In the Trenches

Article

PART 1

JOHNSON, Iowa (Achieve3000, August 5, 2014). The battles of World War I transpired in Europe, but archaeologists have found traces of them in the U.S. Not long ago, scientists located the remains of trenches where soldiers trained before going overseas.

National Guard geographical information systems specialist Jamie Conley located the trenches at the Iowa National Guard base at Camp Dodge in Johnson, Iowa. Conley was studying an aerial image created using a special type of laser photography. The photos taken with this technology reveal terrain that is obscured by trees. Conley noticed seemingly bizarre ground indentations behind a densely forested area near the camp—he later realized that these indentations were old World War I training trenches. The trenches are nearly 100 years old.

Trenches were indispensable in preparing soldiers for World War I. By the time the U.S. entered the war in 1917, several nations in Europe and Asia had already been at war for a few years. This war was different from previous conflicts—the widespread use of advanced weapons such as explosives and rapid-fire artillery led to particularly dangerous battles. To protect themselves, soldiers hunkered down in trenches. Complex trench systems extended more than 400 miles (644 kilometers) on the Western Front, an area that stretched between Switzerland and the northern coast of France.

"When American soldiers became involved in the war two and a half years after the Europeans engaged in combat, they realized this was the nature of warfare," said Mike Vogt, the curator of the Iowa Gold Star Military Museum at Camp Dodge.

As a result, the U.S. military trained soldiers to fight in trenches. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers trained at 16 military bases around the U.S. before being sent to the trenches of Europe. Some of those U.S. bases built extensive trench systems in 1917 so that the soldiers could train in a realistic environment. Trenches have also been found in Mississippi and New York.

The Iowa Guard base, originally established in 1909, was expanded in 1917 after the government acquired land from farmers and transformed it into a training facility. After the war ended in 1918, the government sold much of the land. By the 1920s, a good deal of it was once again being utilized for farming.

"Most of the remnants of World War I [training] were lost at that time," said Mary Jones, an environmental specialist with the Iowa National Guard. No one remembered the exact location of the training trenches until Conley found them.
Historic photos taken at the Iowa camp depict soldiers standing in trenches. Their heads barely reached ground level, indicating that the trenches were about 6 feet (1.8 meters) deep. The trenches that remain have over time filled in to a depth of about 3 feet (0.9 meters). Archaeologists excavating the trenches have uncovered several artifacts, including rifle shell casings and other remnants of weapons.

The National Guard Bureau provided $10,000 to hire the archaeologists, and it will seek additional money to further explore the area and preserve it. Officials say that it’s important to remember U.S. involvement in World War I.

"It's about how we trained, how we lived, how we fought. This is a piece of priceless history that can't be replaced if it would ever go away," said Colonel Greg Happgood, an Iowa National Guard spokesperson. "It can be preserved and guarded for future generations to understand the history of what [the U.S.] went through in World War I."

*The Associated Press contributed to this story.*

**PART 2**

**Dig Deeper**

As you read, World War I was unlike any previous conflict because of the weapons that were used. This led soldiers, particularly those fighting on the Western Front, to engage in trench warfare.

In trench warfare, opposing sides fight each other from trenches in order to protect themselves. Each side—the Allied Powers (which included Britain and France) and the Central Powers (which included Germany)—dug a complex system of trenches. The Allies dug a front-line trench from which to attack. Behind this, they dug a support trench with additional troops and supplies. Farther behind, they created a reserve trench for emergency men and supplies. All trenches were connected by communication trenches so that messages, troops, and supplies could be transported throughout the system. The system also included crude bunkers and latrines.

Allied soldiers rotated through these trenches week by week. When they were in the front two trenches, they had to be on constant alert. Every two weeks, soldiers went to the reserve trenches. This gave them time to rest and also helped boost their morale by providing a break from the harsh realities of the front lines.

Germany dug more complex systems. Its trench systems were deeper and included living quarters with beds and sometimes even electricity. The German trenches were also sturdier than the trenches of their enemies.

Trenches were never dug in a straight line. Soldiers on both sides created them as "zig-zags." That way, if an enemy soldier ended up in a trench, he could not fire his weapon all the way down the trench.

Troops on both sides sometimes conducted raids on enemy trenches. This meant sneaking to the enemy's trench under the cover of darkness to quietly kill or capture the soldiers in one section of a front-line trench. (Captured soldiers might be questioned for information about the enemy.) To conduct a raid, soldiers had to cross "no-man's land," the area between the opposing trenches, which might be riddled with barbed wire and craters created by artillery shells. The distance between trenches was sometimes only about 200 feet (61 meters).

When World War I began in 1914, trench warfare wasn't a new idea. It had been used as far back as the Roman Empire and was employed in the U.S. Civil War. Still, it was more commonly used during World War I because combat had become increasingly dangerous. Before this, wars had involved "infantry fighting." Soldiers had fought at close range, using rifles, handguns, swords, knives, bayonets, or bare hands. World War I saw the use of several weapons that could kill or wound many soldiers in a short time from a distance. These included machine guns, poisonous gases, and airplanes. Trenches were meant as defenses, although advanced weapons often found their way behind trench walls.
Trench warfare was brutal. Since soldiers were living so close to one another, diseases such as dysentery spread quickly. Trenches were no place to get any rest, as the enemy could attack at any time, day or night. Soldiers shared their living space with rats and lice—and standing water, if it had recently rained. Because the trenches were dug into the soil, they required constant repair. This was difficult to do when there was constant danger from the enemy trenches and from the air.

By the time the U.S. entered World War I, trench warfare was well underway. The U.S. military understood the challenges of this type of fighting. Officials realized that the best way to prepare U.S. soldiers for the trenches was to train them in trenches.

**Dictionary**

*depict (verb)* to show something in a picture, painting, or sculpture

*dysentery (noun)* a disease of the large intestine that can be fatal

*transpire (verb)* to occur, happen, or take place