

‘Dig for Bloody Victory’

The British Soldier's Experience of Trench Warfare, 1939-45

by

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Hilary Term 2012

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Short Abstract

Most people’s perceptions of the Second World War leave little room for static, attritional fighting; instead, free-flowing manoeuvre warfare, such as *Blitzkrieg*, is seen as the norm. In reality, however, much of the terrain fought over in 1939-45 was unsuitable for such a war and, as a result, bloody attritional battles and trench fighting were common. Thus ordinary infantrymen spent the majority of their time at the front burrowing underground for protection. Although these trenches were never as fixed or elaborate as those on the Western Front a generation earlier, the men who served in Italy, Normandy, Holland and Germany, nonetheless shared an experience remarkably similar to that of their predecessors in Flanders, Picardy, Champagne and Artois. This is an area which has been largely neglected by scholars. While the first war produced a mountain of books on the experience of trench warfare, the same cannot be said of the second war. This thesis will attempt to fill that gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of static warfare in the Second World War from the point of view of British infantry morale. It draws widely on contemporary letters and diaries, psychiatric and medical reports and official documentation – not to mention personal narratives and accounts published after the war – and will attempt to interpret these sources in light of modern research and organise them into a logical framework. Ultimately it is hoped that this will provide fresh insight into a relatively under-researched area of twentieth century history.

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Long Abstract

Most people’s perceptions of the Second World War leave little room for static, attritional fighting; instead, free-flowing manoeuvre warfare, such as *Blitzkrieg*, is seen as the norm. In reality much of the terrain fought over in 1939-45 was unsuitable for such a war and, as a result, bloody attritional battles and trench fighting were common in every theatre. Although these trenches were never as fixed or elaborate as those on the Western Front a generation earlier, the men who served in Italy, Normandy, Holland and Germany, nonetheless shared an experience remarkably similar to that of their predecessors in Flanders, Picardy, Champagne and Artois. This aspect of combat, which was the common experience for most infantrymen, has been largely neglected by scholars. While the first war produced a mountain of books on trench warfare, the same cannot be said of the second war. This thesis will attempt to fill that gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of static warfare from the point of view of British infantry morale. It draws widely on contemporary letters and diaries, psychiatric and medical reports and official documentation – not to mention personal narratives and accounts published after the war – and will attempt to interpret these sources in light of modern research and organise them into a logical framework. Ultimately it is hoped that this will provide fresh insight into a relatively under-researched area of twentieth century history.

To this end, chapter one will demonstrate that pre-war doctrine and training were geared towards a repetition of the Western Front. Even by 1944 there was still evidence that many soldiers were being inadequately prepared for combat. Indeed, the Army never really got to grips with teaching men

how to dig in under fire, a skill that most soldiers urgently required on active service. Unfortunately, too many inexperienced troops were left to learn the hard way, and the slogan 'dig or die' proved all too accurate.

Chapter two looks at the physical conditions at the front, which were highly reminiscent of 1914-18. Yet there were some critical differences – in the trench systems and time spent in the line – that frequently made things worse. Despite this, the men of 1939-45, viewed the First World War as *the* yardstick of horror and used it to measure their own experiences, drawing on folk memories of the earlier conflict to describe their own suffering. Furthermore, despite evidence that static warfare was common in almost every theatre most new arrivals were completely surprised to encounter it. This feeling gave way to demoralisation, as the true horror of trench warfare sank in and soldiers changed under its influence: their vision narrowed and they grew disconnected from reality. Yet despite all the horror and suffering, there was little political or ideological sentiment; most soldiers simply wanted to get home as soon as possible and return to normal, not build a 'New Britain'. The reason for this was simple. The generation that went to war in 1914 became profoundly disillusioned by the horror and apparent futility of the trenches; the soldiers of 1939, thanks in no small part to the influence of the latter, were already disillusioned and cynical. They certainly knew just how terrible modern industrialised war could be.

The daily routine in a static position was especially damaging to morale and is dealt with in chapter three. At best it was a dirty, monotonous experience; at worst it could be utter misery. Besides the physical demands – such as fatigue and backbreaking labour – men had to contend with appalling stress like the tension of stand-to and 'stags', not to mention crippling boredom. The negative effect these had could be countered by hot food, mail, cigarettes, alcohol and, perhaps most importantly, 'char'; while a spell out of the line, even a few hundred yards back, proved to be a remarkable tonic. On the other hand, if any of these were in short supply, morale could hit rock bottom. In short, the

infantryman's daily routine at the front pushed them to the very limits of their endurance, both physical and mental.

Chapter four considers combat. Despite *blitzkrieg* and all the technological leaps of the twentieth century, it remained an infantryman's war. It was also a very small minority of men who actually did the fighting, and who suffered the bulk of the casualties. Large set-piece battles, however, were relatively infrequent, with routine line-holding being the norm. The latter involved numerous patrols, sometimes for tangible military purposes, other times simply to gain 'moral ascendancy'; the constant menace of enemy snipers; and regular attention from the enemy's guns, generating mental strain at one end and psychiatric breakdown at the other. Attacking was generally a matter of head on assaults against heavily fortified positions, as the dominant German mode of fighting, by force of circumstance, was to establish a static defensive position and hang on to it for as long as possible. Thus British rifleman were nearly always involved in grinding, attritional battles every bit as arduous as those of the Western Front.

In terms of general combat psychology, we will see that inexperienced troops thought of battle with apprehensive enthusiasm, but as the prospect of fighting grew nearer their initial keenness gave way to nagging fear. Pre-contact apprehension was not solely confined to green troops, it affected everyone at all times and the crucial point to bear in mind was that most soldiers were *always* scared at the thought of going into action. Another common fear, perhaps the most important one, was the fear of failure or of not living up to perceived stereotypes of masculinity, which prompted men to put on a brave face in battle and was, in all likelihood, a crucial mainstay of military discipline. Once they were in battle their fears and dread largely disappeared and they went into a kind of emotional vacuum, remembering little about their actions or feelings at the time. Finally, positional warfare greatly increased one's feelings of isolation and helplessness as one rarely saw the enemy, let alone came to grips with him; it also highlighted the random and ubiquitous nature of death; and made the fighting increasingly impersonal. Men realised that they would not be killed in

a valiant life or death struggle with another soldier, but that their death would come suddenly and with little dignity, most likely at the hands of some far off machine against which they were powerless to reply. Trench warfare was for the most part, then, a bewildering experience and one that left most veterans feeling helpless.

Chapter five will show that casualty rates among frontline infantry in the Second World War were remarkably similar to those of the Western Front. Indeed, when one examines individual units and campaigns they often exceeded those of 1914-18 by a considerable margin. Moreover, the rigours of positional warfare combined with appalling living conditions were a huge psychological strain which eventually ground down most soldiers, no matter how experienced. 'Shell shock', known in this war as going 'Bomb Happy', was just as common as it had been on the Western Front. Despite this, as chapter six will indicate, the morale of the British Army during the Second World War was not as brittle as some would have us believe. As the casualty figures demonstrate, frontline infantrymen were at least as willing as their Great War predecessors to suffer in their nation's cause. However, prolonged static warfare undoubtedly had a detrimental effect. Factors such as unrelenting physical hardships, the steady drip of casualties, and in particular the loss of trusted leaders, served to erode a unit's morale. On the other hand, effective leadership, the presence of one's comrades, and a good supply of food and shelter were crucial in sustaining it. Nevertheless, for many the demands of the front proved too much and they succumbed to 'battle exhaustion'; while others resorted to desertion, feigning sickness or, at the extreme end, SIWs or suicide. Most importantly, both of these chapters will explore the relatively neglected link between periods of static warfare and low morale and psychological collapse. Ultimately it is hoped that this will help shed some light on what is a relatively neglected aspect of combat in the Second World War.

Dedication

To my parents, for their love and support.

To my wife, Lynn, with love and gratitude, for her constant encouragement and for cheerfully putting up with a penniless student through thick and thin.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Adrian Gregory, for his invaluable guidance and support.

I would also like to extend my appreciation to Dr. Simon Skinner, Dr. Martin Conway, Dr. Douglas Dupree and Dr. Robert Johnson who have helped me during my D.Phil.

I am grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Council and Balliol College for their generous financial assistance.

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Abbreviations and Glossary

25 pounder	the major British field artillery gun of World War II
88 mm	German anti-aircraft and anti-tank artillery gun.
AA	anti-aircraft
ADMS	Assistant Director of Medical Services (the senior medical officer in a division)
ADS	advanced dressing station (the second link in the chain of medical evacuation)
AFHQ	Allied Force Headquarters (HQ which controlled all Allied operational forces in the Mediterranean Theatre from late 1942 to the end of the war)
AFV	armoured fighting vehicle
ATM	<i>Army Training Memorandum</i>
AWOL	absent without leave
B Echelon	troops, vehicles and equipment held in reserve
BEF	British Expeditionary Force
BLA	British Liberation Army
Blighty	home, Britain
Bomb Happy	Second World War British euphemism for neuropsychiatric casualties
Bren	British light machine gun
CCS	casualty clearing station (the third link in the chain of medical evacuation)
Char	Tea
CO	commanding officer (properly used for commanding officers of battalions)

CRO	<i>Current Reports from Overseas</i>
CSM	company sergeant major (ranking as warrant officer class 2)
CVWW	Council of Voluntary War Work
DAP	Directorate of Army Psychiatry
DCLI	Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry
DDT	Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane
DLI	Durham Light Infantry
DMT	Directorate of Military Training
DSO	Distinguished Service Order
DWR	Duke of Wellington's Regiment
FGCM	Field General Court Martial
FSR	<i>Field Service Regulations</i>
GOC	general officer commanding (the commander of a brigade, division, corps or army)
HLI	Highland Light Infantry
HQ	headquarters
KOSB	King's Own Scottish Borderers
KOYLI	King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry
KSLI	King's Shropshire Light Infantry
MC	Military Cross
MMG	medium machine gun

MO	medical officer
Moaning Minnie	nickname for <i>nebelwerfer</i>
MTP	<i>Military Training Pamphlet</i>
NAAFI	Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes
<i>Nebelwerfer</i>	German rocket propelled multiple barrelled mortar
NCO	non-commissioned officer
NTW	<i>Notes from Theatres of War</i>
OC	officer commanding (properly used for officers commanding companies and platoons)
OCTU	Officer Cadets Training Unit
OP	observation post
OR	other ranks: private soldiers and NCOs
PBI	poor bloody infantry
POW	prisoner of war
PSI	permanent staff instructor
RAF	Royal Air Force
RAP	regimental aid post (the first link in the chain of medical evacuation)
RE	Royal Engineers
RMO	regimental medical officer
SIW	self-inflicted wound
SOS	Save Our Souls: the close protective target on which field artillery was laid when not otherwise engaged
SS	<i>Schutzstaffel</i>

Stag	Sentry duty
Stand to	from 'stand to arms'. The period at dusk and dawn when troops were required to man their battle positions to repel an attack
Stonk	standard regimental artillery concentration
VE	victory in Europe



Figure 1: an eerily familiar picture taken in 1943 of an OP in one of the captured Mareth Line forts (IWM Photo Archive NA1333)

Introduction

A fortnight now and we are still in the line. The force of the German counter-attacks has worn off but the shelling is heavy and every day more of our men are killed or wounded. The fields below us, which were once pleasantly green, are now brown and pocked with a thousand craters. The few houses within sight have been smashed to pieces. The roads are cratered and the verges littered with burned-out trucks and new graves. We live in our trenches on the hillside through mist, drizzle and damp cold.¹

It may come as some surprise that the soldier quoted above did not fight in the Great War. Indeed, for all the striking parallels with the Western Front, the passage dates from 1 February 1944 and was written by an infantry officer in Italy. Nor was this an isolated example - throughout the war the fighting was often highly static and troops lived and fought in trenches little different from those of the generation before. Despite this, most people's perceptions of the two wars are that they were radically different, that the men of 1914-18 endured the Western Front, whereas in 1939-45 fluid manoeuvre warfare was the norm.² On closer inspection, it is plain that for the ordinary infantryman at least, the two wars had a great deal more in common than is usually appreciated.

Perhaps the most noticeable link was the shovel and entrenching tool. 'Newcomers were amazed,' wrote Sergeant Stan Whitehouse, 1st Black Watch, 'to find that everyone carried either a full-sized pick or spade into action. These life-saving tools were stuck in the belt between the ammunition pouches, and it was essential to team up a pick man with a spade man so that digging-in could be

¹ David Cole, *Rough Road to Rome: a foot-soldier in Sicily and Italy, 1943-44* (London 1983) 175.

² G. D. Sheffield, 'The Shadow of the Somme: the Influence of the First World War on British Soldiers' Perceptions and Behaviour in the Second World War', in Paul Addison and Angus Calder (eds.), *Time to Kill: The Soldier's Experience of War in the West 1939-1945* (Pimlico 1997), 36.

done quickly'.³ These 'life-saving' tools remained important for two key reasons. First, although AFVs had initially weakened the power of the defence, the development of more effective counter measures (such as improved anti-tank guns, mines and later the bazooka/PIAT/*Panzerfaust*) went some way to restoring its supremacy. This meant that attacking, as John Ellis points out in *The Sharp End*, 'remained a hazardous and *slow* procedure, only to be undertaken when absolutely necessary and with the maximum of fire support'.⁴ The second reason was the terrain, much of which was unsuitable for a war of movement, and as a result static, or at best slow-moving, attritional operations distinguished much of the fighting.⁵ In Tunisia (1942-43), Italy (1943-45), Normandy (1944) and Holland and Germany (1944-45), the similarities to the Western Front were obvious. Even the fighting in the Western Desert in 1940-42, which at first glance would seem to be the mirror opposite of 1914-18, contained some unmistakably First World War style battles. Thus the war of movement remains something of an illusion as ordinary riflemen spent the majority of their time at the front burrowing underground. Although these trenches were never as fixed or elaborate as those on the Western Front, the men who served in North Africa, Italy and north-west Europe nonetheless shared an experience remarkably similar to that of their predecessors in Flanders, Picardy, Champagne and Artois. The only notable difference (and this was not always the case), was that troops in the present war did not spend as much time in the *same* hole.⁶

Before we continue, we should pause for a moment to discuss terminology. Throughout the present work trench warfare, static warfare and positional warfare will be used fairly interchangeably. Some may question the merits of attaching these labels to the fighting in 1939-45. But our view should not be coloured solely by the experience of 1914-18. There are, as in all things, degrees; and other classifications such as semi-mobile, attritional warfare, although accurate, seem unnecessarily long-

³ Stanley Whitehouse and George B. Bennett, *Fear is the Foe: a footslogger from Normandy to the Rhine* (London 1995), 32.

⁴ John Ellis, *The Sharp End: The Fighting Man in World War II* (London 1993), 36.

⁵ Sheffield, 'The Shadow of the Somme', 36.

⁶ Ellis, *Sharp End*, 37.

winded and lack the same emotive punch. To ensure simplicity we shall continue to refer to the 1939-45 variety as 'trench warfare'.

Even then, we run into problems. For instance, during what were ostensibly mobile campaigns – such as the retreat to Dunkirk, much of the fighting in North Africa or the breakout from Normandy and subsequent 'Great Swan' across France – soldiers still lived and fought in trenches. It may have been a different trench every day, following a move forward in lorries, but it was, nonetheless, a trench. Thus the distinction between manoeuvre and trench warfare becomes something of a moot point. Of greater importance is the immobilisation of combat - when the lines became static and soldiers remained in prolonged close contact with the enemy. When this occurred, in conjunction with the universal habit of entrenching in forward areas, we begin to see the real divergence with mobile fighting. In the present work, therefore, we will focus on such periods of static, trench fighting, against what we might term semi-mobile, trench fighting. In short, our analysis will concentrate as much as possible on soldiers in fixed positions, in extended close contact with the enemy.

But just how static was the fighting? Certainly the opening stages of the war seemed to presage a return to 1914-18 trench warfare, as for nine months from September 1939 to May 1940 British soldiers inhabited a series of set lines identical to those of the first Western Front. Even the vast open spaces of the Western Desert witnessed numerous examples of trench fighting and grim attritional battles – such as the 'boxes' of 1940-2, the Gazala Line, the siege of Tobruk and Second Alamein to name a few. In Tunisia, for instance, First Army spent more than three months locked in a bitter stalemate in the winter of 1942-43; while Eighth Army ground to a halt for nearly a month before the formidable defences at Mareth, a twenty-two mile line in the mould of the fortifications of 1915.



Figure 2: part of the Mareth Line after capture (IWM Photo Archive NA1469)

In Italy the Allies took nineteen months to fight their way from the bottom of the mainland to the top and it was not until April 1945, when the final battle for the River Po took place, that the campaign came to an end - a rate of advance of approximately one mile per day.⁷ The most prominent examples of trench warfare in this theatre took place at Cassino and at Anzio; the former lasted for more than five months and the latter for more than four, during which time the lines barely moved at all. In north-west Europe, the early stages of the Battle for Normandy threatened to turn into a repeat of the deadlock on the Western Front and, for a period of a few weeks, British infantry losses were actually *higher* than what they had been a generation earlier. There was another protracted stalemate later in the campaign in the autumn and winter of 1944-45, a period characterised by trenches, bloody attritional battles and heavy casualties.

What were the conditions like? Were they any better than those in France and Flanders in the previous war? By way of illustration, consider the following account from a private in the 4th Wiltshires:

We went back up on the hill and were there in slit-trenches for weeks. Never moved out of them. Never washed or shaved, or took our boots off. Had to walk back at night-time to pick up food and take it back to our trenches. All this time, constantly shelled day and night, 88s mostly. Time and time again, I prayed, lying in the bottom of a trench. Never saw a German once. Thinking mostly about the next shelling. Hearing blokes scream and cry, when trenches around were hit. Used empty food tins to make water in; had to dash to nearest empty trench for other, trousers unbuttoned in advance. Eventually relieved and went to another field. Three days' rest, cleaned up a bit, back up the line. Senior NCO shot himself in foot, decided he'd had enough.⁸

In fact, the physical conditions on the battlefields of the Second World War were every bit as gruelling as those of the Western Front. In many cases they were worse as, unlike the PBI of 1914-18, who were able to construct elaborate, relatively comfortable trenches, the soldiers of 1939-45

⁷ Brian Harpur, *The Impossible Victory: a personal account of the Battle for the River Po* (Dunton Green 1988), 43.

⁸ William Biles quoted in Ellis, *Sharp End*, 46-47.

were, with a few notable exceptions, seldom in one position long enough to take root and improve their subterranean homes. Most found themselves inhabiting two man slit-trenches, about six feet long by two feet wide and four or five feet deep, for weeks at a time; more often than not they were completely exposed to the elements. In some instances, men lived in little more than shallow holes scraped out of the ground.

Battle itself was equally reminiscent of the earlier conflict; and although tanks and aircraft captured the popular imagination, combat remained at its heart a story of the humble footslogger. Like the last war, soldiers were rotated in and out of the line; sometimes they fought in gigantic, set-piece battles, typically involving the head-on assault of a heavily fortified line, or the grim defence of their own position; and in between they endured the ravages of constant low-intensity combat, routine line-holding, which, in the long-run, could be every bit as damaging. The following extract, provided by a lieutenant who fought with the 6th Gordon Highlanders at Anzio, is illustrative of the true nature of combat in this period:

For three days and nights we remained. The days were long and dreary as we sheltered from the occasional shell fire and heard the sounds of battle coming from the area we had left. During the hours of darkness we waited fully alert in our muddy trenches while the enemy continually pounded us with shells and mortar bombs. Every night a strong attack or fighting patrol was sent against different parts of the line. But each time our machine guns, artillery and mortars, firing their SOS tasks, broke up the attacks before they could penetrate our defences. During these attacks we in our trenches added rifle and Bren gun fire whenever the Germans looming up in the darkness presented a fair target.⁹

This could not be further removed from the traditional image of tanks, aircraft and *blitzkrieg*.

Given the foregoing, it seems only logical to ask what effect this had on the men and to think through the various aspects of the human experience it implies. It is the aim of the present work to

⁹ Edward Grace, *The Perilous Road to Rome & Beyond: fighting through North Africa & Italy* (Barnsley 2007), 140-1.

study static warfare from the point of view of morale. Some of key questions to be addressed include: what effect did the return to the trenches have on the Army's discipline and morale? Was there a clear link between periods of static fighting and the rate of psychiatric breakdown? And what does the experience of 1939-45 tell us about the nature of twentieth century warfare? To this end, chapter one will demonstrate that pre-war doctrine and training were geared towards a repetition of the Western Front. Yet even by 1944 there was still evidence that many soldiers were being inadequately prepared for combat. If truth be told, the Army never got to grips with teaching men how to dig in under fire, a skill that most soldiers urgently required on active service. Unfortunately, too many inexperienced troops were left to learn the hard way, and the slogan 'dig or die' proved all too accurate.

Chapter two looks at the physical conditions at the front, which were highly reminiscent of 1914-18. Yet there were some critical differences – in the trench systems and time spent in the line – that frequently made their experience worse. Despite this, the men of 1939-45 viewed the first war as *the* yardstick of horror and used it to measure their own experiences, drawing on folk memories of the earlier conflict to describe their own suffering. Furthermore, despite evidence that static warfare was common in almost every theatre, new arrivals were completely surprised when they encountered it. This feeling gave way to demoralisation, as the true horror of trench warfare sank in and soldiers began to change under its influence: their vision narrowed and they grew disconnected from reality. Yet despite all the horror and suffering, there was little political or ideological sentiment; most soldiers simply wanted to get home as soon as possible and return to normal, not build a 'New Britain'. The reason for this was simple. The generation that went to war in 1914 became profoundly disillusioned by the horror and apparent futility of the trenches; the soldiers of 1939, thanks in no small part to the influence of the latter, were already disillusioned and more cynical. They certainly knew just how terrible modern industrialised war could be.

The daily routine in a static position was especially damaging to morale and is dealt with in chapter three. At best it was a dirty, monotonous experience; at worst it was utter misery. Besides the physical demands – such as fatigue and backbreaking manual labour – men had to contend with appalling mental stresses like the tension of stand-to and ‘stags’ and crippling boredom. The negative effect of such duties could be countered by hot food, mail, cigarettes, alcohol and, perhaps most importantly, ‘char’; while a spell out of the line, even a few hundred yards back, proved to be a remarkable tonic. On the other hand, if any of these were in short supply, morale could hit rock bottom. In short, the infantryman’s daily routine at the front pushed them to the very limits of their endurance, both physical and mental.

Chapter four considers combat. Despite *blitzkrieg* and all the technological leaps of the twentieth century, it remained an infantryman’s war. It was also a very small minority of men who actually did the fighting, and who suffered the bulk of the casualties. Large set-piece battles, however, were relatively infrequent, with routine line-holding being the norm. The latter involved numerous tension-filled expeditions into no-man’s-land on patrol, sometimes for tangible military purposes, other times just to gain ‘moral ascendancy’; the constant menace of enemy snipers; and regular attention from the enemy’s guns, generating mental strain at one end and all out shell-shock at the other. Attacking was generally a matter of assaulting heavily fortified positions, as the dominant German mode of warfare, by force of circumstance, was to establish a static defensive position and hang on to it for as long as possible. Thus British rifleman were nearly always involved in grinding, attritional battles.

In terms of general combat psychology, we will see that inexperienced troops thought of battle with apprehensive-enthusiasm, but as the prospect of fighting grew nearer their initial keenness gave way to nagging fear. Pre-contact apprehension was not just confined to green troops, it affected everyone all the time and a crucial point to bear in mind was that most soldiers were *always* scared at the thought of going into action. Another common fear, perhaps the most important one, was the

fear of failure or of not living up to perceived stereotypes of masculinity, which prompted men to put on a brave face in battle and was, in all likelihood, a crucial mainstay of military discipline. Once they were in battle their fears largely disappeared and they went into a kind of emotional vacuum, remembering little about their actions or feelings. Finally, trench warfare greatly increased feelings of isolation and helplessness, as one rarely saw the enemy, let alone came to grips with him; it also highlighted the random and ubiquitous nature of death; and made the fighting increasingly impersonal. Men realised that they would not be killed in a valiant life or death struggle with an equally matched opponent, but that death would come suddenly and with little dignity, most likely at the hands of a far off machine against which they were powerless to reply. Static warfare was for the most part, then, a bewildering experience and one that left most veterans feeling totally helpless.

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relatively neglected link between periods of static warfare and low morale and psychological collapse.

Before we consider methodology, we should first outline the relevant historiography. Unfortunately there is practically no secondary literature devoted to this subject - whereas the Great War produced a mountain of such books, there has been little or no attempt by scholars to examine the experience of soldiers in the Second World War in such terms. Perhaps the most in-depth assessment of digging in and morale features in Ellis' *The Sharp End*, which examined the actual physical and mental experience of US and British front-line soldiers in 1939-45.¹⁰ Even then, Ellis devotes fewer than seventeen pages to this topic. Richard Holmes and G. D. Sheffield briefly touch upon the similarities of the two wars in their respective articles in *Time to Kill*.¹¹ Other books acknowledge that such fighting took place, but do not go into much detail. Thus we are left with a handful of scattered references from which to build a comprehensive picture.

