home it was usual to receive a tin of supposedly death-dealing powder or pomade, but the lice thrived on the stuff.

Source C: Private Stuart Dolden wrote about his experiences in the trenches after the war.

We had to sleep fully dressed, of course, this was very uncomfortable with the pressure of ammunition on one's chest restricted breathing; furthermore, when a little warmth was obtained the vermin used to get busy, and for some unexplained reason they always seemed to get lively in the portion of one's back, that lay underneath the belt and was the most inaccessible spot. The only way to obtain relief was to get out of the dugout, put a rifle barrel between the belt and rub up and down like a donkey at a gatepost. This stopped it for a bit, but as soon as one got back into the dugout, and was getting reasonably warm so would the little brutes get going again.

Activities

1. Why were body lice such a problem for the soldiers in the trenches?
2. What did the army do to try and stop the soldiers getting lice? Did it work?
3. Look at Sources B & C. What steps did the soldiers take to try and stop the lice causing them discomfort?
4. Look at Source A. Explain why the cartoon of the British Officer before he set off for the front was so different to cartoon of him after three weeks in the trenches.