There are a plethora of general studies on soldiering and the British Army that shed some light, albeit tangentially, on the area. Many of the most useful date from the 1970s onwards, when military historians began to turn their attention away from 'The Commanders Tale' and began to focus their attention on the PBI. John Keegan's *The Face of Battle*, first published in 1976, examined three great battles from this perspective - Agincourt, Waterloo and the Somme – and posed the question: what *really* happens in battle?¹² He argued that the inclusion of the ordinary soldier's experience of war was the first and most important step in understanding battle 'as it actually was'.¹³ This was followed nine years later by Richard Holmes' wide-ranging and incisive study of the military experience, *Firing Line*.¹⁴ While the common soldier in various theatres of the Second World War was considered in James Lucas' *The British Soldier* and Paul Addison and Angus Calder's *Time to*

¹⁰ Ellis, *The Sharp End*.

¹¹ Paul Addison and Angus Calder (eds.), *Time to Kill: the Soldier's Experience of War in the West, 1939-1945* (London 1997).

¹² John Keegan, *The Face of Battle: a study of Agincourt, Waterloo and Somme* (London 2004).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁴ Richard Holmes, *Acts of War: The Behaviour of Men in Battle* (London 2004).

Kill, the British Army as a whole was dealt with in detail by David French in *Raising Churchill's Army* and Jeremy Crang in *The British Army and the People's War*.¹⁵

There are numerous works on morale and combat motivation which have influenced the present work. None more so than Lord Moran's seminal study, *Anatomy of Courage* (1945), which concluded that every man has a finite stock of courage which is inevitably whittled away by sustained exposure to danger.¹⁶ Another influential work was John Baynes' *Morale: a Study of Men and Courage* (1967), an examination of the 2nd Scottish Rifles at the Battle of Neuve Chapelle in 1915.¹⁷ Baynes pinpointed five factors which were important for good morale: regimental loyalty; excellent officer-other rank relations; strong discipline; a sense of duty and, lastly, sound administration (perhaps reflecting the fact that Baynes was himself a regular officer). Of course, the examination of morale and motivation was not the sole preserve of British authors; we should not ignore the hugely influential triumvirate of American works released in the 1940s: S. L. A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire*; Samuel A. Stouffer (et al), *The American Soldier*; and Edward A. Shils and Morris Janowitz, 'Cohesion and disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II'.¹⁸ The central theme of these studies was the idea that small-group cohesion was key to combat morale; in short, men fought for their mates.

Books on the mental wellbeing of soldiers in industrial warfare proved to be immensely useful in the context of this thesis. One such was Terry Copp and Bill McAndrew's *Battle Exhaustion*, a multifaceted study of soldiers and psychiatrists in the Canadian Army in Italy and Normandy.¹⁹ This was followed by *Shell Shock* by Wendy Holden, a look at the psychological impact of modern warfare, and another wide-ranging and superbly researched study by Ben Shephard, *A War of*

¹⁵ James Lucas, *The British Soldier* (London 1989); Addison and Calder, *Time to Kill*; David French, *Raising Churchill's Army: the British Army and the war against Germany, 1919-1945* (Oxford 2000); J. A. Crang, *The British Army and the People's War 1939-1945* (Manchester 2000).

¹⁶ Lord Moran, *The Anatomy of Courage: the classic WWI account of the psychological effects of War* (London 2007).

¹⁷ John Baynes, *Morale, a study of men and courage: the Second Scottish Rifles at the Battle of Neuve Chapelle, 1915* (London 1987).

¹⁸ S. L. A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command* (Norman, OK 2000); Samuel A. Stouffer [et al], *The American Soldier* (Princeton, NJ 1949); Morris Janowitz and Edward Shils, 'Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II', in M. Janowitz (ed.), *Military Conflict. Essays in the Institutional Analysis of War and Peace* (Los Angeles, CA 1975), 177-220.

¹⁹ Terry Copp and Bill McAndrew, *Battle Exhaustion: soldiers and psychiatrists in the Canadian Army, 1939-1945* (London c. 1990).

Nerves.²⁰ These presented a range of personal insights into the effects of psychiatric breakdown in war and allowed for a greater understanding of the condition and its causes. In addition, numerous works dealing with the experience of trench warfare in the First World War have been consulted. One was Eric Leed's *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (1979), which considered how modern, industrialised war transformed the character of the men who participated in it. Another, Alexander Watson's *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918* (2009), provided a comparative study of how German and British soldiers endured the horror of the First World War, arguing that at the heart of armies' robustness was natural human resilience.

The comparative dearth of material does not extend to primary literature thankfully. The principal archival sources used were the Imperial War Museum, the National Archives, the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives and the Contemporary Medical Archives Centre of the Wellcome Library. To ensure the project's manageability we deal solely with the war in the west (France and Belgium, Africa, Italy and North-West Europe) and on the infantry (generally no higher than battalion). The thesis draws widely on contemporary letters and diaries of British soldiers, psychiatric and medical reports and official documentation – not to mention personal narratives and accounts published after the war – and will attempt to interpret these sources in light of modern research and organise them into a logical framework. Ultimately it is hoped that this will provide fresh insight into a relatively under-researched area of twentieth century history, by crystallising the argument and documenting it clearly.

²⁰ Wendy Holden, *Shell Shock* (London 2001); Ben Shephard, *A War of Nerves: soldiers and psychiatrists, 1914-1994* (London 2002).

Chapter One: Doctrine and Training

Back in Britain, during training, we had often been told 'the rifle is a soldier's best friend': rubbish. The spade had it licked any day.

Corporal Dai Evans, Memoir, c. 1991.¹

The majority of infantrymen trained in Britain during the war had little experience of combat. Until they became familiar with battle their ability to make sound tactical decisions rested on an understanding of doctrine. For the ordinary soldier this was disseminated through word and deed by officers and NCOs who instructed them by demonstration, explanation and practice. However, consistent methods and practices throughout such a large organisation also required a body of written doctrine. As a result, the Army produced a great deal of doctrinal literature during our period. It was intended exclusively for officers and NCOs, not private soldiers, and was designed to promote uniformity by refreshing memories of long-forgotten instruction and as an alternative to training never received. It is debatable, though, to what extent this literature was actually read. According to one officer who served in 1940 and 1941, much training material was 'very good indeed', but often went unread amongst the torrent of useless paperwork spawned by higher HQs

¹ Imperial War Museum (IWM) Department of Documents, 92/37/1, D. Evans, Memoir, 35.

and the War Office.² Despite the apparent inconsistency with which these manuals reached their desired audience, they nevertheless provide valuable insight into training and instruction during our period; representing what was undoubtedly thought of as the norm by the writers and authorities responsible for their creation. In this chapter we will examine the manuals and pamphlets that contained official British Army teaching on static warfare and look at what the men actually did in training to prepare them for life underground. To this end we will examine the following areas: firstly, there will be a critical analysis of defence and static warfare doctrine; secondly, a brief summary of the evolution of training in our period and some of the criticisms; and, finally, a detailed look at how soldiers were actually prepared for trench warfare. It is to the first of these themes that we now turn our attention.

The main doctrinal manual in the pre-war period was *Field Service Regulations (FSR)*, of which no less than four editions were issued by the General Staff between 1920 and 1935.³ Each version was produced by the Director of Staff Duties, although the preparation of a first draft was usually delegated to an officer outside the War Office (The 1929 and 1935 editions, for instance, were drafted by Major-Generals C. P. Deedes and Archibald Wavell respectively).⁴ The draft was distributed not only to General Staff branches in the War Office, but also to the GOC-in-Cs of the home commands and the Staff College for comment. Hence, each manual represented a consensus of the General Staff's views and was intended for all commanders down to the most junior.⁵ In addition to *FSR*, two subsequent manuals, *Infantry Training* (1937) and *Infantry Section Leading* (1938) were published that provided additional guidance on training and tactics.⁶ *Infantry Training: Training and War*, as it was sub-titled, was an attempt to prepare the British Army for modern war and contained a blend of the best of the old principles of open warfare learned in South Africa and

² Michael Joseph, *The Sword in the Scabbard* (London 1942), 218.

³ *Field Service Regulations (FSR)*, ii. *Operations General* (1935) (London 1935).

⁴ A revised version of *FSR* was under preparation when the war began in 1939 but it was never published. The 1935 edition, therefore, had to guide commanders through a period when the organisation and equipment of the army underwent their most radical changes since 1918.

⁵ French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, 13.

⁶ *Infantry Training – Training and War* (London 1937); *Infantry Section Leading* (London 1938).

the Indian frontier with those expected to obtain as a result of increasing mechanisation⁷; whereas *Infantry Section Leading* offered broad guidance on aspects of section command and was meant for NCOs. Between them these three publications - *Field Service Regulations*, *Infantry Training* and *Infantry Section Leading* – represent the main sources used in the following analysis of pre-war doctrine.

Chapter VII of *FSR* (1935) provided commanders with instructions on the conduct of the defence. This section dealt exclusively with resisting a serious attack in force, and not with other forms of defensive fighting. Consequently, it offered a guide to such matters as: considerations involved in the choice of a defensive position; the organisation and conduct of the defence; and the role of different arms.⁸ On being ordered to defend a point or area, the unit was to select ground offering cover from view and observation over the enemy and then dig in to obtain cover from fire.⁹ Initially, each man dug an individual pit for himself and his weapon or, in the case of the MMGs and 3-inch mortars, dug with other members of the crew a pit for their particular support weapon. The main position was to consist of a belt of defended localities with intervals between them, arranged in depth to provide mutual support. The size of each defended locality, the number of men garrisoning it and the intervals between localities was determined by the ground, tactical situation and the training and morale of the troops. Once this position was established it would act as the front edge of what would ultimately become an extensive defensive *system*, with further positions built in the rear to offer defence in depth. Indeed, as *FSR* stated, the position should

Always be strengthened by entrenchments and obstacles to the fullest extent that the time available permits . . . Concealment from the air is of importance and use should be made, when time permits, of camouflage devices; dummy trenches may be usefully constructed.¹⁰

⁷ Anthony Farrar-Hockley, *Infantry Tactics* (Warren MI, 1976), 10.

⁸ *FSR* (1935), 132.

⁹ The main considerations in the choice of a defensive position were: the object; the size of the force; artillery observation; anti-tank defence; and the suitability of the rearward part of the position.

¹⁰ *FSR* (1935), 138-139.

This principle was reiterated in *Infantry Training*. In section seventy-four, *The Battalion in Defence*, commanders were instructed that if a position was to be held for more than forty-eight hours, the enemy should be confronted with an *extensive trench system*; covered communication trenches between the forward companies and the rear; and alternative positions for the garrison.¹¹ When this level of digging was required, the programme of development was to be carried out in the following stages

- (a) Digging of weapon pits for the garrison and erection of wire, after considering the final trace of the system.
- (b) Digging of intermediate weapons pits.
- (c) Joining up weapon pits throughout the system, and provision of a 'crawl' trench 18 inches deep. In tracing these trenches it must be remembered that they will ultimately be developed into fire and communication trenches.
- (d) Deepening all trenches to three feet.
- (e) Development to full width and depth can proceed eventually with greater ease and security.¹²

It advised commanders that, if possible, all fieldworks should be traced out on the ground before digging began to ensure greater economy in time and labour. *Infantry Section Leading* also recommended this practice (if circumstances permitted), to ensure that

Sufficient room has been left for traverses and that the pits have been sited so as to avoid unnecessary digging if they are to be joined up later into a complete trench system. As a rule, to minimize the effect of shells or enfilade fire, a bend in the trench or traverse is required between every ten yards of straight trench.¹³

Besides general instructions on the conduct of the defence, *FSR* also offered commanders a specific guide to position warfare (chapter IX). This mainly dealt with static conditions developing

¹¹ *Infantry Training* (1937), 153.

¹² *Ibid.*, 153.

¹³ *Infantry Section Leading* (1938), 73-74.

slowly out of mobile operations; however, it also warned readers that due to elaborate frontier defences constructed by 'some nations on the continent of Europe', static conditions may ensue from the outset.¹⁴ The chapter dispensed advice on such matters as: the general characteristics of position warfare; the attack and defence in static fighting; gas attacks; reliefs; and the function of different arms. In *General Characteristics*, commanders were cautioned that machine guns made the assault of even hastily entrenched positions a formidable undertaking; while the addition of an obstacle - barbed wire against infantry, minefields or specially dug works against AFVs – ensured that an offensive begun in the open field would almost certainly bog down. At this point, only with a considerable mass of tanks or a great weight of artillery could the attacker hope to force the position; but the delay needed to gather these resources would allow the defender time to deepen and improve his works. Unless the position could be turned, the attacker would be left with no option but to entrench himself opposite the enemy and resort to the methods of siege warfare. Once this happened

the defensive system will extend to a depth of several thousands of yards, strengthened by concrete works and shelters, by deep dug-outs, by wide obstacles or inundations; artillery and mortars of the heaviest calibre, with an almost unlimited supply of ammunition, will be used in both attack and defence; mining and counter-mining will take place; and a huge system of depots, stores and installations of all kinds, together with a network of communications – by road, water, railway, tramline – will be required to deal with the masses of ammunition, and of the material, offensive and defensive, which this type of warfare necessitates.¹⁵

In all three publications the influence of the First War was never far from the surface. Much emphasis was placed on the need for temporary entrenchments to be gradually elaborated and improved, obstacles in front of the position strengthened and extended, and the defended localities joined up. *FSR* instructed commanders that one of the first steps in the improvement of a temporary position should be the connection by *continuous* trenches of the various posts and localities which

¹⁴ *FSR* (1935), 161.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 162.

formed the framework of the defensive works. This had the advantage of facilitating control and reliefs and made it difficult for the enemy to discover the actual dispositions of the defenders and would cause him to disperse his fire. Furthermore, continuous trenches helped prevent a feeling of isolation among the defenders and improved their morale.¹⁶ In a similar vein, *Infantry Training* warned commanders not to build trenches in obvious isolation, as this would allow the enemy to work out not only the location, but also strength of the garrison. To overcome this, 'rapid and extensive digging between platoon and company localities in both forward and reserve areas', was strongly recommended.¹⁷ This gradual improvement and strengthening was geared towards the construction of what *FSR* described as

A main system, where the natural advantages of the ground have been strengthened by the best and most carefully concealed obstacles and defensive works that can be constructed in the time available; and an outpost system to act as a buffer and absorb the first shock. Both main system and outpost system will be organized in depth. Behind these again, at some distance in rear, if time and labour permit and there is a possibility of having to withstand very heavy attacks, rear systems may be constructed, or at all events reconnoitred and planned.¹⁸

It is apparent that the men who wrote these manuals had not forgotten the impact of artillery and mortar fire on trench lines during the last war.¹⁹ As a result, they believed that cover from fire was more important than cover from view if the choice had to be made. Significantly, the diagrams which supported much of this doctrine also reflected even more strongly the old trench warfare mentality: for instance, machine guns were sighted on forward arcs on the assumption that the enemy would always attack from the front (see page 19). At the ultimate stage of development, the defence system mirrored those carried across Flanders and France from 1915 onwards. This did

¹⁶ *FSR* (1935), 165.

¹⁷ *Infantry Training* (1937), 153.

¹⁸ *FSR* (1935), 164.

¹⁹ Archibald Wavell, who drafted *FSR* (1935), was working as a staff officer when the First World War began. In November 1914 he was appointed Brigade-Major of 9th Infantry Brigade. He was wounded in the Second Battle of Ypres in 1915 and won the MC. In December 1915 he was appointed to the General Staff where he served for the rest of the war in a variety of roles; Russell Gurney, who wrote the draft of *Infantry Training: Training and War*, served as a platoon and company commander with 7th Northamptonshire Regiment on the Western Front from September 1915 onwards. In December 1916 he was appointed as Staff Captain of 72nd Infantry Brigade.

Below, a company position from *Infantry Training*. The tracing has been extended into a trench system, a second line has been constructed and communications trenches extended back to the final line around company HQ. With the addition of belts of barbed wire the position has taken on the look of a Great War trench line.

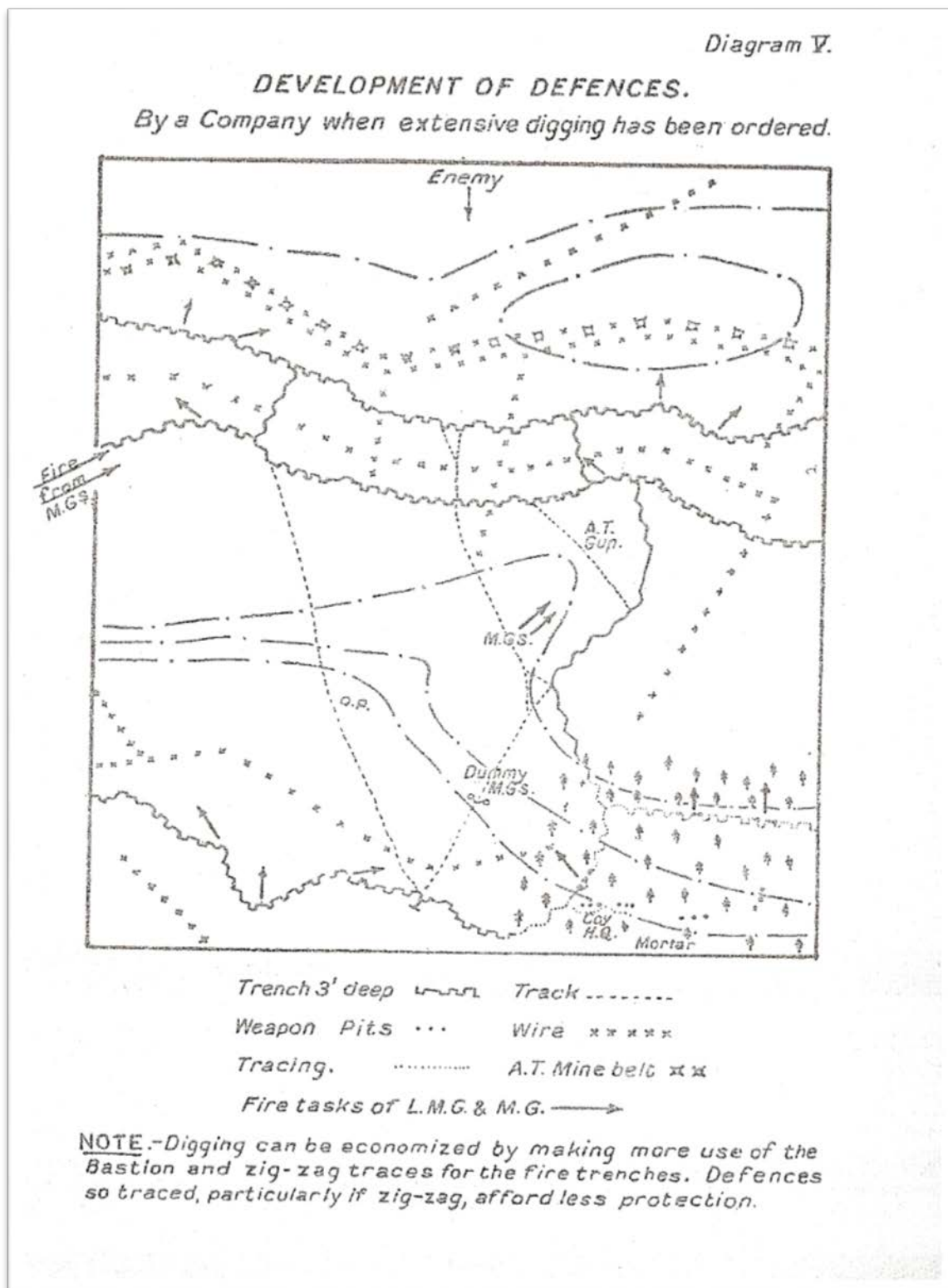


Figure 3: a company position (*Infantry Training – Training and War*)

not train the Army to meet the most likely threat, for the German idea was to break through on a narrow front with heavy fire power as a preliminary to speedy exploitation of any gaps to attack the enemy in the flank or rear.²⁰

The influence of the Western Front also permeated instructions for offensive action. There was still the belief that only a deliberate attack could break the enemy's main position.²¹ According to *Infantry Training* the only hope of success against organised resistance was 'deliberate and methodical preparation and the provision at the outset of extensive support to keep the fire of the enemy in subjection'.²² *Infantry Section Leading* called for a careful plan to be made and an attack carried out 'on a timed programme to which the forward sections must adhere'.²³ *FSR* advised commanders that large material resources were required to deal with organised defences; that preparations would need considerable time; and that orders for the attack would have to be very detailed.²⁴ Indeed, it envisaged the need for a series of operations, separated by several days of careful preparation, before the position could be forced and the enemy driven into the open. The conduct of such an attack was described in detail

The artillery preparation . . . will be heavier and more prolonged in accordance with the strength of the hostile position; the attacking troops will be covered by a more intense and deeper barrage; the objectives of each successive body of troops are likely to be closer to each other owing to the probably greater severity of the fighting and higher percentage of casualties; special parties for clearing up each line of enemy trenches ('mopping-up' was an official term in the Great War) may be required; and consolidation of successive objectives and protection of flanks will need specially detailed arrangements.²⁵

This depiction of an attack, following deliberate and methodical preparation, could just as easily relate to an offensive twenty years earlier. In sum, British pre-war doctrine, as far as static warfare

²⁰ Farrar-Hockley, *Infantry Tactics*, 12.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

²² *Infantry Training* (1937), 109.

²³ *Infantry Section Leading* (1938), 62.

²⁴ *FSR* (1935), 166.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 167-168.

was concerned, seemed geared to fighting the present war in the manner in which they had fought the last. Firstly, our three manuals hammered home the need to improve and elaborate temporary fieldworks, ultimately leading to an extensive system made up of continuous trenches arrayed in depth, reminiscent of the Western Front from 1915 onwards; and, secondly, they also clung to the belief that only meticulous preparation and a scrupulously planned attack could hope to break the enemy's main position. All of this begs the question: if pre-war doctrine prepared the British Army to fight the wrong war, was official teaching in the years after Dunkirk (in light of the humbling of the BEF) any more effective?

The principal source of official doctrine during the war years was the *MTP* series produced by the War Office.²⁶ These were written by specially selected officers chosen by the DMT and covered a variety of different trades and specialisms.²⁷ Like most doctrinal literature, however, it was aimed solely at officers and NCOs, rather than private soldiers. As the *MTP* series represented official doctrine, their production was often a time-consuming process. To ensure that troops in the field were provided with the latest tactical advice, the War Office initiated another series of pamphlets to disseminate new or revised doctrine. This was the *ATM* series, which initially appeared monthly and thereafter less regularly, with up to seven months between issues. They were distributed to every officer and typically contained a series of short articles on tactical, administrative and training matters covering all arms, together with good ideas and advice from units in active theatres. As they took less time to produce, they could respond promptly to events and were often used to announce changes in tactical doctrine learned from recent battle experience. Despite their comparatively speedy production it was not always possible to keep up to date with the latest battlefield developments. Indeed, many lessons were learnt on active service that, although not requiring a change in printed doctrine, needed to be brought to the attention of the men training at home.

²⁶ For a detailed examination of the doctrinal publication system, see Timothy Harrison-Place, *Military Training in the British Army, 1940-1944: from Dunkirk to D-Day* (London 2000), 8-17.

²⁷ Some important aspects of doctrine were dealt with outside of the *MTP* series. For example, those wishing to study infantry tactics mainly had to rely on pre-war literature such as *Infantry Training* and *Infantry Section Leading*, released in 1937 and 1938 respectively.

These could be briefly outlined in *ATMs*, but to allow such lessons to be discussed at length the War Office began two series of battle-experience publications in 1942, *NTW* and *CRO*.

NTW began life as a fairly up to date publication dealing with particular operations; later editions, however, took more time to be produced and covered entire strategic phases in a particular theatre. Eventually their purpose was to transmit considered operational lessons, once the higher HQs concerned and the War Office had sorted through the battle reports and decreed what merited official approval. They are useful in so far as they represent the official lessons of battle. One was usually given to each company, but distribution varied depending on the content. The titles in this series covered every major campaign, with the curious exception of north-west Europe. However, when important new developments occurred on the battlefield suggesting a change in doctrine was necessary, it was crucial that this was swiftly related to the troops in training. Battle lessons that did not yet have the official seal of approval were published in the *CRO* series. Because they were not supported officially, the lessons contained in this series were not considered as valuable as those in *NTW* and were not circulated as far down the chain of command, reflecting the greater level of discretion deemed necessary in their use. At first they were available only at brigade HQ level and above, but from April 1944 distribution was increased to include lieutenant-colonels' commands. *CRO* No. 1 was published in September 1942; *CRO* No. 2 eight months later; and thereafter weekly *CROs* appeared until June 1945. The material came from a much wider range of sources than *NTW* and was subjected to little editorial interference before being released (save the deletion of unit names and personnel). Often they contained basic factual accounts of operations written by the officers involved, followed by an attempt to draw pertinent lessons. Between them, *MTP*, *ATM*, *NTW* and *CRO* constitute the main sources used in this chapter for the analysis of wartime doctrine.

MTP No. 30, *Field Engineering (All Arms), Part V: Protective Works* was published in February 1941.²⁸ It was intended for all arms and described only those protective works which were not the

²⁸ *Military Training Pamphlet (MTP) No. 30. Field Engineering (All Arms), Part V: Protective Works* (London 1941).

responsibility of the Royal Engineers. Significantly, it was drafted during the time when a German invasion of Britain seemed imminent. As a result the pamphlet only dealt with the kind of protective works that would develop during a protracted defence, such as containing an enemy beachhead; in contrast, there was little instruction on the practicalities of digging in under fire or on the construction of slit-trenches. Although the threat of invasion eventually eased and thoughts shifted to offensive operations abroad, *MTP* No. 30 was not superseded until March 1944, meaning that much of it was incompatible with the realities of the battlefield. For example, the description of tools and materials used in construction assumed that a large and varied supply would be on hand, such as would undoubtedly have been the case in Britain, but less likely in operations overseas (especially the Western Desert and Tunisia). Tools were grouped into three categories – entrenching, cutting and miscellaneous – and were bewildering in their variety (they included: pickaxes, shovels, spades, crowbars, felling-axes, cross-cut saws, folding saws, mauls, sledge-hammers, spanners, wrenches and augers). Similarly, the list of construction materials – such as brushwood, sandbags, spikes, expanded metal, corrugated iron, hurdles, fascines, ‘A’ frames, trench-boards and wire-netting – also reflected this assumption, and belonged more to the trenches of the Western Front than the weapon slits of the present war.²⁹

The drill for tool handling and digging was equally out of touch. The manual instructed that the soldier should first be taught how to handle and march with his tools, then the motions of picking and shovelling, and then how to dig small tasks. To begin with tools were issued. If time permitted they were laid out in sets, shovel on the right, helms eighteen inches apart, point of the blade in line with the pickhead, and the sets one pace apart. If there was little time, the picks and shovels were stacked separately and the men passed through them in single file, collecting a pick with the left hand and a shovel with the right. With this stage complete, the manual proceeded to outline the

²⁹ *MTP* No. 30 (1941), 2-6.

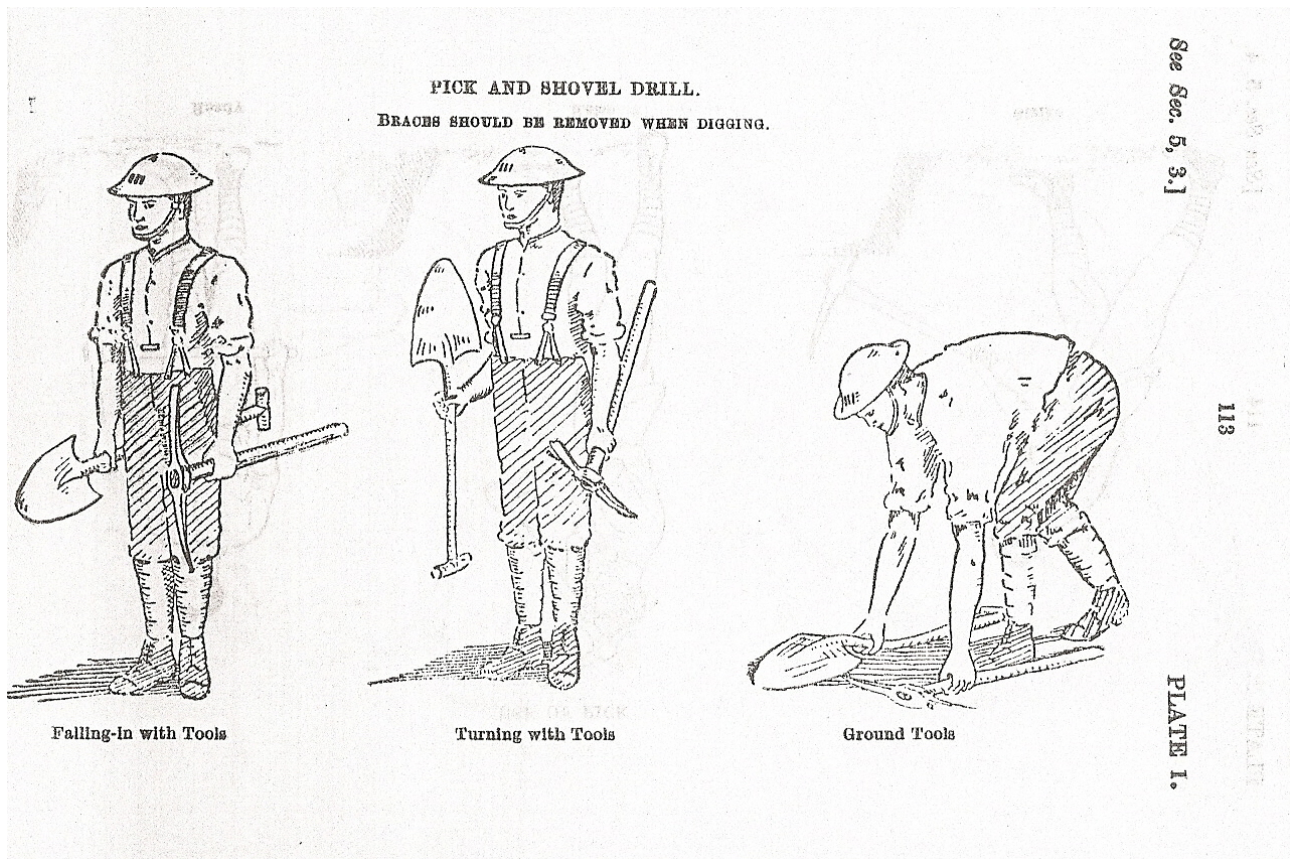


Figure 4: 'braces should be removed when digging', pick and shovel drill (MTP No. 30 1941)

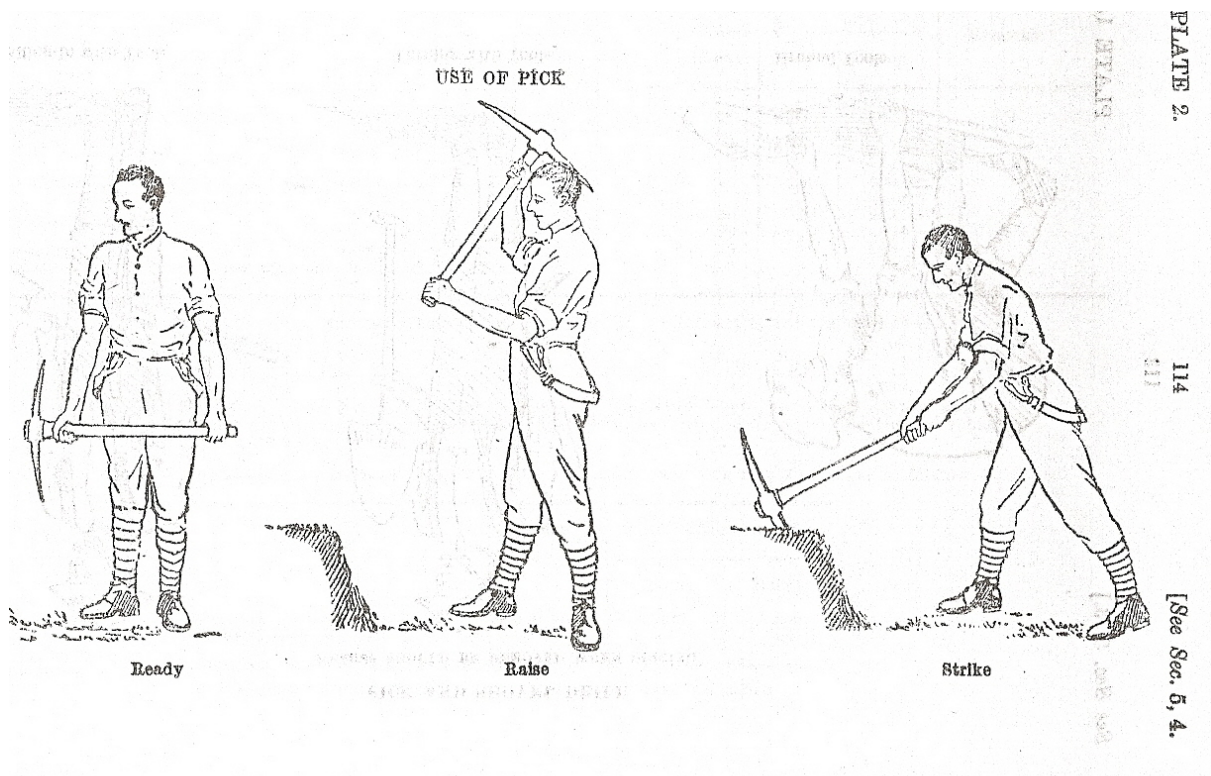


Figure 5: use of pick (MTP No. 30 1941)

methods of tool drill: falling in with tools, grounding and taking up tools, and marching with tools.³⁰

Although the next stage of the process - digging drill – taught men the quickest and most efficient way to dig a hole, it did not teach them how to dig in under fire. As such it is worth quoting to demonstrate its irrelevance to most soldiers in action:

"Ready" Turn half left and carry off right foot to right. Body evenly balanced on both feet. Pick horizontal in front of body. Both arms loose. Right hand about 4 in. from pickhead. Left hand at small end of helve.

"Raise" Fix eyes on point to be struck. Raise pick over right shoulder, keeping right upper arm horizontal, centre of pick directly over right shoulder, left arm slightly bent across front of body. Right hand moves slightly towards left, weight of body on rear foot.

"Strike" Eyes on mark. Holding firmly with left hand, strike downwards, allowing helve to slip through right hand. At the moment of striking the ground both hands grip tightly, weight of body coming on to forward hand.

"Break" Force small end of helve upwards and move forward hand towards pickhead.

"Rake" Rake the loosened earth towards feet by pulling pick back with both hands. Weight of body on rear foot.

"Raise" Straighten the forward knee and trunk and continue; if necessary, the "rake" may be repeated before "Raise" by carrying the pick forward and raking.

The drill is continued by the repetition of the commands **"Raise," "Strike," "Break," "Rake,"** as necessary. It is important to teach a regular rhythm. The rate should be from 28 to 30 strokes a minute for periods from 15 to 30 seconds, followed by a short pause, during which, if it is desired to continue work with the shovel, the pick will be grounded and the shovel taken up.³¹

³⁰ MTP No. 30 (1941), 6-8.

³¹ Ibid., 8.

Shovel drill followed along corresponding lines with commands of 'swing and fill', 'handle low', and 'swing and throw'.³² Clearly these elaborate drills were designed for constructing field works in areas not immediately within range of the enemy. Interestingly, a drill for digging under fire was outlined, but it was contained in a single paragraph towards the end of a section on points for instructors. Under the heading *Intensive digging*, it advised that men should rehearse entrenching quickly with a small number of tools, such as would be the case in recently captured positions. The drill called for each man to dig as fast as possible for two minutes, while the others took cover behind the trench. At the end of two minutes the instructor would blow a whistle and the next man would take over while the first man rested. After a further two minutes the third man would take over and so on. Thus each soldier worked as hard as possible for two minutes – so 'that they can work no longer' - and rested for four minutes.³³ Clearly, then, *MTP* No. 30, provided detailed instructions for building defensive works in non-battlefield conditions, while simultaneously neglecting instruction on digging in under fire. While this may have been of some relevance to repelling an invasion in 1940 or 1941, it is questionable to what extent it was applicable to subsequent overseas operations.

As in earlier doctrinal literature, the influence of the First World War was clearly visible. Commanders were cautioned that care must be taken to avoid revealing their dispositions to the enemy. Some work, therefore, had to be carried out in establishing alternative and dummy positions in conjunction with the development of existing trenches. According to *MTP* No. 30

Completion of trench communications within the platoon and company is the first requirement, but, as more time becomes available, the value of a continuous lateral trench, whether in the form of a front-line trench or farther in rear, and later of further lateral communications in rear, should be remembered.³⁴

With this in mind the stages of development were laid out as

³² *MTP* No. 30 (1941), 9.

³³ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

- i. Siting of weapons and O.Ps.
- ii. Improving communications.
- iii. Clearing and improving the field of fire.
- iv. Digging fire positions, constructing machine-gun positions and observation posts.
- v. Creating obstacles
- vi. Constructing shelters
- vii. Completing the fire positions and connecting them up.
- viii. Completing the communication or connecting trenches.³⁵

Taken as a whole, *MTP* No. 30 gave commanders comprehensive instructions on how to build and maintain a Great War fire trench. Accordingly there was advice on constructing a parapet and parados; how to build a berm (the space between the foot of the parapet or parados and the edge of the trench); creating a firestep; adding a traverse to a trench; the different types of fire bays; the dimensions and development of communication trenches; types of revetment; and building sumps for drainage.³⁶ For the majority of the war, therefore, the key manual on defensive works was hopelessly out of date and unsuited to the actual conditions of the battlefield.

A new edition appeared in March 1944. Unlike the previous version, which overwhelmingly dealt with a fully developed trench system as used in protracted defence, the new manual laid more emphasis on hastily occupied positions. In the first few pages commanders were told that the *standard* form of fire position was a two or three man weapon slit.³⁷ Consequently, the manual gave detailed instructions concerning this type of position. This included guidance on matters such as hastily constructing positions in the face of the enemy; types of deliberate construction (two-man slit, three-man V-shaped slit and three-man cross-slit); advantages of weapon slits (concealment, suitability for all small arms, protection, facilitating control and comfort); light machine gun and 2-

³⁵ *MTP* No. 30 (1941), 24.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, *passim*.

³⁷ *MTP* No. 30 (1944), 6

inch mortar pits; and revetment and drainage.³⁸ It also included sections on the defence of hedges, walls and buildings, no doubt with the invasion of Normandy in mind.

The programme of development of field defences also offered more realistic instructions for commanders. Whereas the 1941 edition had stressed the importance of developing communications and joining up isolated localities to form a continuous lateral trench, the 1944 version suggested

When the position is occupied hastily, the work will generally develop as follows:-

- (a) Protective minefields.
- (b) Weapon slits and emplacements for Infantry A[nti] t[an]k guns, MMGs, etc.
- (c) Obstacles.
- (d) Improvement of observation and field of fire.
- (e) Emplacements for field and medium guns and observation posts.
- (f) Emplacements for other infantry weapons.
- (g) Emplacements for light anti-aircraft guns.
- (h) Command posts.
- (i) Headquarters and offices.
- (j) Aid posts and advanced dressing stations.³⁹

Furthermore, commanders were now told that crawl trenches were to be kept to a minimum.⁴⁰ As we can see, this programme of development reflected practical experience built up over years of campaigning in the Western Desert, North Africa and Italy; in contrast to the 1941 edition, where the equivalent instructions were mainly based on the experience of the last war. Yet the 1944 manual also provided guidance on how to develop a position that was likely to be held for some time. This was to include: revetting weapon slits; crawl trenches connecting weapon slits and section posts;

³⁸ *MTP* No. 30 (1944), 6-11.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 2, 39.

strengthening of obstacles; alternative fire positions; dummy fire positions, crawl trenches, and tracks; and shelters.⁴¹ Both extremes were now catered for.

Unfortunately some of the anachronistic instructions from 1941 still remained, albeit tucked away at the back. Tool and digging drill was unchanged, as was the description of the materials to be used in construction. Nevertheless, the 1944 edition represented a step forward, offering advice on both extremes of position warfare and being soundly based on the practical lessons of previous campaigns. Even in a purely cosmetic sense the new version was an improvement on the last. Gone were the conspicuously out-of-date illustrations of a soldier in puttees, braces and old style uniform, replaced by one in anklets and battle-dress, complete with respirator.

In the years between the publication of the 1941 and 1944 editions of *MTP* No. 30, the military authorities released additional doctrinal literature to ensure soldiers were kept abreast of the latest tactical developments. The *ATM* series, for instance, displayed evidence of a progression away from the outdated doctrine contained in the 1941 edition of *MTP* No. 30, to that of the more applicable 1944 version. *ATM* No. 40, released in 1941, warned commanders that

Under modern conditions of air bombardment, trenches wide enough to accommodate a suburban bus merely serve to provide an easier target for the enemy. All trenches and posts must be as small as is practicable; and slit-trenches should be dug rather than the elaborate field defences described in pre-war manuals.⁴²

ATM No. 44, published in 1942, also reinforced the move away from elaborate trench systems. Readers were told that training would concentrate on weapon slits, and stated that: 'All ranks . . . will be taught the construction and use of weapon slits. All arms must be taught the modifications of standard weapon slits (or pits) to suit their own weapons'.⁴³ We can see the evolution of tactical

⁴¹ *MTP* No. 30 (1944), 2.

⁴² *ATM* No. 40 (London 1941), 12.

⁴³ *ATM* No. 44 (London 1942), 34-35.

doctrine under the impact of experience in these two memoranda. The speed of the movement of armies in early stages of the war, and the destruction that could be wrought upon obvious fixed defences, had led to a notable change in emphasis. This was enshrined in the much improved 1944 version of *Infantry Training*, which observed:

An outstanding lesson of the present war is that, if their positions are accurately located, defending troops at the point of attack will be neutralised by overwhelming air, artillery or mortar bombardment. If, however, their positions remain undetected, the bombardment will be ineffective provided that their weapons slits are designed to afford reasonable protection.⁴⁴

During the course of the war, doctrine was continually being updated and improved to reflect developments on the battlefield. It is with this point in mind that we leave doctrine behind, and go on to consider the soldier's experience of training.

Before we look at the actual preparation for static warfare, we must briefly outline the development of training in our period. Of all the military arms, the skills demanded of the infantry on active service were the most numerous and varied. Infantrymen had to be skilled in reconnaissance and sniping, in closing with the enemy in open country, woods or built up areas; they also formed the backbone of the defensive line against enemy attack and had a wide variety of weapons to master.⁴⁵ The training they received was of two basic types: that for the individual destined to be a replacement, and that for men part of a division that had not yet gone overseas.⁴⁶ The process began at a training depot where the recruits underwent individual training in basic skills. This consisted of a period (usually three months) of drill, musketry, physical training, route marches, discipline, map-reading, and elementary field-craft. The main goal of basic training was to encourage immediate, unquestioning obedience. From the moment they arrived at the training barracks, recruits were left in no doubt that their sole purpose was to obey. Norman Wray underwent basic

⁴⁴ *Infantry Training* (London 1944), quoted in Stephen Bull, *World War II Infantry Tactics: Vol. 1. Squad and platoon* (Oxford 2004), 45; see also *MTP No. 3, The Defence* (London 1943), 2, 15.

⁴⁵ Farrar-Hockley, *Infantry Tactics*, 8.

⁴⁶ The latter lasted much longer, as the men not only had to master their weapons but also had to take part in collective exercises to allow their officers to familiarise themselves with the responsibilities of command.

training in Lincoln during the summer of 1942. He endured a punishing routine designed to humiliate and exhaust: 'It was a programme that totally demoralised us, breaking our will. We soon obeyed and submitted to the onslaught. Only the toughest did not surrender.'⁴⁷ Len Waller's first month of training at Chelsea barracks in early 1940 was typical. It was designed to turn

sloppy civilians into soldiers. It wasn't done by kindness either. Every day we were marched and yelled at up and down the barrack square. We were cursed, humiliated, degraded and worked until we were fit to drop. At the end of each day's training we were allowed to relax by sitting astride our beds polishing and burnishing a bewildering array of equipment.⁴⁸

The majority of recruits found basic training to be physically challenging, but after a few weeks began to take pleasure in a new sense of physical well being, as well as the developing bonds with their fellow trainees through shared hardships.⁴⁹

In the early years of the war, the quality of training was not great. The infantry was forced to shoulder the burden of coastal and vulnerable point defence duties – in addition to many non-military tasks, such as agricultural assistance - which meant collective tactical training was impossible for months at a time. Tactical instruction left much to be desired. Since the end of the First World War, complained one brigadier in April 1941, the Army had practised every phase of the battle up to zero-hour – the time battle actually commences – but not beyond this point. It was, he felt, essential to provide training in the 'practical details which will occur FROM ZERO ONWARDS'.⁵⁰ Training lacked realism too; troops took part in a range of individual and collective exercises, but little attempt was made to recreate the chaos and noise of the battlefield.⁵¹ 'The ordinary infantry battalion,' commented one soldier 'is still preoccupied with out-of-date tactics and unrealistic

⁴⁷ IWM Department of Documents, 99/85/1, N. Wray, 'Infantry Man! Why Me?', 16.

⁴⁸ IWM Department of Documents, 87/42/1, L. Waller, 'How did we ever win?', 3.

⁴⁹ French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, 127.

⁵⁰ H. A. Freeman-Attwood quoted in Harrison-Place, *Military Training*, 43.

⁵¹ Nor were there, unlike the First World War, opportunities for inexperienced soldiers to be gradually exposed to the demands of the frontline in relatively quiet sectors.

exercises'.⁵² Michael Joseph, a company commander with 9th Royal West Kents, found training dull and uninspiring and warned that

We cannot afford to prepare for war in 1942 and 1943 on the basis of 1914-1918, and the type of military mind which insists that 'fundamental principles' do not change is a real menace. It is all the more dangerous because it sincerely believes that the old maxims and methods still hold good. There are many senior regimental officers who still think in terms of a front line, the reorganization of troops and consolidation of positions after an attack, and the necessity for protecting flanks under all circumstances. They cannot realize that all this has been swept away and that tactics which sometime succeeded in the last war have no application now. . . . A revolution in our training methods is vitally necessary.⁵³

Not only did these problems undermine military efficiency, but morale reports for early 1942 draw attention to shortcomings in the system of instruction and a preference for more active training.⁵⁴

The training of soldiers in the more technical aspects of their trade was often dull and repetitive, a vestige of the days when illiterate soldiers were taught by an instructor who, in the words of Jeremy Crang, 'memorised his weapons' manual off-by-heart and was only considered competent if he was word perfect and his lecture could be heard in the next county'.⁵⁵ Thus weapons instruction was frequently reduced to virtual gibberish, a time-honoured incantation rather than an attempt to impart knowledge of the workings and use of a particular weapon. One sergeant in the 9th Royal Northumberland Fusiliers recalled the following example from the Small Arms School at Netheravon

Some of us had realised at an early stage that the PSI had learned his patter by rote, hence, during his lectures we would ask him questions, largely to see his reactions. Having given us an answer he would then have to return to some earlier stage of his talk to pick up the threads.

⁵² Quoted in Crang, *British Army*, 79.

⁵³ Joseph, *Sword*, 221-222.

⁵⁴ Crang, *British Army*, 80.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 75.

Several times each week he was subjected to this treatment apparently without discovering our motives.⁵⁶

Another soldier commented that most instructors, especially regulars, considered themselves to be 'superior beings who pride themselves on their knowledge rather than on their duty to impart that knowledge'.⁵⁷ The low standard of teaching was illustrated by research undertaken by Professor C. W. Valentine (professor of education and Director of the Department for the Training of Teachers at the University of Birmingham). In 1942 he carried out a survey of weapons training received by his former student-teachers serving in the army. The study exposed a series of faults in their instruction, such as: too much material packed into a given period; teaching by rote; unnecessary enumeration of parts; too much technical jargon; insufficient use of visual aids; lack of learning by doing; and unsympathetic handling of slow men.⁵⁸

Besides failings in tactical and technical instruction, training was also hampered by a questionable set of priorities. During the First War the manpower demands of the frontline meant that methods considered unnecessary to defeat the enemy were of less significance. The years after the war witnessed a return to 'proper soldiering' and the working day for many trainees focused on a routine of excessive spit and polish, elaborate close-order drill, needless parades and monotonous fatigues – collectively known as 'bullshit' to the troops.⁵⁹ 'I've wondered sometimes since whether much of the drill taught us was of any consequence,' wrote one soldier of his training in the summer of 1940. 'I suppose . . . that the basic drill movements were necessary - things like straight forward marching and turns etc. Yet I feel sure that it wasn't going to help defeat Hitler by practising diagonal marching and ceremonial guard drill'.⁶⁰ Of course, no account of basic training was complete without a description of the twisted extremes of spit and polish. Derek Bond, who volunteered in October 1939 and was later commissioned in the Grenadier Guards, provides the following tale

⁵⁶ IWM Department of Documents, 04/17/1, G. S. Easton, 'Quo Fata Vocant', 12.

⁵⁷ Crang, *British Army*, 79.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁶⁰ IWM Department of Documents, 81/10/1, H. Buckle, 'Recollections of Yesteryear', 8.

Before going to breakfast we had to lay out all our kit for inspection with fanatical geometrical accuracy. A long piece of string was used to ensure that every last sock and underpant was in line. We then had to 'bump' the floor. The 'bumper' was a heavy instrument wrapped in cloth heavily impregnated with floor polish and on a long broom handle. The floor had to be polished until it shone like a mirror. Then no one was allowed to walk on it! We had to make our way out of the barrack room by easing ourselves along on the horizontal supports of the beds – taking care not to disturb our immaculately laid-out kits.⁶¹

This dubious sense of priorities did not go unnoticed by the men. Michael Joseph complained that the army was more concerned with producing soldiers with shiny boots and well-pressed uniforms than trained fighting men ready for war. 'The threat of invasion was imminent,' he complained, 'and if it came to fighting we should need skilled riflemen more than spotless green gaiters'.⁶² Such practices did not just eat up valuable time that could have been used on more useful instruction. They also generated low morale.⁶³ 'The average soldier', claimed an Army Morale Report for February to May 1942, 'particularly objects to "spit and polish" where its application serves no apparent purpose'.⁶⁴ Soldiers preferred tough, realistic training as, in spite of the discomfort, such instruction invariably made them keener, happier and more confident.⁶⁵ Recent research supports this view: Hew Strachan, in an article entitled 'Training, Morale and Modern War', has shown that effective training is a vital component of combat motivation and sound morale.⁶⁶

Efforts were made to improve the situation. The Battle School movement, which sprang up in 1941, sought to inject weapons and tactical training with greater realism and energy. Thus the maximum of live ammunition was used and attempts were made to develop new methods of infantry attack.⁶⁷

⁶¹ Derek Bond, *Steady Old Man: Don't You Know There's a War on?* (London 1990), 14.

⁶² Joseph, *Sword*, 56.

⁶³ National Archives (NA), WO193/453, War Office Committee on Morale in the Army, May to July 1943; NA WO163/163, War Office Committee on Morale: Draft Report on the Morale of the Army Overseas, June to August 1944.

⁶⁴ Jeremy A. Crang, 'The British Soldier on the Home Front: Army Morale Reports, 1940-1945', in Addison and Calder, *Time to Kill*, 64.

⁶⁵ NA WO163/161, War Office Committee on Morale: Draft Morale Report, May to July 1942 (The Army at Home); NA WO193/453, War Office Committee on Morale in the Army, February to April 1943.

⁶⁶ Hew Strachan, 'Training, Morale and Modern War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 41:2 (2006), 211-227.

⁶⁷ J. A. English, *The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign* (New York, NY 1991), 107-123.

The overall purpose was to establish a common battle drill that would replace older methods of training and battle inoculation techniques that would help acclimatise the men to the noise and confusion of the battlefield. For many pupils the main function of the Battle School was psychological: to dispel the idea of inevitable German victory by instilling an ethos that was deliberately radical and hostile to the staid ways of the old Army.⁶⁸ The first of these courses even included 'hate training', which emphasised the cruelty of the enemy and attempted to desensitise the trainees by taking them on visits to slaughterhouses and liberally splashing animal blood on assault courses. This experiment was not deemed a success - Army psychiatrists advised against these practices arguing that they did more harm than good - and was abandoned after the first attempt.⁶⁹

Simultaneous attempts were made - by raising the calibre of instructors at training units and promoting better teaching methods - to improve the quality of teaching. Special courses for instructors were instituted at the Army School of Education at the end of 1942; replaced in autumn 1943 by 'method of instruction' teams who visited training units, advised on instruction methods and gave practical demonstrations.⁷⁰ In addition, the military authorities also initiated efforts to reform several facets of the soldier's day-to-day life, such as reducing spit and polish and simplifying drill. It was decreed that standards of spit and polish should be suited to the occasion and observed in a manner which the men could 'understand and respect'.⁷¹ As the war progressed, there was some evidence that the quality of the soldier's training and working life had improved. In many units the daily routine had been purged of some of its more meaningless rituals. The value of military training also seemed to improve and battle drill succeeded in motivating the troops. Yet the deep-rooted old methods did not entirely vanish. Throughout the war soldiers continued to complain of

⁶⁸ Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, 232; on the psychological impact of the Battle Schools see Denis Forman, *To Reason Why* (London 1993).

⁶⁹ NA CAB21/914, Committee on the work of Psychologists and Psychiatrists in the Services. Directorate of Army Psychiatry Technical Memorandum No. 2 (June 1942): 'Suppose you were a Nazi agent' or 'fifth column work for amateurs', section on 'The Offensive Spirit'; Crang, *British Army*, 81; Ellis, *Sharp End*, 17; Harrison-Place, *Military Training*, 49-61.

⁷⁰ Crang, *British Army*, 80.

⁷¹ Crang, 'The British Soldier on the Home Front', 65.

excessive bullshit. Doubts over the quality of military instruction also remained. In sum, these improvements undoubtedly offered a more purposeful existence for many recruits, but for others the inadequacies of training and the drudgery of army life continued unabated. It is against this inconsistent backdrop that we must consider what the men actually did in training to prepare them for trench warfare.⁷²

If pre-war doctrine was largely obsolete, and wartime doctrine gradually evolved from experience on the battlefield, how did this translate to the training ground? It is important to note at the outset that preparations for trench warfare are not prominent in soldiers' accounts of training. This in itself is revealing, indicating perhaps that there was little or no training in this area, or that authors did not consider such stories worth telling. Whatever the case may be, there are enough references throughout the primary source material to give us a broad idea of what the troops actually did. In the early years of the war, training was greatly influenced by the experience of the Western Front. During his basic training in 1940, R. I. Higgins, who would later serve with the 1st DLI in Italy, found that

The technique which formed the basis of this training came from the requirements of the 1914-18 war, when a great deal of the fighting consisted of firing from long lines of trenches at masses of approaching infantry - the two sides periodically changing roles. We were taught the correct depth and width and even the correct slope of the sides, that of the wall facing the enemy differing from the rear; we were shown how to construct the parapet and the parapados and how to make a firing step and where to place revetting.⁷³

The training of one officer cadet in 1939-40 was equally old-fashioned. The hours devoted to the construction of trenches - including meticulous measurements for parapets and firing bays and detailed instructions on how to revet in sandy soil - were, for him, a 'little out of proportion'. Such training was redundant because, according to the would-be officer: 'Either we would be ensconced

⁷² Crang, *British Army*, 84-85.

⁷³ IWM Department of Documents, 86/49/1, R. I. Higgins 'A Few Memories', 63-64.

in some huge complex of concrete such as the Maginot Line, or we would be digging foxholes, as they did in Spain'.⁷⁴ Overall it seems that a great deal of time was wasted recreating trenches more suited to the Great War. To this period belonged the Tunnel Hill system of the Guards training battalion at Pirbright. Here an elaborate system of defences was dug in the very best style of 1918. 'Outmoded though these field-works were shortly to be proved,' wrote the historian of the Scots Guards, 'It was a magnificent trench system, but it was not of this war'.⁷⁵ One soldier with 2nd London Scottish claimed his OCTU trench system (built in 1941) would have done credit to the Battle of the Somme.⁷⁶

This sense of *déjà vu* manifested itself in other areas of instruction. An Englishman training with the Cameron Highlanders in June 1940 remembered that

Bayonet training was the same as the 1914-1918 pattern and with the same bayonets, and we often thought that those we were using could at one time have been embedded in the entrails of some long-dead German soldier. Here we were . . . being exhorted to lunge and bury our bayonets in the innards of a boxer's punch-bag and psyche ourselves up to believing it was the stomach of some German soldier. Evidently times had not changed . . .⁷⁷

For some, like Second-Lieutenant Robin Medley of the 2nd Beds and Herts, it was more than just a feeling of *déjà vu*. During his training in September 1939, the officers, warrant officers and sergeants of his battalion attended lectures given by those with experience of patrolling in no-man's-land in World War One.⁷⁸ Moreover, one course he attended at Bethune in December 1939 even consisted of digging trenches and erecting wire after dark using 'the old pock marked ground of the Hindenburg Line'.⁷⁹ Thus the actual content of training in the early years of the war was largely geared towards preparing the men to fight the last war. This feeling was summed up by one soldier

⁷⁴ Forman, *To Reason Why*, 18.

⁷⁵ David Erskine, *The Scots Guards, 1919-1955* (London 1956), 61; for another example see Bond, *Steady Old Man*, 32.

⁷⁶ Frank Coutts, *One Blue Bonnet: a Scottish soldier looks back* (Edinburgh 1991), 42

⁷⁷ IWM Department of Documents, 90/18/1, C. G. Beech, 'Bury Me in a Shallow Grave – Dig Me Up Later', 8.

⁷⁸ R. H. Medley, *Five days to live: France 1939-40* (Abertillery 2000), 5.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

with the Royal Scots Fusiliers in February 1940, who was struck by the fact that they were still being trained 'exactly as the soldiers were trained for the Infantry in the 1914-18 war'.⁸⁰

If what soldiers were taught at this time was out of date, there is also ample evidence to suggest that *how* they were taught was flawed. Digging drill was often imparted word-for-word as per *MTP* No. 30; and while this schooled the men in the most efficient way to dig a hole, it did not offer guidance on the critical question of how to dig in under fire. R. I. Higgins' experience during training is revealing

The drill . . . went something like this:

Take up a position of 'Stand-at-ease' at an angle of 45 degrees to the earth you want to break. Grasp the helve of the pick, left hand nearer the pick head, right hand near the top of the helve and adopt a comfortable stance. On the command 'One', raise the pick above your head. 'Two', bring down the point vigorously upon your target. Without straightening your back, 'Three', raise the handle of the pick with pressure from the right hand ('Break') and, 'Four' draw the tool toward you which will clear the ground in readiness for the next strike ('Rake'). Here it is then, One, Two, Three, Four. Lift, Strike, Break and Rake. Lift, Strike, Break and Rake.

The drill for the shovel was similar and was designed to remove the debris created by the pick. The pattern was: 'Swing and load, handle low, swing and throw,' and all this was done without straightening the back and the method certainly minimised fatigue and strain, the weight of the loaded tool being swung rhythmically to cause a very economical movement.⁸¹

This approach required time and freedom of movement to be of any use - both of which were in short supply in forward areas. At the very least, the relevance of this method could be questioned. At the worst extreme it endangered the lives of inexperienced troops going into battle for the first time. Unfortunately, such teaching was not confined to the war's early years. As late as 1944, the routine was still largely unchanged: Dai Evans remembered one occasion when his unit was taken

⁸⁰ IWM Department of Documents, 88/48/1, D. O. Helm, Memoir, 6.

⁸¹ IWM 86/49/1, Higgins 'A Few Memories', 167-168.

out into a field to practise digging by a major who shouted out the digging drill commands as detailed in *MTP* No. 30. 'There we were shouting out the words as we operated. It was almost farcical . . . Once in action the sheer need for survival taught the best and quickest way to work, and those who couldn't learn didn't last long'.⁸²

Of course, this was not the only method; training with a unit on active service offered a more realistic experience. One soldier who joined the 9th DLI in the desert during the summer of 1942 recalled digging trenches as if under fire, lying on his stomach, using the entrenching tool.⁸³ Another remembered training at the Allied School of Infantry at Ain Smara in Tunisia in August 1943, where the stoutness of his trench was tested with live ammunition, including machine-guns and mortars.⁸⁴ Preparation like this depended on sufficient time away from the frontline; otherwise replacements had to learn the hard way, by digging in for the first time under fire. Dai Evans, who would go on to serve with the 6th Royal Welch Fusiliers in north-west Europe, complained that he had never been properly taught how to dig a slit-trench during training; it was only when he joined a fighting battalion and was forced to do so under fire that he became proficient at it.⁸⁵

There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that inadequate training was commonplace throughout the war. In June 1942, R. I. Higgins, at that time a weapons and physical training instructor, could still complain that much of his time was spent on digging trenches and erecting miles and miles of barbed wire. 'With hindsight,' he later wrote, 'I have the feeling that our labours were activated by the 1914-18 mentality and had little connection with the requirements of defence against a modern war machine'.⁸⁶ The situation had not greatly improved by 1943. 'Commanders have reported a low standard of proficiency in the training of drafts from [the] UK', noted one War Office report. 'Too little real digging has been practiced [sic] in training'.⁸⁷ This deficiency was observed firsthand by an

⁸² IWM 92/37/1, Evans, Memoir, 192-193.

⁸³ IWM Department of Documents, 86/61/1, E. Kerans, Memoir, 5.

⁸⁴ IWM Department of Documents, 06/126/1, Major H. W. Freeman-Attwood, 'Recollections of War', 39.

⁸⁵ IWM 92/37/1, Evans, Memoir, 192-193.

⁸⁶ IWM 86/49/1, Higgins, 'A Few Memories', 166.

⁸⁷ NA WO231/10, Lessons Learned from Operations in Tunisia, Main Training Lessons: Digging.

experienced infantry officer in the summer of 1943. Major H. P. Samwell of the 7th Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders had been loaned to a newly arrived brigade in North Africa to give them advice on patrolling and forward positions. He noted that

Their greatest fault was one which all troops new to the fighting line were guilty of, failure to realise the importance of digging in and digging in deeply. Unfortunately the unit they had taken over from had done very little digging in either, and even worse, had given the impression that this was rather an old wife's habit. As a result, the new troops had suffered unnecessary casualties, and when I arrived a 'blitz' had just started to make everyone dig as hard as they could. When I heartily endorsed this policy some of the officers were quite relieved, for they had been in some doubt whether this digging was 'scare stuff'.⁸⁸

As late as June 1944, the GOC 1st Division at Anzio, Major-General W. R. C. Penney, had cause to complain about the standard of field defences in his command; his infantry battalions did too little digging, he complained, and what they did was 'often unskilled both in planning and execution'.⁸⁹

The War Office attempted to remedy this problem and official publications stressed the need to dig in immediately. According to *NTW* No. 16 (October 1943), one of the main training lessons of the fighting in North Africa was that digging should start as soon as a position was occupied and must be completed as swiftly as possible, no matter how tired the men were or however quiet the enemy. When troops suffered casualties from artillery or mortar fire, they soon learned the importance of this principle; it was, however, 'an expensive and useless sacrifice if every fresh formation and draft has to learn from its own experience, and the lesson must, therefore, be thoroughly instilled in training'.⁹⁰ In 1943 and 1944 the *ATM* series included a number of letters from 'Paul', a subaltern on active service in the Mediterranean theatre to his friend 'Tom', stationed in Britain entitled 'A Few

⁸⁸ H. P. Samwell, *An Infantry Officer with the Eighth Army: the personal experience of an infantry officer during the Eighth Army's campaign through Africa and Sicily* (Edinburgh 1945), 158-159.

⁸⁹ Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives (LHCMA), Papers of Major-General Sir (William) Ronald Campbell Penney 13/17: 'Fd Defences' to Inf Bde Comds, 28 June 1944. Interestingly, Penney stressed in the same circular that 'Separate weapon pits must, at the earliest practical moment, be extended and converted into or replaced by a continuous organised system complete with deep (NOT 'crawl') communication trenches. We must achieve early freedom of movement'. This reflects the highly static nature of the fighting at Anzio.

⁹⁰ *NTW* No. 16, *North Africa, November 1942 – May 1943* (London 1943), 19.

“Tips” from the front.’ In reality ‘Paul’ was Major Paul Bryan of the 6th Royal West Kents, who served with distinction in Tunisia and went on to command the battalion in Italy.⁹¹ In these letters he stressed the importance of entrenching. In *ATM* No. 50 he wrote that

Slit-trenches deserve a paragraph all to themselves. A few days after we landed we spent literally a whole day at Tabarka being dive-bombed and machine-gunned from the air. This went on intermittently all the following week at Djebel Abiod, plus more than enough shelling. Since then the men have dug slit-trenches automatically, even if they arrive at a place soaking wet at three in the morning - and they are a full 5-ft deep, too. Anyone will tell you tales of miraculous escapes due to slit-trenches - shells landing a couple of feet away without hurting the bloke inside, etc. I do not think you could ever shell this battalion out of a position, if only because they know they are safer in slit-trenches than out of them.⁹²

Individual units did what they could on active service. The 5th Buffs War Diary noted that on 19 March 1944, the battalion was then at eight hours notice to move, ‘and modified training was carried out, and practice was given to the digging of slit-trenches’.⁹³ The CO of the 1/6th East Surreys spoke to his battalion in September 1944 and stressed the importance of digging in immediately when in forward areas in order to reduce the risk of unnecessary casualties.⁹⁴ The military authorities and battalion officers were obviously well aware of the deficiencies of training in this respect and continually attempted to drive home the need for rapid consolidation in much of their doctrinal literature and unit training.

By 1944 things had improved slightly. Now training was more akin to that experienced by one Royal Scots Fusilier in June 1944. He recalled an exercise where the men dug slit-trenches – approximately six feet long by two feet wide and three feet deep - in pairs, using a pick and shovel, in which they later slept. To test the slit-trench, and it would seem the nerve of the occupants, a tracked vehicle

⁹¹ Paul Bryan, *Wool, War and Westminster: front-line memoirs of Sir Paul Bryan, DSO, MC* (London 1993), *passim*.

⁹² *ATM* No. 50 (London 1943), 65.

⁹³ NA WO170/1368, 5th Buffs (Royal East Kent Regiment), War Diary for March 1944.

⁹⁴ NA WO170/1486, 1/6th East Surrey Regiment, War Diary for September 1944.

was driven across the top to simulate an attack by light armoured vehicles.⁹⁵ Undoubtedly a greater degree of realism was injected into training by the war's later years. J. G. Redgewell of the 2nd South Wales Borderers, for instance, recalled an exercise in 1944 when his company had to dig a trench to defend against a night attack made by another company in his battalion. The defenders were alerted by the jingle of tin cans, which they had strategically placed on string around the expected fronts of attack. 'And then,' recalled Redgewell, 'all hell broke loose. With a whooping and a hollering (designed, literally, to put the fear of who knows what up one), the attack Company fell upon us with extremely strong "relish". It was to be assumed that they, being as tired as we, were bedevilled and incensed to get it over and done with'.⁹⁶

Yet there was still evidence that the quality of training remained inconsistent and that many soldiers were wholly unprepared for what awaited them. When a group of reinforcements joined Sergeant Stanley Whitehouse's platoon in the Reichswald in February 1945, they were amazed to find that everyone carried a full-sized pick or spade into action.⁹⁷ One rifle platoon commander wrote in *CRO* No. 71 (January 1945) that

the need for head cover does not seem to be understood by most troops recently out from home. Head cover not only provides protection against air bursts and the weather, but is a positive requirement if weapon slits are dug anywhere near trees, because when mortar bombs and shells detonate in the branches, fragments will drop into any open trench.⁹⁸

Many other soldiers complained about the lack of proper instruction in entrenching. 'As regards digging slit-trenches,' wrote an NCO preparing for D-Day, 'this was never taught, one had to find out the hard way later when it was usually the case of "dig or die"'.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Kenneth J. West, *An' it's called a Tam-o'-Shanter* (Braunton 1985), 10.

⁹⁶ IWM Department of Documents, 06/42/1, J. G. Redgewell, *Memoir*, 2.

⁹⁷ Whitehouse and Bennett, *Fear is the Foe*, 142.

⁹⁸ *CRO* No. 71 (London 1945), 1-2.

⁹⁹ Corporal G. Cowie, 1st Tyneside Scottish, quoted in Kevin Baverstock, *Breaking the Panzers: the bloody battle for Rauray, Normandy, 1 July 1944* (Stroud 2002), 17.

In conclusion, significant improvements were made in Army doctrine and training over the course of the war. By 1944, official teaching accepted that the basic defensive position for the infantry was the two or four man slit-trench, and that no attempt should be made to connect the trenches. In addition, training had assumed a greater degree of realism and urgency from 1942 onwards. But in spite of these improvements there was still evidence that many soldiers were being inadequately prepared for combat. The Army never fully got to grips with teaching men how to dig in under fire, a skill that most soldiers urgently required on active service. Unfortunately, too many inexperienced troops were left to learn the hard way, and the slogan 'dig or die' proved all too accurate. Moreover, it must have been hugely dispiriting for soldiers, who had spent so long in training, to find out that much of what they had learned was at best out of date, or at worst completely useless. This is a crucial point to bear in mind, as confidence in one's proficiency as a soldier, which was instilled by effective and realistic training, has been shown to be an important factor in the state of one's morale.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ R. Gal, 'Unit Morale: From a Theoretical Puzzle to an Empirical Illustration – an Israeli Example', *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 16:6 (September 1986), 549-564; M. Steiner and M. Neumann, 'Traumatic Neurosis and Social Support in the Yom Kippur War Returnees', *Military Medicine*, 143:12 (1978), 866-8.

Chapter Two: the Physical Setting

Took over this bloody position today. Mud, filth, [and] dug-outs again.

E. Grey Turner, Diary, 21 December 1944.¹

So this was the Adriatic sector. One could picture the 1914 - 18 war in France. Mud, mud and still more mud; huge craters, trees blown to bits, twisted wrecks of all kinds of vehicle, a real graveyard of destruction in every way.

John Hillier, *The Long Long Road to Victory*, c. 1995.²

Soldiers arriving at the front from Britain were badly prepared for trench warfare. On the whole, few had any real concept of what awaited them.³ Most infantrymen - with the exception of the men of the BEF who shipped out to France in 1939-40 - did not anticipate a war of squalid trenches and grim, attritional assaults. Consequently, this chapter will examine two themes: first, the physical setting – an account of the living conditions in the frontline; secondly, the mental landscape – an analysis of how soldiers reacted to trench warfare psychologically. In terms of the former, the intention is to demonstrate that the infantry spent most of their time behind cover (either in slit-trenches or breastworks) in appalling conditions reminiscent of the Western Front; and to prove that the fighting itself was a great deal more static than commonly thought. Given this, the latter section deals with the men's perceptions of the war and will show that, despite the evidence in front of their

¹ The Wellcome Library for the History and Understanding of Medicine, Contemporary Medical Collection (CMAC), GC/96/1, E. Grey Turner, Diary of RAMC Service in World War II, 1942-5, entry of 21 December 1944, 183.

² John Hillier, *The Long Long Road to Victory: diary of an infantry despatch rider, 1940 to 1946* (Trowbridge 1995), 119.

³ CRO No. 71 (London 1945), 3.

eyes, soldiers were convinced that somehow their predecessors in the First World War had suffered more. Of course, before we can delve fully into the complex mental landscape of the trenches we must take a moment to establish the comparatively straightforward physical horizons.

In this respect, the fighting man of 1939-45 had a much more varied experience than the 'Tommy' on the Western Front, encountering an astonishing range of climate and terrain during his service abroad. It was possible for a 'Jock' in 51st (Highland) Division, for instance, to have fought in France, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Sicily and north-west Europe. As we shall see, the PBI endured frontline conditions of the most appalling severity. Poor weather, in particular, played a major part in this and could turn simple day-to-day existence into a miserable ordeal. Consequently the elements had a profound influence on morale: a spell of dry, sunny weather made life in the line bearable; while a period of sustained heavy rain made the trenches absolute hell.⁴ One officer wrote: 'When campaigning, one's well-being, thoughts and feelings were entirely governed by the clemency or otherwise of the weather'.⁵ This point is important, since a period in the line was almost always spent outside in a cramped, dirty hole in the ground, usually cold, wet and within range of the enemy.

The physical conditions soldiers experienced during the Second War were often equal to, if not worse than, the Western Front. Heavy rain and the much despised corollary, mud, were as much a central theme of this war as they had been in 1914-18, with a similar effect on morale. Soldiers had their first taste of this during the 'Phoney War' (September 1939 - May 1940) when the BEF was stationed along the Franco-Belgian frontier digging an extension to the Maginot line, the so called Gort Line. As soon as work started on the new defences, the heavens opened and the conditions which the troops toiled under became utterly dreadful.⁶ The men dug in mud or water up to their knees for five or six hours a day using only picks or shovels. For week after week they struggled

⁴ Alastair Borthwick, *Sans Peur: the history of the 5th (Caithness and Sutherland) battalion, the Seaforth Highlanders, 1942-1945* (Stirling 1946), 169.

⁵ John Horsfall, *Fling Our Banner to the Wind* (Kineton 1976), 19.

⁶ *Historical records of the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders* (Edinburgh n.d.), 111.

through torrential rain and sticky mud preparing pill boxes, sand-bagged posts, connecting trenches and erecting wire obstacles. Life became a misery under the persistent beat of the rain; more so since gas-capes were on no account to be used as waterproofs.⁷ Feet were constantly soaking wet and some men even paid out of their own pockets to buy waterproof boots. Trench foot, an affliction more commonly associated with the last war, became a serious problem and commanders were told to inspect their men's feet daily and to ensure preventative material was available.⁸

Even in North Africa, rain and mud was a major impediment.⁹ This came as a complete surprise to the men. 'I had always pictured North Africa as sweltering hot with Bedouins careering about on camels,' an officer in 78th Division wrote. 'The truth was very different in winter'.¹⁰ In Tunisia the rainy season ran from November to February, but in 1942-43, spells of extraordinarily heavy rain continued until April, falling almost continuously during December and January.¹¹ Major John Horsfall, OC 'D' company, 1st Royal Irish Fusiliers, remembered this time as 'on the whole wet', claiming the storms had a 'vicious element of Highland sleet'. Most of his time was spent either soaked to the bone or gradually drying off, usually being blown dry in the high winds that always seemed to follow. 'Mostly however we were damp enough,' Horsfall wrote in his account of the campaign, 'and one's state of mind largely revolved around whether the night ahead looked like being a dry one or not'.¹²

These downpours frequently lasted for a week or more and turned low-lying parts of the country into a quagmire. Movement off road for wheeled or tracked vehicles was impossible and even infantry movement across country was severely hindered by cement-like mud.¹³ The *Daily Express* war correspondent, Alan Moorehead, described the mud as 'thick, sticky and bottomless', and

⁷ IWM Department of Documents, 83/46/1, Major W. G. Blaxland, 'Unready for War: a memoir of a journey through Sandhurst and Dunkirk', 90.

⁸ NA WO167/720, 4th Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders, War Diary for April 1940.

⁹ NA WO231/10, Lessons Learned from Operations in Tunisia: First Army Lessons from Tunisian campaign, 1. This was one of the reasons why the Allied dash to capture Tunis ground to a halt, allowing the Germans time to bring up strong reinforcements.

¹⁰ Bond, *Steady, Old Man*, 72.

¹¹ NA 231/10, Lessons Learned from Operations in Tunisia: First Army Lessons from Tunisian Campaign, 1.

¹² John Horsfall, *The Wild Geese are Flying* (Kineton 1976), 33.

¹³ *NTW* No. 16 (London, 1943), 4; Horsfall, *Wild Geese*, 25.

observed that the British troops were in it up to their knees. Even the tanks had sunk up to their turrets. It got everywhere: into hair and food and when it eventually dried it became so hard that it had to be beaten off boots with a hammer or a rifle-butt.¹⁴ John Horsfall maintained that the Tunisian mud had powers of adherence that he never found elsewhere. 'A witch's brew of its own, the grey clay soil disintegrated rapidly when wet into a composition like glue mixed with baking powder, and it paralysed all movement'.¹⁵ Perhaps the ultimate accolade came in a report by the DMT into First Army's operations in Tunisia, which described the mud generated by the prolonged winter conditions as worse than any experienced in France and Flanders in 1914-18.¹⁶

Of all the theatres in which the British Army fought, Italy proved to be the most unpleasant surprise. Like Tunisia, the severe weather came as a complete shock. Driving rain, blizzards and piercing cold was a far cry from the vision of 'Sunny Italy' presented to the troops in pre-war travel posters. Lieutenant D. A. Main of the 7th Rifle Brigade described this sense of disappointment:

We had looked forward to fighting in Italy, as we pictured trees, green grass and a lovely Mediterranean climate. We had not thought of the mountains running up the centre of Italy and later the Apennines which had to be crossed before entering the Plain of Lombardy, nor the rivers which flowed on either side of the mountains sometimes rising by as much as twenty feet in twenty-four hours; again we had not anticipated the mud and snow in the winter, nor the heat and scarcity of water in the summer.¹⁷

Both winters brought constant heavy rain, soaking the men in their exposed mountain positions and making them utterly miserable.¹⁸ The wretched conditions produced by these violent showers

¹⁴ Cyril Ray, *Algiers to Austria: a history of 78 Division in the Second World War* (London 1952), 34.

¹⁵ Horsfall, *Wild Geese*, 34.

¹⁶ NA WO231/10, Lessons Learned from Operations in Tunisia: First Army Lessons from Tunisian campaign.

¹⁷ IWM Department of Documents, 87/35/1, Lieutenant D. A. Main, 'Motor Battalion: war experiences with the London Rifle Brigade, 1939 – 1945', 106.

¹⁸ IWM Department of Documents, 80/46/1, G. Allnutt, 'A Fusilier Remembers Italy', 34-35; W. A. Elliott, *Esprit de Corps: a Scots Guards officer on active service, 1943-1945* (Norwich 1996), 95; Hillier, *Long Long Road to Victory*, 117-118; LHCMA, Papers of Major-General Sir (Eustace) John (Blois) Nelson, 'Always a Grenadier', 49-50.



‘Any complaints, old man?’

Figure 7: “Sunny Italy”, taken from *Jon’s Complete Two Types*

hindered most routine activities and at times brought movement to a complete standstill.¹⁹ 'The wet seemed to get into your bones and made you thoroughly miserable,' wrote one soldier. 'We spent days in trenches with the water lapping around our knees and having to continually bale out to keep the water level down'.²⁰ The ankle-high boots that most soldiers wore - so good for polishing into a parade-ground shine - offered very little protection against such extreme conditions and cold injuries such as trench foot were common.²¹ Some men in the frontline even pilfered boots from the enemy's dead, as German footwear offered a greater degree of protection.²²

The mud was just as pernicious. A private with the 6th York and Lancasters, stationed in San Clemente during January 1944, complained that everywhere was 'mud and more mud' and that his battle dress and boots were constantly caked in it.²³ Writers, as in other theatres, claimed their own brand of mud had special properties. The second-in-command of the 8th Argylls observed that the Apennine clay was as hard as rock when dry, but that one day's rain produced several inches of 'glue' varying in consistency from 'putty to treacle, while a week's rain creates a foot or more of fluid porridge, with the treacle and putty lying at the bottom!'²⁴ For those involved in the fighting at Cassino, Anzio and in the northern Apennines it must have seemed as if they had been transported back in time to a battlefield of the last war. 'The Gesso Ridge really educated us as to the meaning of mud,' wrote a young lieutenant with the 1st Royal Irish Fusiliers.

Mules bogged in the filth were simply shot and left, abandoned capsized tanks were up to their turrets and presumably eventually sank altogether; troops whose trousers and boots were clawed off their legs by its grip aroused no comment, and the doctor who had the wounded dragged back on a sledge over the slime deserved a medal.²⁵

¹⁹ IWM Department of Documents, 99/85/1, K. R. Drury, 'One Man's Memories Fifty Years On', Part One, 7.

²⁰ Ibid., Part One, 7.

²¹ Eric Taylor, *Combat Nurse* (London 1999), 173-174.

²² Ken Ford, *Battleaxe Division: from Africa to Italy with the 78th Division, 1942-45* (Stroud 2003), 144.

²³ IWM 99/85/1, Wray, 'Infantry Man! Why Me?', 137.

²⁴ Alec. D. Malcolm, *History of the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders, 8th Battalion, 1939-47* (London 1949), 225.

²⁵ Colin Gunner, *Adventures with the Irish Brigade* (n. pl. 1973), 138.

The campaign in the Apennines, 1944-45, was arguably the worst in terms of rain and mud. Torrential downpours turned the front into a mud bath in which roads collapsed, vehicles were stuck (even the most powerful tanks could not manoeuvre without shedding their tracks), and swollen streams and rivers, far from cleansing their unpredictable tracts, dispensed instead a 'tenacious glue of silt and sluggish slime'.²⁶ One War Diary noted:

October 26: The rain from the previous day persisted during the night and daylight saw no abatement. River beds became torrents with swift currents making even small streams impassable. . . . Coy positions had been just below the ridge crest of Monte Spaduro. The ground was clay and some trenches began to fill and flow as water ran down from above and welled up from below. Trenches collapsed, burying equipment, weapons and blankets. New trenches met the same fate as soon as dug, and no material was available for revetting. All coys could do was sit in the mud as the water drenched and soaked them, and no sign of a clearer sky appeared. . . . Many were attended to at the RAP for exposure and sickness.²⁷

Unsurprisingly, morale dipped; the battalion's fighting strength was steadily whittled away, mainly by sickness, but also by occasional shelling and absence. Those officers and men who had been with the battalion since Operation TORCH (November 1942), described it as worse than anything they had previously experienced. It was apparent that such conditions could not be 'endured much longer without wasting away the Bn'.²⁸

Poor weather made living conditions equally grim in north-west Europe. In the months after D-Day the weather was good. Occasional summer storms fell, flooding the trenches and turning the ground into a morass, but these were usually short-lived and the men dried out quickly.²⁹ From mid August, persistent heavy rain made life a misery for the men in the frontline. Holland was particularly bad; here the low-lying nature of the land, constant rain and deliberate flooding by the Germans

²⁶ Harpur, *Impossible Victory*, 83-84, 87. See also NA WO170/1348, 3rd Coldstream Guards, War Diary for October 1944.

²⁷ NA WO170/1425, 2nd Lancashire Fusiliers, War Diary for October 1944.

²⁸ NA WO170/1425, *Ibid*.

²⁹ IWM Department of Documents, 90/20/1, Captain W. G. Caines, 'A Brief Account of the 4th Battalion the Dorsetshire Regiment from June 1944 – May 1945', 9, 25.

combined to produce dreadful conditions (see page 229).³⁰ On 20 November 1944, the 4th Dorsets took over a position in the Siegfried Line near the River Maas, soon to be known as 'Dorset Wood'. A diary kept by Sergeant Wally Caines described the change over and the new position in some detail:

It was a hell of a night, everything seemed to go wrong, transport failed to turn up, most of it had become stuck in the mud along the main route, and consequently all ammunition and other essential supplies had to be man handled by carrying parties from the bogged vehicles to the Companies well forward. This operation took hours and hours to complete, the whole of the time the Battalion area was under very heavy fire from the German artillery. The field behind the wood was literally littered with vehicles hull down in the mud . . . Rain also fell heavily, this did not make matters any easier, all of us were soaked to the skin, with absolutely no cover whatsoever, even trenches taken over from the 5 Dorsets were half full with water, and some trenches were not even completed. The majority were well dug out, but had no head cover at all . . . During the night it became very cold, and I cannot say how fed up I felt . . . I personally spent the most part of the night sitting in a trench half full of water, and with the rain trickling down my neck, it was bloody miserable, in fact the only remedy was a swig at the bottle, which I assure for those of us that were lucky enough to have a small supply available, made full use of it by offering round.³¹

Later in the campaign, during the offensive in the Reichswald in January and February 1945, the men endured nineteen consecutive days of heavy rain which reduced the roads and paths in the area to a swamp.³²

Of course, rain and mud were not the only demoralising factors. Cold had an adverse affect on morale and could, in due course, chip away at a unit's combat effectiveness. This was certainly the

³⁰ IWM Department of Documents, 92/1/1, R. Gladman, 'Citizen Soldier', 23; NA WO171/1271, 5th Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders, War Diary for October 1944.

³¹ IWM 90/20/1, Caines, 'A Brief Account of the 4th Battalion the Dorsetshire Regiment', 63.

³² Ellis, *Sharp End*, 23.

case in Italy where both winters the men were subjected to bitter cold, snowstorms and icy winds.³³ The historian of the 1st East Surreys, declared that the conditions in the mountains during the winter of 1944-45 were possibly the worst ever encountered in the whole campaign. Heavy rain fell relentlessly and it was desperately cold, the men lacked adequate shelter and their position was a sea of mud. In December there was a heavy snowfall and the temperature fell to -9°C, accompanied by blizzards, gales and icy sleet.³⁴ Such weather took its toll – the historian of 78th Division, for instance, noted many cases of frostbite during the first two months of 1944, and that of 108 cases of exposure five men had died.³⁵

In France and Belgium, the first winter of the war was no better.³⁶ As late as 9 March 1940, many infantrymen found that metal screw pickets, used to hang barbed wire, broke when they attempted to hammer them into the frozen ground; while one brigadier reported cold so intense that it was impossible for his patrols to lie out for more than 2-3 hours each night, before it became unbearable.³⁷ If anything, the winter of 1944-45 in north-west Europe was even more severe and the men endured intense cold, heavy and prolonged snowfall and icy blizzards.³⁸ Sydney Jary, OC 18 Platoon, 4th Somerset Light Infantry, recalled the penetrating cold in one position in southern Holland in January 1945, where the oil in his men's automatic weapons froze and, until anti-freeze lubricants were issued, their Brens were useless. To make matters worse, the Somersets held a wide front with large gaps between Company positions, necessitating regular night-time standing patrols. The hardships suffered by these small patrols (usually a corporal and three or four men), were terrible. 'Some had hallucinations and a few were evacuated suffering from exposure,' wrote Jary.

³³ IWM Department of Documents, 85/18/1, C. T. Framp, 'The Littlest Victory', 72; NA WO170/1368, 5th Buffs, War Diary for January 1944; NA WO170/1404, 6th Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, War Diary for January 1944; NA WO170/1433, 2nd London Irish Rifles, War Diary for January 1944; Ray, *Algiers to Austria*, 110.

³⁴ Ford, *Battleaxe*, 253.

³⁵ Ray, *Algiers to Austria*, 110.

³⁶ Roderick Grant, *The 51st Highland Division at War* (London 1977), 12.

³⁷ NA WO197/40, Saar Force: 10th Infantry Brigade Report on 17 Days Tour in the Hombourg-Budange (Saar) Sector.

³⁸ See Lieutenant D. B. Balsom and Lieutenant G. D. H. Dicks quoted in John Lincoln, *Thank God and the Infantry: from D-Day to VE-Day with the 1st Battalion, the Royal Norfolk Regiment* (Stroud 1994), 25, 144-145.

Morale began to suffer and 'Keeping fit, warm and clean became a great effort. Conversation dried up'.³⁹

Severe weather affected the men in other ways; cold, for instance, often seemed inescapable. Even when soldiers were able to stay warm, the effects of wintry conditions were felt in awkward cold-weather clothes, confinement to their trenches and problems with equipment.⁴⁰ This resulted in feelings of anger, frustration or depression, which was exacerbated by fatigue, periods of isolation and shortened daylight hours. In Italy, conditions were further aggravated by inadequate winter kit. Captain David Cole, OC the signals platoon of the 2nd Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, remembered wearing a greatcoat with a proliferation of sweaters underneath. He also had to stuff his battledress from the inside with a 'wash-load' of string-vests, old shirts, pyjama trousers, woollen pullovers and scarves. 'I used to tell the Doc,' he wrote in his memoirs, 'that he would need a blow-lamp to cut through all my layers of clothing if I were wounded'.⁴¹ The lack of high-quality winter kit, especially compared to the Americans, proved to be as detrimental to morale as the cold itself and many British writers were scathing in their condemnation.⁴²

Poor weather, in fact, was a major precipitating factor in the high rate of absence and desertion among the troops in this theatre.⁴³ When Lieutenant-Colonel John Sparrow, Assistant Adjutant General and Secretary of the Morale Committee, visited Italy in the summer of 1944, he found evidence of war-weariness brought on by the strain of prolonged periods in the line in unpleasant conditions, all of which was 'finding out the weaker [infantry] members'.⁴⁴ Aside from the obvious detrimental consequences for living conditions, the elements also impaired many factors that the

³⁹ Sydney Jary, *18 Platoon* (Bristol 1994), 93.

⁴⁰ Cole, *Rough Road to Rome*, 124; IWM 85/18/1, Framp, 'The Littlest Victory', 72; IWM 87/35/1, Main, 'Motor Battalion', 170.

⁴¹ Cole, *Rough Road to Rome*, 124.

⁴² IWM 06/126/1, Freeman-Attwood, 'Recollections of War', 42; NA WO204/6701, AFHQ Morale Committee Meetings and Reports: AFHQ Morale Report for the Quarter ending 31 August 1944.

⁴³ Christine Bielecki, *British Infantry Morale during the Italian Campaign 1943-1945*, unpublished PhD Thesis (London UCL 2006), 181-188.

⁴⁴ NA WO32/15772, War Office Morale Committee Reports: Morale Report on Army Overseas, September to November 1944.

Morale Committee highlighted as helping to *sustain* morale, such as: victory in battle; swift medical assistance; hot rations in the line; availability of washing facilities; and regular mail.

Above all, rain and mud inflicted physical and mental strain. Not only did rain soak the men and inundate their trenches, keeping them cold and damp for days, but the ensuing mud required an enormous physical effort to move about in and made it almost impossible to keep clean. Len Waller of the Grenadier Guards kept a diary during his battalion's stint in the line at Medjez El Bab, Tunisia, during December 1942. In it he described the hellish living conditions and dipping morale of his comrades.

[9 December] Awoke before dawn, numb and soaking wet. Stopped raining. Everybody imploring sun to come out and dry our clothes and blankets - it didn't. . . . As expected, it rained during night . . . Attack of claustrophobia as I was falling asleep - almost wrecked dugout. . . . [10 December] At Stand-To, lads' morale at breaking point - second night in rain-filled trenches and still pouring down. Everywhere a sea of mud. Somebody shouting hysterically "Shoot me! - For God's sake shoot me!".⁴⁵

Alan Moorehead witnessed such miserable conditions first-hand and described the enervating consequences for morale. He had spent some time with a unit who had been on yet another exposed Italian mountainside. For two days and nights the men had slept waist-deep in water: 'In utter weariness they lost all sense of time and place and even perhaps the sense of hope. Only the sense of pain remained, of constantly reiterated pain that invaded sleep and waited for the end of sleep to increase. For these soldiers the risk of war had passed out of consciousness and was replaced by the misery and discomfort of war, which in the end is worse than anything'.⁴⁶ Simply surviving in such conditions became a feat of endurance and an achievement to be celebrated.

This brings us to the second key theme to be discussed in this chapter, that of digging in and the infantryman's relationship with the trenches. The first campaign in France certainly seemed to

⁴⁵ IWM 87/42/1, Waller, 'How Ever Did We Win?', 50.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Ellis, *Sharp End*, 358.

suggest a repeat of the last war was in the offing as for nine months (September 1939 - May 1940) British soldiers inhabited a series of static lines identical to those of the Western Front.⁴⁷ Even before hostilities were declared, the general consensus was that a less bloody repeat of 1914-18 was on the cards.⁴⁸ Sergeant W. C. Giblett, a regular soldier with the 2nd Wiltshires, recalled discussions with his comrades on the way to the continent. 'We wondered what the war would be like,' he wrote in his account of service with the BEF. 'Most thought in terms of war like the 1914-18 conflict'.⁴⁹ On the ground their suspicions were confirmed as they were assigned to digging trenches and creating defensive positions for static warfare. This phase of the war was described by a historian of the Coldstream Guards as 'a dreary period of digging and wiring (in a dismal industrial area of France), interspersed with route marches, weapon-training and battlefield tours'.⁵⁰ The digging, of course, conformed to the doctrine of the day; which, as we have seen, placed great emphasis on forming continuous lines. When the 2nd Buffs moved into reserve positions in Belgium, the men initially worked in pairs to dig their own weapons pits before expanding them to provide each section with a continuous trench. This was in turn connected to its neighbour, to form a triangle with traversed sides approximately seventy yards long. Gregory Blaxland, an officer in the battalion, remembered that his sergeant was concerned that they were 'not sticking to the exact measurements laid down in *Field Engineering*'.⁵¹

When the balloon finally went up, to use the contemporary expression, the Allies were completely taken aback by the German *blitzkrieg*, and what followed, far from being the static, defensive

⁴⁷ See IWM Department of Documents, 01/25/1, K. T. Clarke, 'Every Day a Bonus', 54; NA WO197/40, Saar Force: 10th Infantry Brigade Report on 17 Days Tour in the Hombourg-Budange (Saar) Sector; James Lansdale Hodson, *Through the Dark Night: being some account of a war correspondent's journeys, meetings and what was said to him, in France, Britain, and Flanders during 1939-1940* (London 1941), 70-71; Robert Holding, *Since I Bore Arms* (Cirencester 1987), 23.

⁴⁸ To break the potential deadlock, Churchill, as First Lord of the Admiralty, came up with the idea of a gigantic earthmoving machine - the so-called 'NLE Tractor', or 'Nellie' - which would move forward very slowly cutting a trench along which soldiers, and in a later planned version vehicles, could advance on the enemy's trenches. The tactical plan called for two or three hundred of these 100-ton leviathans to advance along a front of twenty to twenty-five miles moving through the night from one front line to the other (David Edgerton, *Britain's War Machine: weapons, resources and experts in the Second World War* (London 2011), 89-90).

⁴⁹ IWM Department of Documents, P233, Major W. C. Giblett, 'Recollections of Service with the British Expeditionary Force in France, September 1939 to June 1940', 1.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Brian Bond, 'The British Field Force in France and Belgium, 1939 - 40', in Addison and Calder, *Time to Kill*, 42.

⁵¹ IWM 83/46/1, Blaxland, 'Unready for War', 121 - 122.

fighting that many had predicted, was a classic example of a war of movement. The resulting withdrawal from the continent left Africa as the lone theatre of operations in the west. In the subsequent campaign (10 June 1940 - 16 May 1943) - despite the vast open spaces and fluidity of operations - entrenching proved to be an essential tactic. This applied right across the continent from the old-style siege warfare in Eritrea in late 1940, to the defensive perimeters or 'boxes' of the Western Desert from 1940 to 1942.⁵² Perhaps the most notorious example of the latter was the Knightsbridge Box, where for a period of nineteen days (27 May - 14 June 1942) the defenders, under constant attack from artillery and armour, could only shelter in their dugouts and take sporadic pot shots at the enemy.⁵³ There were many other such defensive positions in the Western Desert (the Gazala Line, for instance, was simply a series of occupied boxes each of brigade strength set out across the desert); and, as a result, troops were constantly digging in sand or rock. Lieutenant Neil McCallum of the 5/7th Gordon Highlanders, who fought in North Africa from the summer of 1942 to the end of hostilities, wrote that 'The shovel has saved more lives than the rifle'.⁵⁴ Another Eighth Army officer who fought in North Africa and Sicily, 1942-43, claimed that no officer or man was ever without pick or shovel.⁵⁵

The fighting in Tunisia was particularly static. Operations here came to resemble a vast siege, as First and Eighth Armies attempted to force the Germans out of the rocky ridges around Tunis in order to push on to the coast. These ridges became the single most important feature of the campaign, for they offered whoever held them excellent observation and the ability to call down precise artillery and mortar fire. For that reason, the fighting descended into a repetitive pattern of attacking the enemy's entrenched positions, or of grimly hanging on to some desolate hill top lacking sufficient cover. For more than three months from Boxing Day 1942, when the Allied run for Tunis was finally stopped, to mid April 1943 when 78th Division began clearing the Béja-Medjez road in preparation

⁵² Peter Cochrane, *Charlie Company: in service with C Company, 2nd Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders, 1940-44* (London 2007), 6-13; Ellis, *Sharp End*, 37-38.

⁵³ Ellis, *Sharp End*, 38.

⁵⁴ Neil McCallum, *Journey with a Pistol: a diary of war* (London 1959), 51.

⁵⁵ IWM Department of Documents, PP/MCR/202, Colonel A. H. F. Fausset-Farquhar, *Memoir*, 229.

for the final offensive, First Army was locked in a bitter stalemate. The troops in the frontline held positions in the *djebels* (mountains) for weeks at a time, cutting into the rock and thin sub-soil in an attempt to provide adequate cover. Units had to stay alert for twenty-four hours a day in case the enemy decided to launch an attack; even in quiet periods the threat of a sudden artillery barrage or of having to go out on patrol or take part in an attack was a constant strain. On most nights all the weapons had to be manned, the mortars loaded with flares, and a fifty-fifty watch carried out, meaning only half the men could sleep at any one time. The rest were either behind the Brens or as much as a quarter of a mile forward, on picket duty.⁵⁶

Following the surrender of the Axis forces in North Africa, the British took part in the brief Sicilian campaign, before landing on the Italian mainland in September 1943. The fighting here was dominated by a seemingly endless succession of slow-moving, attritional river crossings and mountain assaults. Frontline infantrymen spent the majority of their time in Italy burrowing underground - arguably more than any other theatre – and in conditions remarkably similar to those of the Western Front. In the words of one War Office report:

During the winter and spring there were periods of close position warfare, particularly in the ANZIO and CASSINO areas. In some places slit-trenches were joined up, communication trenches were dug, dugouts were constructed, and wire was used extensively. Methods and equipment of the last war were revived, such as periscopes and rifle grenades. Sniping was developed by both sides . . . Much of the technique of 1914-18 had to be revived, and taught to troops who had no previous experience of it.⁵⁷

At Cassino alone (17 January - 18 May 1944) the Germans did not surrender a single yard of ground for more than five months. For one hundred and twenty-two days nearly every army in Italy was drawn into the ghastly fighting centred on the cornerstone of the Gustav Line: Monte Cassino. On the ground, soldiers endured dreadful conditions equal to anything in Flanders thirty years before. E.

⁵⁶ Ellis, *Sharp End*, 40.

⁵⁷ NA WO231/8, Lessons Learned from Operations in Italy, October 1942 – March 1944.

Grey Turner, a MO in the 2nd Coldstream Guards, described moving into Cassino town (see page 62) in his diary:

The whole scene was exactly like the last war, the road and surrounding fields pitted with water logged shell holes, the avenue of devastated trees, the town reduced to mere heaps of rubble. Unspeakable horrors on either side - unburied mangled bodies, shattered tanks, sewage.

We got into the crypt [Battalion HQ] without trouble. It is exactly like a dug-out HQ of the last war. . . . Our forward positions are only about 50 yards from the Germans.

It is exactly like Ypres (1915) or Stalingrad (1942).⁵⁸

Most soldiers did not have the luxury of a cathedral crypt to shelter in, however; and the weather and primitive living conditions combined to produce appalling hardships for the men in the line. The 1st KOYLI did one of their longest stints on Monte Natale, where 'conditions were in many respects more rigorous than the normal run of trench warfare in the 1914-18 war. . . . In mid-winter at heights of 2000 feet and more, in rain and snow, with only rock-built sangars for protection and leather jerkins, gas-capes and greatcoats for warmth, mere living became a fine art'.⁵⁹

A major problem at Cassino was the proximity of the lines, meaning one was usually under constant observation. This meant that soldiers had to remain under cover during the day, keeping movement to a minimum, and that they could only venture out at night under cover of darkness. On Point 593, the 2nd Camerons were positioned on a forward slope and daylight movement resulted in immediate sniper and mortar fire. 'In day time we had to stay put,' wrote Peter Cochrane, OC 'C' Company, 'peering at the German positions seventy-five yards away, getting cramp in our legs, watching the snow drift in, and twitching when the mortar bombs came down'.⁶⁰ Besides the simple physical discomfort, another drawback of being under observation was supplies could only be brought up at night and even then the journey was usually so treacherous and time consuming that

⁵⁸ CMAC GC/96/1, Turner, Diary entry of 5 April 1944, 121.

⁵⁹ G. F. Ellenberger, *History of the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry*, vol. 6 (Aldershot 1961), 89.

⁶⁰ Cochrane, *Charlie Company*, 118.

only a fraction of the initial load ever made it through.⁶¹ The proximity of the enemy also meant that removing the dead was not always possible. Countless rotting bodies lay in no-man's-land – those of the myriad nationalities who had fallen in the fighting of the previous few months. 'The decomposing figures smelt terribly and there were rats and flies in abundance,' complained one soldier on Monte Cairo. 'The uniforms on the swollen bodies would get wet when it rained and then when the sun came out you could see the moisture rising as they dried out for yet another day'.⁶²

There were other times when the fighting bogged down in Italy. For over a week at Salerno (9-17 September 1943) the Allies were sealed off in a small beachhead by heavy German counter-attacks which came within a hair's breadth of driving them back into the sea. At the turn of the year it took Fifth Army more than six weeks (1 December 1943 – 15 January 1944) and more than 16,000 casualties to break through the Bernhardt Line, an offshoot of the main Gustav Line that ran over the massif of Monte Camino.⁶³ The conditions here rivalled those of Flanders in 1917. An officer with the 3rd Coldstream Guards recalled using groundsheets and gas capes to catch rainwater for drinking. His men were unable to shave, as any cut became infected (the author managed to maintain a basic level of hygiene by having a 'good' wash in a shell hole) and hands and feet became swollen after the constant rain and exposure.⁶⁴ Another bout of prolonged static fighting took place high up in the northern Apennines from the autumn of 1944 to February 1945, when the Allies stalled in front of the formidable Gothic Line. A typical experience was that of the Scots Guards on Monte Battaglia in October 1944: during one tour of duty the Battalion occupied forward positions overlooked by the enemy on three sides and were shelled day and night, 'sleep, except from sheer exhaustion, or existence at all outside a slit-trench, was barely possible'. It rained constantly, filling the trenches with icy water and soaking the tired men to the bone. The position became a swamp and it became increasingly difficult to bring up supplies. 'The platoon areas were filthy with old ration tins and

⁶¹ John Ellis, *Cassino, the Hollow Victory: the battle for Rome, January-June 1944* (London 2003), 214.

⁶² IWM 99/85/1, Drury, 'One Man's Memories', Part Two, 4; see also Raleigh Trevelyan, *Rome '44: the battle for the eternal city* (London 2004), 208.

⁶³ Fred Majdalany, *Cassino: portrait of a battle* (London 1999), 30.

⁶⁴ D.C. Quilter (ed.), *"No Dishonourable Name": the 2nd and 3rd battalions Coldstream Guards, 1939 - 1946* (East Ardsley 1972), 195.

excrement', the regimental historian wrote, 'and all around were spread a waste of mud and rock and shell-scarred tree-stumps, scattered with shell-holes and the unburied corpses of German and American dead'.⁶⁵

It was, however, the protracted defence at Anzio that most resembled the fighting on the Western Front. Like elsewhere, the troops lived in filthy holes below ground, in foul weather, under constant shellfire, but instead of craggy mountains, they were cornered in a claustrophobic beachhead for four months (22 January – 5 June 1944). Here the lines were completely immobile, leading to the development of deep dugouts, continuous lines and communication trenches highly reminiscent of the Somme or Ypres thirty years earlier. In the 'Lobster Claw', for example, there were 'spectacular' ribbon developments in the form of a massive network of communication trenches, dugouts, weapon-pits and observation posts, all deep and well furnished with timber and sandbags. 'It looked like a flash-back to the Great War' remembered David Cole. 'Indeed, when I first arrived there in the depths of the night, I thought I was walking straight into Act I of *Journey's End* - with all the appropriate bangs and flashes off stage'.⁶⁶ Like Cassino, the two sides lived cheek by jowl; in the notorious 'Fortress' position the two sides were dug in only a few yards from each other. 'One could hear each other talking at times,' recalled John Hillier, 2nd Wiltshires. 'It was very much like the first war, where you were eyeball to eyeball with the enemy'.⁶⁷

Living conditions there were amongst the worst in Italy. David Cole spent some of March in the forward trenches of the 'Fortress'. Cole remembered the strain of remaining constantly alert for German patrols or attacks, the discomfort of living in a cramped trench with another soldier, the pain of being unable to stretch his legs, having to relieve himself in a tin and being periodically attacked by snipers, machine-guns and rifle grenades. Adding to his misery was the stench of numerous decomposing corpses lying nearby entangled amongst the barbed wire, along with the

⁶⁵ Erskine, *Scots Guards*, 283 – 284.

⁶⁶ Cole, *Rough Road to Rome*, 216.

⁶⁷ Hillier, *Long Long Road to Victory*, 134.



Figure 8: a picture of Cassino reminiscent of the Western Front (Ellis, *Sharp End*)

smell of decaying vegetation, refuse, cordite and excreta.⁶⁸ 'What we could not see, we could smell . . . Death seemed to hang in the air. The word Stygian had developed a wealth of new meanings'.⁶⁹ In many places the Germans were so close that they could be heard digging and talking. Sometimes elementary threats and grim jokes were shouted across no-man's-land: such as, in the best music hall tradition of the day, 'What time is it Tommy?', 'Air-raid time in Berlin, Fritz.'⁷⁰ Moreover, the close proximity of the lines meant that neither side left the other alone for very long; harassing fire was constant.⁷¹

The weather, especially in the first two months, was terrible. Summer temperatures could reach over 100 degrees of suffocating heat, but in winter the 'steady, driving, sleeting rain which permeated everywhere' turned the landscape – most of it former malarial swampland – into a quagmire.⁷² The coldest winter in years was keenly felt in the beachhead; slit-trenches filled with freezing rain and it was impossible to dig down more than six inches before reaching water.⁷³ Even freshly-dug graves were half-filled with water before the burials could take place. The regimental historian of the Irish Guards, whose 1st Battalion fought a series of battles at Anzio over a seven-week period, described the pattern of life there:

It was a savage, brutish, troglodyte existence, in which there could be no sleep for anyone and no rest for any commander. The weather was almost the worst enemy and the same torrential rain, which sent an icy flood swirling around our knees as we lurked in the Gullies, would at times sweep away the earth that covered the poor torn bodies of casualties hastily buried . . . isolated by day and erratically supplied by night, soaked to the skin and stupefied by exhaustion and bombardment, surrounded by new and old corpses yet persistently cheerful, the Guardsmen dug trenches and manned them till they were blown in and then dug new ones, beat off attacks, changed their positions, launched local attacks, stalked snipers, broke up patrols,

⁶⁸ Cole, *Rough Road to Rome*, 200 – 201.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 198.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 200 – 201.

⁷¹ Grace, *Perilous Road to Rome*, 140-141; Raleigh Trevelyan, *The Fortress: a diary of Anzio and after* (London 1985), 16-17.

⁷² NA WO170/1350, 5th Grenadier Guards, War Diary for February 1944; Peter Verney, *Anzio 1944: an unexpected fury* (London 1978), 50.

⁷³ NA WO170/1354, 1st Irish Guards, War Diary for March 1944.

evacuated the wounded, buried the dead and carried supplies. The bringing up of supplies each night was a recurrent nightmare. Carrying parties got lost, jeeps got bogged and, as the swearing troops heaved at them, down came the shells.⁷⁴

Most newcomers could scarcely believe that life could carry on in such conditions.

In contrast to the dramatic terrain in Italy, the fighting in north-west Europe revolved around a seemingly endless string of hedgerows, canals, rivers and dank forests. This did not mean that life here was any easier. On the contrary, the static nature of the fighting meant that, as in Italy, soldiers spent most of their time dug in, usually in dreadful conditions and in close proximity to the enemy. The fighting in Normandy was especially bad and, like other theatres, was highly reminiscent of conditions on the Western Front. When the 5th Seaforths relieved the Regiment's Second Battalion at St. Honorine in June 1944, the description of the event could have been lifted directly from a Great War memoir. The Highlanders slithered along a path, not knowing where they were but followed the muddy tape until it brought them to a 'sea of mud, dim trenches, sandbags and corrugated iron'.⁷⁵ It was, according to one infantry officer, a nagging sort of warfare, 'There was nothing big or decisive about it; but every night their patrols were prodding at our defences and every day they shelled us'.⁷⁶ In the bitter fighting for Hill 112 in mid July, the 8th Middlesex needed little encouragement to construct some very deep and strong dugouts in the style of the last war. Eric Codling, a 4.2-inch mortar-man in the battalion, recalled his Brigadier, a veteran of the first war, saying the conditions were similar to the 'very heavy artillery fire and trench warfare of 1914 – 18'. For six days the 'Die Hards' stayed put, taking part in some of the most bitter fighting of the war. Most of the time it was impossible to get out of the mortar pits, such was the level of German shelling. Codling wrote: 'We ate, slept and even the natural body functions had to be carried out in that confined space below ground'.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Desmond J. L. Fitzgerald, *History of the Irish Guards in the Second World War* (Aldershot 1949), 335.

⁷⁵ Borthwick, *Sans Peur*, 162.

⁷⁶ Borthwick quoted in Eversley Belfield and H. Essame, *The Battle for Normandy* (London 1975), 118.

⁷⁷ IWM Department of Documents, 88/4/1, E. A. Codling, *Memoir*, 42, 48.

Following the breakout from Normandy the tempo of operations was swift. The failure at Arnhem, however, led to another protracted stalemate during the autumn and early winter of 1944-45. Although the Allies had advanced to the borders of the Third Reich, a hasty defence by German units and the onset of bad weather left them practically immobilised in the mud, snow and unforgiving terrain of the outer Ruhr and Ardennes forest.⁷⁸ During this period the British fought a succession of grim, attritional battles, gained little in the way of ground, sustained heavy combat losses and suffered greatly from the winter weather.⁷⁹ Holland proved to be a severe trial. 'We had,' wrote the adjutant of the 2nd Argylls, 'during that period of two or three months the same experience as the infantry had in World War One and the trenches for many years'.⁸⁰ In most places men struck water after only a few feet of digging, sometimes less.⁸¹ Nor were things appreciably better in Germany. Corporal Doug Procter, 4th Somersets, was stationed near the Siegfried Line during December 1944. Despite being in close contact with the Germans, the biggest enemy was the weather. Gas capes offered little protection against the rain and the men were permanently wet from the knees down because the trenches were awash. The misery was compounded by the stench of numerous putrefying bodies hidden in the undergrowth around the position. 'Everywhere stank of death and desolation,' recalled Procter, 'the corpses [became] more grotesque as each day passed'.⁸²

So far we have considered the similarities between frontline living conditions in the two wars. In the following section we will examine some of the ways in which they differed. The first point to make is that, with a few notable exceptions, the soldiers of 1939-45 did not occupy fully developed trench *systems*; they were, therefore, a great deal more uncomfortable in the line than their Great War predecessors. Exposure to the elements was a serious problem. By way of illustration, Peter White, a

⁷⁸ IWM 88/4/1, *Ibid.*, 95.

⁷⁹ IWM 92/1/1, Gladman, 'Citizen Soldier', 23; IWM Department of Documents, 06/41/1, W. S. Scull, 'Army Service', 11; Carlo D'Este, 'The Army and the Challenge of War, 1939-1945' in David G. Chandler and Ian Beckett (eds.), *The Oxford History of the British Army* (Oxford 2003), 293.

⁸⁰ IWM Sound Archive, 8337, John David Carew Graham.

⁸¹ IWM Department of Documents, 94/41/1, L. A. Roebuck, 'The Five Yorkshire Tykes', 67; R. M. Wingfield, *The Only Way Out: an infantryman's autobiography of the north-west Europe campaign August 1944 - February 1945* (London 1955), 157.

⁸² Quoted in Patrick Delaforce, *The Fighting Wessex Wyverns: from Normandy to Bremerhaven with the 43rd Wessex Division* (Stroud 2002), 238.

platoon commander in the 4th KOSB, occupied a line of shallow trenches in a waterlogged area of frozen bog-land in Germany during January 1945. It was fearsomely cold and few of his men were properly dug in as this would have meant lying in a 'bone-numbing soup of ice, snow and water'. For three hours the exhausted, hungry men lay motionless in their shallow pits. 'I could not visualise our being able to stick this for much longer,' White admitted afterwards. 'How blissfully ignorant we were then of what we would be forced to go through. We were to be pinned into freezing immobility for a further ten hours and with all this world could offer of hell and misery let loose about us almost continuously'.⁸³ Another soldier claimed that the worst thing about war was not the prospect of dying or losing a limb, it was the discomfort. 'Agonising, shivering, sodden, misery not just for an hour or so but for day after day'.⁸⁴

Besides exposure to the elements, another main disadvantage of the standard two man slit-trench was that, in order to provide a reasonable level of protection, they had to be as narrow as possible.⁸⁵ This meant that soldiers often had very little room, which made sleeping, eating and going to the toilet extremely difficult, and cramp tricky to alleviate.⁸⁶ Raleigh Trevelyan, a subaltern with the 1st Green Howards, described his discomfort at Anzio. There were about two inches of '*café au lait*' coloured water at the bottom of his trench, meaning he and his trench-mate had to sit hunched up on ration boxes, taking turns to ease the pressure on their joints by stretching out their feet on to each others' knees. Blankets had been used to line the walls in order to prevent earth from falling in, but these had become so soggy that they had to avoid leaning against them; nor could they use their Tommy cookers⁸⁷, as there was nowhere dry to stand them, meaning no hot food or, more importantly, tea.⁸⁸ Worse was to come. Later in the 'Fortress', Trevelyan and his trench-mate were unable to dig a sufficiently deep hole as the ground was too hard, meaning they had to sit with their

⁸³ Peter White, *With the Jocks: a soldier's struggle for Europe, 1944-45* (Stroud 2001), 106.

⁸⁴ Harpur, *Impossible Victory*, 84.

⁸⁵ IWM Department of Documents, 82/37/1, E. P. Danger, 'Diary of a Guardsman', 40.

⁸⁶ IWM Department of Documents, 83/36/1, R. H. Day, 'We Landed at Nightfall: a private's view of Salerno', 15-16; Whitehouse and Bennett, *Fear is the Foe*, 128.

⁸⁷ A compact, portable, solidified alcohol fuelled stove issued to British troops in both wars.

⁸⁸ Trevelyan, *Fortress*, 17-18.

backs perpetually bent to avoid sticking their heads over the top during daylight.⁸⁹ Both of these examples are fairly representative of life in a slit-trench – dirty, uncomfortable and at the mercy of the weather. One 78th Division infantryman undoubtedly spoke for the majority when he stated ‘I have always felt that the worst thing about war was the bloody discomfort’.⁹⁰

Frontline accommodation did not end at slit-trenches, though. Dugouts offered their inhabitants a greater degree of comfort and were thus usually occupied by company officers and wireless operators. However, they were far from the luxurious, underground shelters of *Journey's End*. After Cassino had fallen, Peter Cochrane was able to revisit the dugout he had shared with the CSM and found that it measured a mere 4ft by 5ft and offered 3ft of headroom. In that – approximately the size of a reasonable sized cupboard resting on its back – two men had lived for three weeks.⁹¹ They could be tremendously dirty and unsanitary, too. When the 2nd Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers relieved a battalion of the 56th (London) Division on Monte Damiano in February 1944, David Cole was shocked at the appalling state of the command post. The roof leaked constantly, turning the floor into a muddy soup. ‘Inside,’ remembered Cole, ‘an officer was lying on some sandbags under what he maintained was the only sound part of the roof. Nevertheless a steady drip of water was splashing on his forehead. Four other figures, caked with mud, were crouched or seated on sandbags on the floor . . . The only light came from a flickering candle, perched on a stone, which faintly illuminated the tense and exhausted faces of the men around it’.⁹²

Sangars were used to give men cover wherever the ground made it impossible to dig and were used extensively in North Africa and Italy. On Monte Cassino the rocky ground ensured the only option was to build up rather than digging down. One private with the 2nd Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers recalled finding a niche in the rocks and surrounding it with anything that came to hand – small rocks in ammunition boxes, sandbags, anything that would protect him from blast and shell fragments.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 67.

⁹⁰ Harpur, *Impossible Victory*, 42.

⁹¹ Ellis, *Sharp End*, 44. See also Captain F. W. Marten, 2nd Rifle Brigade, quoted in David Lee, *Up Close and Personal: the reality of close-quarter fighting in World War II* (London 2006), 157.

⁹² Cole, *Rough Road to Rome*, p. 180.

One sangar was even constructed entirely of American K-rations (wooden boxes full of tinned foods). The contents of the inside tins were still edible, but those on the outside had been punctured by numerous splinters. 'If you ate one of the tins,' he wrote, 'you had to fill the empty with earth and replace it otherwise you were eating your protection'.⁹³ As one might expect, they tended to be very uncomfortable. David Cole, recalling all the internal points and edges, likened them to medieval torture chambers. 'I never found a way of arranging myself inside one that did not bring on simultaneously the symptoms of everything from housemaid's knee to what old wives say comes from sitting on wet grass'.⁹⁴ Cole continued:

what with the wind and the rain, the constant harassment by enemy guns, the problems of physical cramp and tension in confined spaces and the obvious difficulties of eating and excreting, the CO arranged that no platoon would remain there for more than two days: and even that must have seemed like two months.⁹⁵

Another officer simply described them as 'rock coffins'.⁹⁶

The contrast between the relatively comfortable, deep trenches of the First World War and the squalid, cramped holes of the current war did not go unnoticed. Neil McCallum, in a slit-trench at Mareth, thought longingly of the 'theatrical underground caverns of *Journey's End*, where officers sat in comfortable cellars and drank whisky out of property mugs'.⁹⁷ When the 2nd Scots Guards took over positions on Monte Natale during January 1944, they found the departing battalion standing shivering in the darkness beside the flooded slit-trenches. All through the night the Guards baled out using their mess tins and steel helmets. The mud was so sodden that their holes soon started to fill up again, forcing the men to sit on branches suspended half way up the sides. Sleet and snow buffeted the exposed position and the mountain top assumed a mantle of white. 'I spent three

⁹³ IWM 99/85/1, Drury, 'One Man's Memories Fifty Years On', Part Two, 4.

⁹⁴ Cole, *Rough Road to Rome*, 181.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁹⁶ Gunner, *Adventures with the Irish Brigade*, 99.

⁹⁷ McCallum, *Journey with a Pistol*, 99.

days like this, soaked to the skin,' wrote one platoon commander. 'It seemed worse than the 1914-18 war when deep trenches were all interconnected and there were also communal dug-outs'.⁹⁸

There were, of course, many veterans of the last war still serving in the British Army (especially among senior officers and NCOs); what did they make of the conditions? If the scattered references in the primary literature are anything to go by then it seems much of the fighting produced feelings of nostalgia in the old warriors. For example, the CO of the 2nd Camerons commented that the fighting at Sidi Barrani in October 1940 was 'just like old times'.⁹⁹ Later in the campaign, while listening to the preliminary bombardment at Alamein in 1942, Major-General Douglas Wimberley, GOC 51st (Highland) Division, recalled listening to a similar bombardment at Passchendaele a quarter of a century earlier.¹⁰⁰ Besides the style of the fighting, the trenches themselves had a powerful impact on the Old Sweats. David Cole described one veteran who seemed to take on a new lease of life at Anzio:

I saw immediately why he was so relaxed. As a veteran of the Great War, he was completely at home in Anzio. The idea of portering ammunition and rations at night across bullet-swept fields and down long communication trenches into an extensive system of dugouts and emplacements took him back to the Somme and he revelled in the nostalgia. All he missed were the horses.¹⁰¹

Lieutenant-General Harry Crerar, GOC I Canadian Corps, could not help but comment on the similarity between the static defence lines he took over in Italy in the winter of 1943-44 and those he had seen in France twenty years earlier.¹⁰²

It was not just veterans of 1914-18 who developed a bond with the trenches. When 8 Platoon, 6th York and Lancasters, left the positions they had held in the Salerno beachhead, one private wrote that 'It was always a wrench to leave a position after many days. In spite of its exposed situation,

⁹⁸ Elliott, *Esprit de Corps*, 95.

⁹⁹ Robert Dick, *I was not alone* (Edinburgh 1997), 80.

¹⁰⁰ Adrian Gilbert, *The Imperial War Museum Book of the Desert War* (London 1992), 164.

¹⁰¹ Cole, *Rough Road to Rome*, p. 195.

¹⁰² Copp and McAndrew, *Battle Exhaustion*, 67.

with all its incidents and scares, it was like leaving home. We had all become attached to our particular slit-trenches. No infantry man favours leaving his hole in the ground to move forward into unknown danger'.¹⁰³ The War Diary of the 5th Grenadier Guards agreed, declaring: 'It is extraordinary how the most primitive slit-trench shelter can seem like home sometimes!'¹⁰⁴ This was unsurprising given that, whenever possible, soldiers attempted to elaborate and improve their trenches in an effort to provide some degree of comfort. In reserve positions or quiet sectors it was usually possible to undertake quite elaborate home improvements.¹⁰⁵ In close contact with the enemy, developments were more modest, as a Rifleman with the 9th Cameronians recalled: 'Practice had made us fairly expert by now. Widening the bottom so that we could sit with our legs stretched out straight, instead of the knees bent position'.¹⁰⁶ A key improvement – one which experienced soldiers always tended to first – was to build up head cover to protect against air and tree bursts: usually a door covered with soil or, less frequently, an earth-filled wardrobe.¹⁰⁷ In addition to head cover, soldiers gained some peace of mind by digging their trenches as deep as possible, so much so, in fact, that on occasions ammunition boxes had to be used to see over the parapet. Making them as narrow as possible also helped – the wider the trench, the more chance there was of a hit, either a direct hit or shell fragments.¹⁰⁸ In fact, if properly dug in, the infantry suffered remarkably few casualties from artillery or mortar attacks.¹⁰⁹

Another important difference was the amount of time soldiers spent in the line. In 1914-18 the system of reliefs ensured that units regularly moved in and out of the line for a rest. Battalions could be drawn into reserve within brigades, brigades within divisions and divisions within corps. This was

¹⁰³ IWM 99/85/1, Wray, 'Infantry Man!', 93 – 94.

¹⁰⁴ NA WO170/1350, 5th Grenadier Guards, War Diary for February 1944.

¹⁰⁵ McCallum, *Journey with a Pistol*, 80-81; White, *With the Jocks*, 169-170.

¹⁰⁶ IWM Department of Documents, 99/85/1, T. A. Gore, 'Reluctant Hero, Reluctant Coward', 53. See also Borthwick, *Sans Peur*, 180; Bryan, *Wool, War and Westminster*, 76; Cole, *Rough Road to Rome*, 183; Major Bob Moberley, 2nd Middlesex, quoted in Patrick Delaforce, *Marching to the Sound of Gunfire: North west Europe 1944-5* (Stroud 2003), 67; Trevelyan, *Fortress*, 40; West, *An' it's Called a Tam-O'-Shanter*, 76.

¹⁰⁷ IWM 90/20/1, Caines, 'A Brief Account of the 4th Battalion the Dorsetshire Regiment', 10-11; IWM 88/4/1, Codling, *Memoir*, 73; Borthwick, *Sans Peur*, 180; Jary, *18 Platoon*, 65.

¹⁰⁸ *ATM* No. 45 (London 1943), 65; IWM 82/37/1, Danger, 'Diary of a Guardsman', 40; IWM 99/85/1, Drury, 'One Man's Memories', Part One, 5.

¹⁰⁹ IWM Department of Documents, 86/49/1, R. I. Higgins, 'A Few Memories', 329; Jary, *18 Platoon*, 14.

not always possible during the Second World War and units were routinely kept for long periods of time in close proximity to the enemy. To illustrate this point, one company of the Scots Guards spent twenty-four consecutive days (originally intended to be only forty-eight hours) holding the line on Monte Battaglia.¹¹⁰ Elsewhere in Italy, one 46th Division battalion spent 31 consecutive days in the line; the troops were unable to wash or shave and had no hot food for the duration of tour. When they were finally relieved they had a meagre three nights' rest before going straight back to the front. In the words of one NCO, 'some men just couldn't take it'.¹¹¹ In Tunisia, when the 5th Black Watch entered the line at Mareth on 23 February 1943, the battalion endured daily shelling, frequent air attacks and some ground attacks, for no less than thirty-four days, with the exception of a brief forty-eight hours respite.¹¹² The 5th Camerons spent a staggering 53 days in the line in Normandy, from their landing on 7 June to their eventual relief on 29 July.¹¹³ The record for unrelieved suffering goes to a support group of the 1st Kensingtons, who, from October 1944 to February 1945, spent 123 consecutive days in a large and thinly manned sector of the Apennines.¹¹⁴ The impact of such prolonged spells in the line can scarce be imagined. Undoubtedly it ground down soldiers' ability to endure and sapped their physical and mental reserves. Even the best soldiers must have wondered what was being asked of them and how long they would have to endure such torment.

Hopefully by now the reader will have gathered that much of the fighting in 1939-45 was immobile and took place in exceptionally gruelling conditions. Now that the physical setting has been firmly established, we can turn our attention to the somewhat more ethereal subject of the mental landscape. By this we mean soldiers' preconceptions about the conflict, their reactions at the time to static warfare and the aftermath. The first point to make is that most soldiers - before May 1940 at least - believed that they would be fighting in static positions and that a less bloody repetition of the

¹¹⁰ Erskine, *Scots Guards*, 283 – 284.

¹¹¹ IWM Sound Archive, 16719, Edward 'Ted' Grey.

¹¹² John McGregor, *The Spirit of Angus: the war history of the county's Battalion of the Black Watch* (Chichester 1988), 67.

¹¹³ NA WO171/1270, 5th Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders, War Diary for July 1944.

¹¹⁴ Harpur, *Impossible Victory*, 85.

Western Front was in the offing (due in part to the perceived strength of the Maginot Line).¹¹⁵ 'Everyone had his pet theory as to our future,' claimed one BEF infantryman. 'One, the most popular, was that we were destined to sit in trenches on the French or Belgian frontiers until the politicians decided to end the whole stupid affair'.¹¹⁶ Another soldier, who was shipped over to France in 1939, claimed that he and most of his comrades expected a repetition of the 1914-18 and that, as a result, veterans of the latter were 'looked upon as experts with special knowledge and experience. Anything they had to say about it was listened to eagerly'.¹¹⁷

Thereafter, due to the influence of *blitzkrieg*, basic training, newspapers and newsreels, the men did not expect trenches and attritional fighting when they got to the front; this despite the impression of combat presumably gleaned from accounts of the fighting in Tunisia, Anzio and Cassino. In Normandy, many troops were taken aback at the claustrophobic nature of the fighting. This affected not only those experiencing battle for the first time but also soldiers in the veteran Eighth Army divisions. When Captain Geoffrey Picot, OC the 3-inch Mortar Platoon, 1st Hampshires, went ahead to reconnoitre reserve positions for his unit during July, he had a long talk with an officer from the departing unit. Both men took an extremely gloomy view of the war. It had taken the Allies seven or eight weeks to gain a little strip of coast, perhaps about twenty miles deep. Both men felt that if the casualties continued at the present rate, there would be no army left by the time it reached the battlefields of the First World War, let alone Berlin. 'Montgomery was stuck,' Picot wrote. 'We had no doubt about that. Attacks were costly and gained only a few hundred yards. Montgomery's estimate of the fighting being over in six months was foolish'. Both men parted, thinking that the war would go on forever.¹¹⁸ Another soldier in Normandy, Sergeant H. Green of the 10th HLI, recalling his experience in the precarious Odon Bridgehead, was equally surprised and despondent at the static nature of the fighting: 'Was it but a week ago that digging a slit-trench was considered

¹¹⁵ Such was the strength of the belief that the Maginot Line, and its German counterpart, the Siegfried Line, would prevent a war of movement that a Trench Warfare Training and Experimental Establishment was created in Britain to which personnel from the BEF, and from units due to deploy to France, were sent for instruction.

¹¹⁶ Holding, *Since I Bore Arms*, 9.

¹¹⁷ IWM P233, Giblett, 'Recollections of Service', 1.

¹¹⁸ Geoffrey Picot, *Accidental Warrior: in the front line from Normandy till victory* (London 1994), 115 – 166.

more work that it was worth? Now, the shovel had become a mighty weapon of war, a treasure to be hoarded carefully, lest it be snatched up by some pilferer; being without a shovel left one feeling as naked as a man in Piccadilly without his trousers'.¹¹⁹

Once they got over the initial shock, soldiers found trench fighting dispiriting. While we do not want to say too much on this score, as it forms the bulk of the final chapter, we should note that the weather, static warfare and constant danger all conspired to chip away at morale. This was especially true in Normandy, where by the end of June 1944, the British were locked in a protracted stalemate outside of Caen. After many days of unrelieved combat, morale was often on the wane and in some units it was gravely lacking. It was the lack of progress that most soldiers found difficult to tolerate. A captain in the Highland Division complained that:

We had been in the line for a long time, continuously under fire, and doing (as it must have seemed to many) absolutely nothing; and yet here we were, still in the same old doover [slit-trench], getting nowhere. The enemy mortars had our range, and casualties were mounting. We were all bone-tired. When a man sees his friend killed in an attack he can understand the need for it and accepts it; but bridgeheads and build-ups and Army plans are abstractions too vague to be comprehended when he is sitting in a trench and seeing, day after day, four or five or six of his mates being carried off or buried.¹²⁰

In Holland, Sydney Jary observed a noticeable deterioration in his Platoon's morale as a result of static warfare. Gradually the 'Smiling faces vanished and the grey look returned once more,' he wrote of a lengthy spell in the line in September 1944. 'Men walked with one ear cocked in the air for approaching shells and with a slight stoop. The jokes began to peter out and the cheerful "Good Morning, Sir" ceased when I went round the platoons at "stand to". Morale was always higher during an attack. Sitting around being shelled is not an occupation to be recommended'.¹²¹ These two passages reveal the key problems associated with trench warfare and, consequently, also

¹¹⁹ Quoted in Ellis, *Sharp End*, 46. These implements were so prized, in fact, that men carved their initials on them.

¹²⁰ Borthwick, *Sans Peur*, 181.

¹²¹ Jary, *18 Platoon*, 49.

explain why it was so harmful for morale. Besides the awful living conditions that ground down one's ability to endure, it was the lack of progress and the immense psychological strain of having to endure heavy shelling in a confined trench.

But trench warfare did not just affect morale; it also altered soldiers' attitudes to home and the wider war. It may have been due to the spatial restrictions, or the strain of constant action and the randomness of death, or because they were often kept in the dark about the big picture, but, for whatever reason, most soldiers found their mental horizons – like that of their immediate physical vista – greatly diminished by the trenches. After a while most soldiers' thoughts rarely lifted beyond the basics of life: the desire for food, shelter and a modicum of comfort. 'Infantry,' wrote Private Rex Wingfield, a footslogger in 11th Armoured Division, 'originally of necessity and finally from sheer habit, had the ability to look forward only to the next meal or, at the most, to the next day.'¹²² Peter White wrote of his shock at this phenomenon, complaining that he and his men had turned into little more than animals, due to their obsession with the fundamentals of survival: food, sleep and warmth.¹²³ It is also true to say that the nearer soldiers were to the enemy the more ignorant they tended to be of the wider aspects of a battle.¹²⁴ Men in the forward trenches were often not even aware of what was happening around them and few, if any, would have been competent to give that information.¹²⁵ For most soldiers, all that mattered was their little section of the line, sometimes to the exclusion of all else. Bob Day, who landed at Salerno with the 2/6th East Surreys, was initially mystified that his part of the beachhead could be eerily quiet despite the fact that he could hear the cacophony of battle nearby. That his unit could sit in peace while there was a 'fight-to-the-death' struggle going on with men doing brave deeds and dying was unbelievable. Day later wrote: 'I was soon to learn that news of the front as a whole is hazy to the ordinary soldier and that all he knows is what is happening in his part . . . and that is all he is interested in, too. Big military moves mean

¹²² Wingfield, *Only Way Out*, 160.

¹²³ White, *With the Jocks*, 89.

¹²⁴ See Private Ron Ludgater, 1st Manchesters, quoted in Robin Neillands, *The Battle of Normandy, 1944* (London 2003), 376-377; Vernon Scannell, *Argument of Kings* (London 1989), 151-152.

¹²⁵ Belfield and Essame, *Battle for Normandy*, 72.

little to the Tommy. He wants to hear what happened when that patrol of six men and the platoon sergeant went out to 'recce' the farm buildings the night before'.¹²⁶

Another common reaction to the strain of prolonged static warfare was to sink into what one writer termed a 'spiritual limbo'.¹²⁷ At Cassino many soldiers described an overwhelming feeling of numbness as a result of the relentless horror. Major Fred Majdalany of the 2nd Lancashire Fusiliers, who spent what must have seemed like an eternity on the massif, wrote:

A state of utter timelessness now prevailed. There were no Mondays or Fridays or Sundays. There were not even any days and nights. There was just light and dark. . . . The other world, the world of women and shops, music and streets, churches and harlots, no longer existed. It was something we'd once read about in a book. The only world was *here*. And the only time was *now*. There was no past, present or future. There was only *now*. We'd always been here and we always would be. . . . It was just a passive state of sustained awfulness.¹²⁸

Many began to lose sight of any other reality other than the squalid holes and dugouts in which they lived for weeks without end. When Rex Wingfield, who had been in the line since Normandy, received a copy of his local newspaper in February 1945 he found the contents disturbing, 'all these things were happening in a different world. Most of us were no longer affected by home-sickness. The trench, the snipers, Death and Destruction - these things were home'.¹²⁹

Curiously, despite the abundant evidence to the contrary, most infantrymen felt that no matter how much they suffered, their predecessors on the Western Front had suffered more. In effect, the First World War became a touchstone of horror by which all later experiences were judged. Soldiers were said to be less scared of being afraid than their forebears because they believed that it could never be that bad again.¹³⁰ For that reason, most authors used analogies with the Western Front in an

¹²⁶ IWM 83/36/1, Day, 'We Landed at Nightfall', 19-20; see also Harpur, *Impossible Victory*, 37.

¹²⁷ Ellis, *Cassino*, 285.

¹²⁸ Fred Majdalany, *The Monastery* (London 1945), 51-52.

¹²⁹ Wingfield, *Only Way Out*, 174.

¹³⁰ Holden, *Shell Shock*, 75; Sheffield, 'The Shadow of the Somme', 29-40.

attempt to sum up the dreadfulness of their own experiences. When one soldier in 43rd (Wessex) Division first saw the Normandy battlefield, he was reminded of the impressions he had of the last war, not, significantly, the impressions he would have formed of the fighting in North Africa and Italy in the past four years.¹³¹ Later in the same campaign, a private in the 7th Somersets (also 43rd Division) described the intense German shelling around Hill 112 in July as ‘reminiscent of the 1914-18 War and barrages’¹³²; another infantryman in the same battalion described Hill 112 as a second Verdun.¹³³ An officer serving with the 4th KOSB in 52nd (Lowland) Division – who had already taken part in the arduous clearance of the Scheldt – could think of no better analogy for the month he spent in the line in Germany in December 1944 than ‘trench warfare 1914-1918 style.’¹³⁴

Many soldiers expressed sympathy, implicitly or explicitly, with the generation who fought on the Western Front. As we have seen, mud was as much a feature of this war as it was in the last, yet one soldier, who served with 78th Division in Italy, wrote of his experience at Gesso Ridge that ‘for a little while we touched hands with that generation that floundered and died around Passchendaele’.¹³⁵ Of the carnage at Anzio following the vicious German counter-attack on 18 February 1944, Lieutenant Edward Grace, 6th Gordons, could only write that ‘It was a tragic day, reminiscent of some of the worst days of the First World War’.¹³⁶ Another soldier who glossed over his own experiences and focused instead on 1914-18 was Private W. Evans, ‘B’ Company, 1st Royal Norfolks. On D-Day, his battalion had attempted to advance through a cornfield but was cut to pieces by a German machine gun firing from a small pillbox. Evans, who had gone to ground immediately, found himself face down in a patch of poppies. These reminded him of ‘the hell and horrors of the 1914 war which my father had talked about so often’.¹³⁷ By and large, then, the men of this war did not appreciate that *all* wars are hell for those who have to fight them, especially the PBI, and that each new experience

¹³¹ Lance-Corporal Ron Garner quoted in Sheffield, ‘The Shadow of the Somme’, 36.

¹³² Private D. O’Connell quoted in Delaforce, *Wessex Wyverns*, 82.

¹³³ A. L. Hayman quoted in Neillands, *Battle of Normandy, 1944*, 176.

¹³⁴ Coutts, *One Blue Bonnet*, 75–76.

¹³⁵ Gunner, *Adventures with the Irish Brigade*, 138.

¹³⁶ Grace, *Perilous Road to Rome*, 150.

¹³⁷ Quoted in Lincoln, *Thank God and the Infantry*, 25.

had its own and completely individual level of horror. As we have seen, on many occasions the physical conditions endured by the infantry in the Second War were as bad, if not more so, than those of the Western Front, and, as we discussed in the last chapter, there was very little preparation for the ordeal ahead.

All of this begs the question: to what extent were soldiers radicalised by their experiences in the trenches? Not much would appear to be the answer. From 1944 onwards, as it became increasingly obvious that Germany had lost the war, future prospects – mainly the problems of re-absorption into civilian life and work - became uppermost in men's minds.¹³⁸ In spite of the commotion that the suppression of the Beveridge Report had caused, the optimism it had initially generated had waned over time and expectations remained modest.¹³⁹ Despite the claims of one eminent historian, most soldiers desired nothing more than a return to the status quo.¹⁴⁰ The Army Morale Report for the period May-July 1943 observed that:

Most of them simply want to get back to the home they know and fondly imagine that when they get there everything, without any effort on their own or anyone else's part, will be just as it was before. They are not interested in a 'New Britain', so long as they can get 'security' in the same job as they had before the war.¹⁴¹

When John Sparrow toured Second Army in the spring of 1944, he found that the ordinary BLA soldier was only interested in how the post-war world would affect him. 'He is not interested in politics,' Sparrow observed, 'he is abysmally ignorant of his own country and how it is governed and apathetic when reminded of his own responsibilities as a citizen'.¹⁴² The Morale Report for March-May 1945 was of the same mind, stating that 'Reports from all overseas theatres show that there is, if anything . . . even less interest or constructive thought regarding the major post-war world

¹³⁸ NA WO259/44, Army Morale: paper by Adjutant General, May 1944.

¹³⁹ David Englander and Tony Mason, *The British soldier in World War II* (Coventry c. 1984), 13.

¹⁴⁰ A. J. P. Taylor, for instance, claimed that 'the very spirit of the nation had changed' and that 'no one in 1945 wanted to go back to 1939'. A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914-45* (Oxford 1965), 600.

¹⁴¹ NA WO193/453, War Office Committee Report on Morale in the Army, May-July 1943.

¹⁴² NA WO193/452, Lt.-Col. J. H. A. Sparrow, 'Report on Visit to 21 Army Group and Tour of Second Army, 30 Mar - 5 May 1945'.

problems. In fact, the average soldier's feelings about the United Kingdom and civilisation generally, is not how to rebuild or to improve them but purely and simply to get back to them'.¹⁴³

Few soldiers really believed that things would change.¹⁴⁴ There was a powerful collective sense that the working man, having given his all in 1914-18, had been betrayed when homes fit for heroes had not materialised; that the ruling classes had not kept to their side of the bargain. One of the most disturbing things about his men, an officer in the Welsh Guards found in 1943, was their 'complete distrust of their leaders'.

They are all convinced that they will be forgotten after the war as they were after the last. I have even got to the stage of telling them that the war is worth fighting even if they are completely forgotten afterwards.¹⁴⁵

It is clear that high minded concepts like the Atlantic Charter and international friendship meant precious little to the men in the trenches; and cynicism about future prospects and mistrust of the government were rife.¹⁴⁶ The Morale Report for September-November 1944 commented on the 'Deep seated bitterness, cynicism and mistrust of the Government and politicians generally which prevail in the minds of soldiers serving overseas'.¹⁴⁷ This was reflected in the relatively poor response to the 1945 General Election.¹⁴⁸ According to an estimate by John Sparrow, on a visit to Italy and the Middle East in the summer of 1944, little over 50% of the troops had completed the form to put their names on the electoral register. At least 10% refused to sign point blank.¹⁴⁹ Mass Observation noted that it was not merely inefficient administration at fault; the main reasons were political apathy and cynicism.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴³ NA WO193/456, War Office Morale Committee, Draft Report on the Morale of the Army Overseas, March to May 1945.

¹⁴⁴ WO 163/161, War Office Committee on Morale in the Army - Second Quarterly Report, May to July 1942.

¹⁴⁵ Quoted in Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, 173.

¹⁴⁶ NA WO163/161, War Office Committee on Morale in the Army - Second Quarterly Report, May to July 1942; NA WO163/163, Morale Committee: Draft Report on the Morale of the Army Overseas, September to November 1944.

¹⁴⁷ NA WO163/163, Morale Committee: Draft Report on the Morale of the Army Overseas, September to November 1944.

¹⁴⁸ NA WO32/15772, Lt.-Col. J.H.A. Sparrow, 'Report on Tour of Italy, ME and PAIC, Jun-Sep 44'; Englander and Mason, *The British Soldier*, 14-15.

¹⁴⁹ NA WO32/15772, *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ Englander and Mason, *British Soldier*, 14-15.

For most soldiers the trenches of 1939-45 were not a radicalising experience. Why was this? As well as the belief that the present war was not as bad as the last one, another key reason was that, unlike 1914, there was no eager rush to the colours: 'when they need me, they'll send for me,' seemed to be the attitude.¹⁵¹ The majority considered the war to be an unpleasant but necessary duty, 'a bad job that had to be got through' before they could return to their normal civilian lives.¹⁵² This outlook can largely be credited to the impact of the 1930s when a widespread, albeit shallowly rooted, period of pacifism took hold of the country; as a result, many men took with them into the Army a streak of anti-militarism.¹⁵³ Christopher Bulteel, who would serve as an officer with the 3rd Coldstream Guards in Tunisia and Italy, remembered that as a child his school holidays were filled with tales of the trenches and that, even before he went to school at all, he had been made to march up and down with his siblings to gramophone records of the Coldstream Band. Bulteel found this militarism depressing: 'if I had the nerve, or the maturity, I should have declared myself a pacifist. The tales of carnage made me sick. By this time, I had read Wilfred Owen, and Edward Thomas, and everyone knew what had happened to *them*'.¹⁵⁴ Few recruits had much enthusiasm for soldiering or fighting. Their fathers and uncles, who had fought in the trenches of the Great War, had instilled in them the conviction that the Army would, in all probability, take advantage of them, ignore their needs, and possibly sacrifice their lives needlessly.¹⁵⁵ Unlike the generation that eagerly went to war in 1914, and who eventually became disillusioned by service in the trenches, the soldiers of 1939-45 were largely cynical and disillusioned already and were certainly all too aware of the horrific nature of modern industrialised warfare.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵¹ Quoted in Charles Whiting, *Poor Bloody Infantry: 1939-1945* (Stroud 2007), 11.

¹⁵² Quoted in Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, 172.

¹⁵³ Cochrane, *Charlie Company*, 16-17; Sheffield, 'The Shadow of the Somme', 30; Gary Sheffield, 'Dead Cows and Tigers: some aspects of the experience of the British soldier in Normandy, 1944' in John Buckley (ed.), *The Normandy campaign 1944: sixty years on* (London 2005), 119.

¹⁵⁴ Christopher Bulteel, *Something about a Soldier: the wartime memoirs of Christopher Bulteel M.C.* (Shrewsbury 2000), 7-8.

¹⁵⁵ IWM Department of Documents, 07/23/1, Lieutenant R. W. Holborow, 'My War Years, 1939-1946', 1; David Fraser, *And We Shall Shock Them: the British Army in the Second World War* (Dunton Green 1988), 98.

¹⁵⁶ Englander and Mason, *British Soldier*, 5-6. See also Cochrane, *Charlie Company*, 16-17; Wingfield, *Only Way Out*, 42.

In conclusion, we have examined the infantryman's relationship with his physical environment, both in terms of climate and digging in. We have established that severe weather had a detrimental impact on morale and living conditions; that infantryman more often than not lived in squalid uncomfortable holes in the ground, exposed to the elements, in close proximity to the enemy; and that the fighting was often completely static, sometimes for months at a time. In short, the similarities between 1939-45 and 1914-18 are clear. There were some critical differences – in the primitive trench systems and amount of time spent in the line – that made things a good deal worse. Despite this, the men of 1939-45 saw the First World War as *the* yardstick of horror and frequently used it to measure their own experiences, drawing on folk memories of the earlier conflict to describe their own suffering. In addition, regardless of evidence that static warfare was common in almost every theatre – Kohima, Imphal, Keren, Knightsbridge Box, Stalingrad, Cassino, Anzio, Salerno and Caen, to name a few – most newcomers were completely surprised when they encountered it. This shock gave way to demoralisation, as the true horror of static, trench fighting gradually sank in. Eventually soldiers changed under its influence: their vision narrowed, sinking in on itself, and they grew more and more disconnected from reality. Yet despite all the horror and suffering of the trenches, it did not generate a great deal of political or ideological sentiment; most soldiers simply wanted to get home as soon as possible and return to their normal lives, not build a 'New Britain'. The reason was simple. The generation that went to war in 1914 became profoundly disillusioned by the horror and apparent futility of the trenches; the soldiers of 1939, thanks in no small part to the influence of the latter, were *already* disillusioned and more cynical.

Chapter Three: The Daily Routine

Life in the front line consists of short periods of intense action followed by long periods of uncertain waiting. This is certainly how I found it. Move forward - stop - dig in - wait - what is happening? Who knows? Not us. Move on. Where are we? Where are we going? I haven't a clue!

Gilbert Allnutt, *A Fusilier Remembers Italy*, n. d.¹

We have seen that living conditions at the front sorely tested the morale of soldiers and the discipline of the Army. Taken in isolation, poor weather and filthy, cramped trenches were a serious drain on the infantryman's ability to endure, yet these were not the only pressures of life in the line; another considerable source of stress was the punishing daily routine. At night soldiers took turns on watch, dug and improved trenches, laid and extended minefields and barbed wire, distributed supplies and went out on patrol; by day they stood to, cleaned weapons and themselves, and struggled to sleep amid the clamour of mortars, shells and machine guns. In short, a spell in the line entailed periods of hard manual labour, interspersed with bouts of insufferable tedium and nerve-shredding tension. Not only did this cause physical exhaustion and chronic sleep deprivation, it also lowered morale and made soldiers more susceptible to psychiatric breakdown. It is the purpose of

¹ IWM Department of Documents, 80/46/1, G. Allnutt, 'A Fusilier Remembers Italy', 18.

this chapter to consider to what extent the ordinary day-to-day routine in the trenches affected spirits and combat effectiveness. To this end we will look at specific elements of the daily regimen in static warfare; the impact of the latter on soldiers' morale and efficiency; the link to psychiatric breakdown; and, finally, consider some of the differences between 1914-18 and 1939-45 in terms of army welfare organisation. It should be noted at this point that although combat - especially patrolling - could be a daily occurrence, it will be dealt with in the next chapter.

What constituted a normal day in the frontline in the Second World War? One Black Watch soldier offered the following account of a typical twenty-four hours in the line at Mareth:

Starting at dawn we 'Stand-to' . . . We stand down, sometimes after ½ an hour, sometimes after 1½ hours, but never before it is properly light. Efforts are then made to produce breakfast. . . . After a meal there is the business of shaving. . . . Sleep is next on the agenda; because of our activity throughout each night, there is little chance of any sleep, so daytime hours are used whenever possible. Sentries are always on alert and daylight movement is restricted to essential duties. Officers and NCOs have generally got things to be dealt with, but for many the day's inactivity, cooped up in a slit-trench can be very boring and it is then that the precious letters from home are read over and over again . . . At the end of each day comes the darkness and with it great activity. . . . The first thing is the arrival of the 'B' Echelon transport, including the cooks' trucks with the hot evening meal. . . . Water rations are issued, ammunition stock replenished and once a week the issue of 50 cigarettes . . . It generally takes several hours to get all the stuff out to platoon and section positions, but by midnight the job is done . . . After the administrative work . . . there are other jobs to be done. Perhaps a patrol has to be sent out, slit-trenches and latrines to be dug or improved, mine fields to be extended, more protective wire to be laid, and all the work to be completed before the dawn Stand-to.²

Elsewhere the pattern of life was much the same. During the winter of 1944-45, for instance, the 8th Argylls held a static line in the Apennines; daily life involved a turn on watch followed by a few

² McGregor, *Spirit of Angus*, 68-69.

hours' rest, an hour cleaning mud from a rifle or Bren gun, half an hour boiling a mug of tea on a Tommy cooker, then perhaps another hour or two asleep 'pillowed on a slimy sandbag'. At night at least half the battalion manned forward positions, while the rest were out on patrol or on various work details.³ In Holland, Eric Codling experienced the 'monotonous and uncomfortable' routine of cleaning weapons and protecting the position through short days and long nights. Besides sentry duty, the day was spent on 'menial' tasks and guards; sleep was snatched whenever possible, followed by dusk stand-to and a whole raft of nocturnal activities.⁴ It is evident, then, that although conditions on the ground varied from theatre to theatre, the basic outline of one's day seldom differed.⁵ Broken down into their component parts, the examples above reveal some of the key topics to be addressed in this chapter, beginning with the ritual of stand-to.

Stand-to required every soldier in the line to stand in his assigned position, rifle in hand or immediately nearby, ready for any action on the part of the enemy in the half-light before dawn or dusk (the reason being that most attacks were launched at this time).⁶ To illustrate the effects of this, the 1st Royal Norfolks spent over a month in the frontline in Normandy (6 June - 9 July 1944) in which they stood-to an hour before dark and again an hour before daybreak. Consequently the troops had to be wide awake from 22:30 to 23:30 hours and again from 04:30 to 05:30 hours; by the time they had settled down, no one got more than four-and-a-half hours' sleep per night.⁷ What made matters worse was the fact that, unless they had been out on patrol after dark, the men were not permitted to sleep during the day.⁸ In fact, no matter how busy soldiers were through the night, or how tired they were as a result, stand-to remained compulsory: one Guardsman in Tunisia, for example, spent up to four or five hours per night collecting supplies for his unit, seldom finishing

³ Malcolm, *History of the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders*, 225.

⁴ IWM 88/4/1, Codling, Memoir, 96-97.

⁵ For the routine in Egypt (1940) see Cochrane, *Charlie Company*, 7; for Tunisia see Bryan, *Wool, War and Westminster*, 75-76; for Italy see Elliott, *Esprit de Corps*, 96; for Normandy see Borthwick, *Sans Peur*, 168-169.

⁶ NA WO167/720, 4th Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders, War Diary for April 1940. Trench and Post Standing Orders, Issue One, 29 April 1940; NA WO231/16, El Alamein to Messina: lessons learned by 152 Infantry Brigade during the years of fighting, November 1943, 12.

⁷ For other stand-to routines see NA WO171/1296, 1st Glasgow Highlanders, War Diary for November 1944; NA WO171/1361, 7/9th Royal Scots, War Diary for November 1944.

⁸ Lieutenant Norman Brunning, 1st Royal Norfolks, quoted in Lincoln, *Thank God and the Infantry*, 41.

before 01:00 hours, which left just a few hours of sleep before dawn stand-to at 03:30 hours.⁹ After stand-down at daybreak soldiers washed, shaved, ate and tried to sleep, but with one man from each trench fully alert, usually in two hour stretches (see page 261).¹⁰ Along with these prescribed morning and evening duties, soldiers also stood-to at other times depending on the tactical situation, and in places where the lines were particularly close this could occur on a regular basis.¹¹ A case in point was that of the 2/4th KOYLI in Italy, where, on 23 February 1944, a sudden German artillery concentration at 04:00 hours caused the CO to order the entire battalion to stand-to.¹² Events such as this ensured that those not on duty were frequently disturbed, which made a good night's sleep even more problematic.

In addition to *at least* several hours of stand-to per day, further periods of sentry duty were required in forward areas. The normal degree of readiness in the line, with the exception of stand-to, was one-third alert, which meant that one-third of forward troops were at their post keeping watch. In some positions, one section from each platoon would provide the one-third on duty, in others, such as those situated on forward slopes where no daylight movement was possible, one-third of each section was always on duty.¹³ The actual proportion of troops and time spent on 'stag' as the men called it, varied depending on the season, climate, proximity of the enemy and likelihood of attack. In December 1944, the men of the 4th KOSB spent six of the eighteen hours of darkness per day taking turns on watch, the normal duty being two hours on and four hours off (over and above stand-to). Constant alarms caused by enemy fire, in addition to the 'interminable crackle of the wireless set', meant that there was precious little sleep for those not on duty. Indeed, as was the case elsewhere, the distinction between on and off duty was largely meaningless, as the men

⁹ IWM 82/37/1, Danger, 'Diary of a Guardsman', 40.

¹⁰ Trevelyan, *Fortress*, 19; Whitehouse and Bennett, *Fear is the Foe*, 83.

¹¹ See Ian C. Cameron, *History of the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders, 7th Battalion from El Alamein to Germany* (London 1946), 135; Coutts, *One Blue Bonnet*, 75–76.

¹² NA WO170/1412, 2/4th KOYLI, War Diary for February 1944.

¹³ NA WO231/16, El Alamein to Messina: lessons learned by 152 Infantry Brigade during the years of fighting, November 1943, 12.

sometimes had to stand fully alert for twenty-four hours at a time.¹⁴ Winter necessitated longer and more frequent turns on stag, which invariably took its toll. 'As the nights lengthened,' wrote Sydney Jary, 'the hours of "stag" lengthened too and with them the mental and physical fatigue of the company'.¹⁵

It will come as no surprise that stand-to and stags were never popular. Gilbert Allnutt, 'W' Company, 8th Royal Fusiliers, complained that a night's sleep in the line was impossible. 'What with the dusk "stand to"; a two hour sentry go, [a] patrol and then, the dawn stand to, there are not many hours left for sleeping'.¹⁶ The upshot was a cumulative lack of sleep, which had a noticeable effect on efficiency and morale over time. As a matter of fact, these qualities were often at their lowest ebb when, roused from an uncomfortable sleep in a waterlogged trench, soldiers had to take over as sentry for a few hours.¹⁷ Take, for example, this account from a soldier with the 1/6th Queen's, who had completed his morning stag only to face stand-to a few hours later (note the perilously drowsy sentries):

The Sergeant pulled us to the top of our trenches and kicked our backsides till we were awake. We fought, spinning, to the surface. The light, feeble and grey as it was, smashed into our eyes. We cocked the Bren and leaned on the parapet, dozing. . . . No-one spoke. The only sounds were the sighs and groans of exhaustion and a faint thump as someone fell asleep over the edge of the trench. We dozed on fitfully, half awake, half asleep, vague. Our heads were not parts of our bodies but long, opaque periscopes stretching up from somewhere in the trench. Our shoulders sagged till they seemed to be resting on our thighs. We didn't feel our legs. If we moved them, they answered the brain's message slowly. They weren't part of us, just heavy things vaguely attached to our weary bodies, deadly useless things which somehow prevented our dropping to the bottom of our trenches, where we wanted to be with all our hearts. We hated them.¹⁸

¹⁴ Coutts, *One Blue Bonnet*, 75-76.

¹⁵ Quoted in Delaforce, *Wessex Wyverns*, 219.

¹⁶ IWM 80/46/1, Allnutt, 'A Fusilier Remembers Italy', 23.

¹⁷ For a vivid description see IWM 06/42/1, Redgewell, Memoir, 8.

¹⁸ Wingfield, *Only Way Out*, 109-110.

This passage highlights another scourge of sleep-deprived infantryman: being relieved as sentry only to face dawn stand-to shortly thereafter. The last sentry duty before stand to was viewed ambiguously by those concerned, for although it offered, in theory, a stretch of uninterrupted sleep before taking up one's post, it also meant that the last stag before dawn was, in the words of one private, necessarily 'double time'.¹⁹ The first stag, on the other hand, with its promise of an undisturbed period of sleep, was highly coveted.²⁰

Another factor making these duties unpopular was the acute mental strain. There were three elements to this: having to maintain constant vigilance for long periods of time; the loneliness of isolated section posts; and the tension of waiting for the enemy to attack. In respect of the latter, stand-to was an especially anxious time, as men stood waiting in their trenches, weapons at the ready, peering into the half-light and praying for calm.²¹ At Anzio, according to Raleigh Trevelyan, his platoon did nothing *but* watch and wait. 'Twice a day we expect the attack that never materialises,' he wrote. 'Our weapons are cocked, our eyes strain into the twilight; the slightest gust of wind causes palpitations'.²² Such stress was equally intense during normal sentry duty. One rifleman with the 9th Cameronians complained that time seemed to stand still on stag and that he needed eyes in the back of his head. Because of this he was always on his 'toes, listening for the slightest noise', constantly checking the safety catch on his Bren and double-checking the location of his grenades.²³ The same soldier also described how his imagination played tricks on him, something which numerous writers commented on. One officer, who first experienced the frontline in April 1940, discovered that if he stared at something for long enough in the dark it eventually moved.²⁴ Eric Codling recalled how the trees in one shell-torn orchard quickly came to resemble the spaced out

¹⁹ IWM 06/42/1, Redgewell, Memoir, 1.

²⁰ Wingfield, *Only Way Out*, 151.

²¹ IWM 06/42/1, Redgewell, Memoir, 2.

²² Trevelyan, *Fortress*, 54.

²³ IWM 99/85/1, Gore, 'Reluctant Hero, Reluctant Coward', 10.

²⁴ Second-Lieutenant Diarmid Hall, quoted in Saul David, *Churchill's Sacrifice of the Highland Division, France 1940* (London 2004), 14.

formation of an enemy patrol, even though they had been seen a few hours before in daylight.²⁵ When one takes into account the dual influence of exhaustion and fear, in conjunction with the effect of poor light in unfavourable atmospheric conditions (mist and fog especially), this phenomenon was far from surprising. In many places the terrain did not help either. The Reichswald (a forest in Germany between the Rhine and the Maas and the location of Operation VERITABLE) was particularly bad; sound seemed magnified between the densely packed trees and the dank, eerie atmosphere caused many soldiers to fire at imaginary enemies or flitting 'ghosts'.²⁶

The need to maintain a high level of concentration – in case of raids or patrols – also imposed tremendous strain. An officer with the 7th Argylls, described the claustrophobic fighting in the Orne bridgehead - where the men regularly stood-to for up to three hours a night in anticipation of an attack - as a period of very considerable tension because they had to be constantly on the alert.²⁷ Equally, Fred Majdalany commented sardonically that the only thing he and every other soldier had to look forward to at the end of another day at Cassino was a long night of 'straining alertness'.²⁸ As a result, men were gradually worn down until they became utterly drained.²⁹ Sydney Jary witnessed this process first hand in Holland in late 1944 and vividly described it in his memoirs. In the 'chilly green light of dawn' his men would come in for breakfast

their eyes red with strain after a night's 'stag' duty. Wrapped in their greatcoats with their equipment hanging loosely over their shoulders, they would hold out their mess tins beseechingly for food, never uttering a sound. The scene now seems pathetic to me but, at the time, I was too busy and preoccupied to dwell on it.³⁰

The final stressful element of stags was the sense of loneliness and isolation. S. L. A. Marshall, whose *Men Against Fire* remains a classic account of the behaviour of infantrymen on the battlefield, rightly

²⁵ IWM 88/4/1, Codling, Memoir, 96-97.

²⁶ Delaforce, *Wessex Wyverns*, 218.

²⁷ Cameron, *History of the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders*, 135

²⁸ Majdalany, *Monastery*, 23.

²⁹ Grace, *Perilous Road to Rome*, 141.

³⁰ Jary, *18 Platoon*, 54.

observed that 'Man is a gregarious animal. He wants company. In his hour of greatest danger his herd instinct drives him toward his fellows. It is a source of comfort to him to be close to another man; it makes danger more endurable'.³¹ By the same token, men in remote and thinly held positions felt a great deal less secure and found danger more difficult to bear. During a FGCM held on 29 August 1941, the defending officer cited the fact that the accused, a regular private charged with cowardice, had on many occasions been entirely alone at night, 'I consider that the strain upon his nerves was very great, and that after a period . . . he began to break up'.³² This last point is particularly relevant as, unlike 1914-18, when continuous lines helped reduce the sense of isolation, doctrine from 1940 onwards called for widely dispersed positions and small slit-trenches, which tended to have the opposite effect.³³ Although the intention was to group defenders into strong localities, positioned in depth to prevent them becoming isolated, in practice it did not always work. In many cases the tactical situation and lack of manpower meant that an insufficient number of troops were thinly stretched over wide fronts; consequently, their positions were often dangerously remote. In the Saar in 1940, the section posts of one battalion were so isolated, that the men refused to sleep, in spite of strict orders from their Brigadier.³⁴ In Tunisia the scarcity of roads and deep mud severely restricted the number of troops deployed against the enemy, with the result that a relatively small number of men held very wide frontages.³⁵ This was certainly the case for 78th Division, who spent most of January 1943 defending its sector of the line; according to one historian: '[the] front was both long and sparsely held, units occupying just the main positions with scores of miles between them'.³⁶ It was for this reason, as well as making sure that each sentry was still alert, that officers would visit their section posts at night; those in isolated positions found it reassuring to

³¹ Marshall, *Men Against Fire*, 141.

³² NA WO71/728, FGCM, 29 August 1941. Colley, W. Offence: Cowardice.

³³ See MTP No. 30 (1941); ATM No. 40 (1941), 12; MTP No. 3. *The Defence* (London 1943), 2.

³⁴ NA WO197/40, Saar Force: 10th Infantry Brigade Report on 17 Days Tour in the Hombourg-Budange (Saar) Sector.

³⁵ NTW No. 13 (London 1943), 2.

³⁶ Ford, *Battleaxe Division*, 43.

know that, in the words of Peter Cochrane, referring to his service in the Western Desert in 1940, 'he wasn't the only person on duty in the numbing silence of desert night'.³⁷

Stags and stand-to ultimately sapped soldiers' ability to endure and slowly ground down their combat effectiveness. Primarily they resulted in a chronic shortage of sleep, which seriously impaired physical and mental performance, weakened the determination to carry on, and, in the long run, contributed to the onset of psychiatric breakdown³⁸; alongside this went an often profound sense of loneliness (exacerbated by the trenches of 1939-45), the nerve-jangling tension of waiting for something to happen and the mental exhaustion of having to sustain a high level of concentration. All of this had serious connotations for morale and the Army's fighting efficiency. Diana Butler, in her study of the British soldier in Italy, September 1943 to June 1944, cited the strain imposed by such duties as one of the main causal factors behind the high percentage of infantrymen who succumbed to battle exhaustion. 'It was the infantry who had to bear the brunt of the fighting', she wrote, 'who made the breach in the enemy line and held the exposed outposts. The heavy casualties suffered proportionately increased the strain on the rifleman, who found himself "a sentry more often, with bigger gaps between sections and generally far more lonely"'.³⁹ Many veterans expressed similar sentiments: one Highland Division soldier described stags as an 'unnerving experience'⁴⁰; while Raleigh Trevelyan credited the gradual erosion of his nerves to 'waiting' and the constant nagging feeling that something was 'brewing up'.⁴¹ Lastly, in terms of fighting efficiency, the GOC XIII Corps was not alone in thinking that the strain of holding forward positions made soldiers 'unduly sleepy, lethargic and un-alert', which had a marked influence on the rate of sickness and absenteeism.⁴²

³⁷ Cochrane, *Charlie Company*, 7.

³⁸ See for instance CMAc GC/135/B.1/4, Lt.-Col. T. F. Main, Quarterly report by the Adviser in Psychiatry - 21 Army Group BLA, 1944, 5; NA WO222/218, Morale, discipline and mental fitness, circular to Medical Officers from AMD 11 (n.d.), 5; Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, 216, 226.

³⁹ NA CAB101/224, D. F. Butler, *The British Soldier in Italy, September 1943-June 1944* (London n.d.), 36.

⁴⁰ Diarmid Hall, quoted in David, *Churchill's Sacrifice of the Highland Division*, 14.

⁴¹ Trevelyan, *Fortress*, 54, 214.

⁴² LHCMA, Papers of General Sir Sidney Chevalier Kirkman: Letter to Mark Clark, Commanding General, Fifth US Army, 23 December 1944.

Of course, these duties represented just a fraction of a typical day at the front. In between times, there was an endless succession of tasks dreamt up by the Army to keep soldiers occupied. These included everything from improving and repairing slit-trenches, erecting wire, laying minefields, planning patrols and cleaning weapons, to cutting hair and washing clothes. The duties of 10th Infantry Brigade during their seventeen day tour of duty in the Maginot Line included the following: double sentries on each post by night; single sentries on certain posts by day; patrolling and covering work parties at night; searching woods or villages, wire and dead ground after morning stand down; cleaning their arms and platoon area; work on their posts - sandbagging, digging, wiring and carrying; and, lastly, cleaning themselves.⁴³ When daylight movement was impossible, as was often the case, these jobs had to be carried out at night and completed in time for dawn stand-to. The troops in the frontline were always busiest at night, using the cover of darkness to carry out essential routine maintenance and supply. In contrast, life in reserve positions was slightly less frenetic, as described by H. P. Samwell, stationed near Alamein in October 1942. The day began with stand-to followed by a short sleep. Gradually the men emerged from their trenches and started brewing up and visiting each other, whereupon the morning's tasks began. Water was brought up in cans, men and positions were inspected and all the other routine jobs of an infantry company were carried out. When the mid-day heat became unbearable Samwell's company had their 'siesta' followed by 'light tiffin' and then went off in parties to bathe in the sea.⁴⁴ Sadly this holiday-like routine was not the experience for most infantrymen, nor even indicative of most other reserve positions.

Closer to the front the pattern of daily life was dominated by ceaseless activity. 'Moving, digging, and carrying seemed to fill the hours until stand-to found us cold and weary,' wrote a Highland Division officer of his time in Tunisia.⁴⁵ The same author remembered the background to the

⁴³ NA WO197/40, Saar Force: 10th Infantry Brigade Report on 17 Days Tour in the Hombourg-Budange (Saar) Sector.

⁴⁴ Samwell, *Infantry Officer*, 23-24.

⁴⁵ Borthwick, *Sans Peur*, 84.

Normandy campaign as sleeplessness, exhaustion, and 'hands blistered with digging'.⁴⁶ The latter was, in fact, one of the chief occupations of the infantryman at the front, who, in addition to his own slit-trench, was responsible for digging and improving weapon pits, crawl and communication trenches, HQ dugouts, company positions, latrines and anything else not deemed the responsibility of the Royal Engineers. Consequently, most soldiers spent a high percentage of their time engaged in what must have seemed like an endless round of digging. Even platoon and company officers were not spared: at Anzio, for instance, Raleigh Trevelyan's hands became so blistered by constant digging that he had to wrap handkerchiefs around his palms to ease the pain.⁴⁷ One of the most frustrating aspects of constantly digging in was that as soon as the men had settled in one position, they were often ordered to move, which entailed yet another exhausting sequence of marching and entrenching.⁴⁸ Despite this, experienced soldiers dug in immediately, while those less familiar with combat learned to do so or did not survive long. 'The first thing one did, and I mean the first thing, was to dig in,' declared Brian Harpur, an officer with the 1st Kensingtons in Italy. 'The carving out of a shallow trench . . . to enable one to crouch below ground level meant the difference between being killed by enemy fire or staying alive. It was as simple as that'.⁴⁹

Besides digging, punctuated with a turn on stag, infantrymen also had to go out on patrol (see next chapter), lay mines or escort laying parties, construct wire entanglements, or fetch and distribute ammunition, water and supplies. All of these tasks were, without exception, physically demanding, stressful and often extremely dangerous; one rifleman with 15th (Scottish) Division in Holland, who made regular trips along an exposed road under heavy shellfire to fetch rations, remembered it as

⁴⁶ Borthwick, *Sans Peur*, 189.

⁴⁷ Trevelyan, *Fortress*, 37.

⁴⁸ IWM Department of Documents, 98/3/1, Captain M. Bendix, Memoir, 28; Scannell, *Argument of Kings*, 152.

⁴⁹ Harpur, *Impossible Victory*, 103-104. See also IWM 82/37/1, Danger, 'Diary of a Guardsman', 40; Major Bob Moberley, 2nd Middlesex, quoted in Delaforce, *Marching to the Sound of Gunfire*, 67; Picot, *Accidental Warrior*, 124.



Figure 9: Seaforth Highlanders and RE sappers work side by side preparing positions in front of the Mareth Line (IWM Photo Archive NA1388)

one of the most dangerous of his duties.⁵⁰ Above and beyond the risk and tension involved, the primary adjunct of constant night-time activity – in addition to stags and stand-to - was the difficulty of getting a good night's sleep. 'At night we got what sleep we could,' wrote the MO of the 1st Gordons, 'we didn't get much because of all the jobs to be done. . . . It was not long before we . . . all became very exhausted'.⁵¹ In theory, of course, one could catch up with sleep during the day, but in practice – what with the shells, mortars and general hustle and bustle of the line - this was rarely the case. When Captain Alastair Borthwick, 5th Seaforths, attempted to bed down after a particularly demanding night in Normandy, he found that he was continually interrupted. 'There was always some job to do, or some conference to attend, or a shell to be dodged,' he complained. 'Then it was evening again, with the serenade going full blast'.⁵²

The net result was twofold: first, incessant marching, digging and carrying caused soldiers to be physically exhausted; second, it deprived them of much needed sleep, night after night. A study of American soldiers in Italy in 1944 established that 31% averaged less than four hours sleep per night, while another 54% enjoyed less than six.⁵³ In general, a satisfactory level of performance can be maintained with as little as four hours sleep, with six hours the minimum for *protracted* operations.⁵⁴ Yet even these small amounts of sleep were denied most soldiers. K. R. Drury, a signaller who served at Cassino with the 6th Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, claimed that there was no rest at all during the night and considered himself lucky if he managed as much as one uninterrupted hour during the day.⁵⁵ At Anzio in February 1944, the 5th Grenadier Guards went without sleep for 72 hours during one engagement⁵⁶; while one year later, in north-west Europe, few men in the 4th

⁵⁰ IWM 99/85/1, Gore, 'Reluctant Hero, Reluctant Coward', 9; see also Private W. Evans, 1st Royal Norfolks, quoted in Lincoln, *Thank God and the Infantry*, 40.

⁵¹ IWM PP/MCR/202, Fausset-Farquhar, 139, 357.

⁵² Borthwick, *Sans Peur*, 168-169.

⁵³ Holmes, *Acts of War*, 124.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁵⁵ IWM 99/85/1, Drury, 'One Man's Memories', Part Two, 7.

⁵⁶ NA WO170/1350, 5th Grenadier Guards, War Diary for February 1944.

KOSB totalled as much as seven hours of 'odd attempts' at sleep in one draining ninety-five hour spell in the line.⁵⁷

These examples should be considered fairly representative. While it could be argued that this was par for the course on active service, such fatigue was, nonetheless, a terrible burden. Soldiers were liable to doze off the minute they stopped moving, or, in some cases, even while they were in motion⁵⁸; some men were so exhausted that, in one instance, they slept for twelve hours through a series of barrages which were fired with the gun crews holding their hands against their ears.⁵⁹ Stan Whitehouse, recalling the campaign in Normandy, wrote: 'Our bodies - and minds - desperately cried out for sleep, deep luxurious sleep, away from the ear-splitting, nerve-shattering noise all around us'.⁶⁰ The continual deficit was so bad that many soldiers expressed relief after they had been wounded, now they would at least be able to get a 'decent kip'.⁶¹

All of this had serious consequences for individual soldiers and the army as a whole. The demands of night duties, coupled with the paltry amount of sleep obtained during the day, pushed men to the limits of their endurance and was extremely demoralising. According to a report by the War Office, fatigue was the chief enemy of morale in the frontline. It quoted an officer who commanded a battalion in Sicily and in Italy as saying, 'fatigue lowers morale more than anything the enemy can do'.⁶² Most soldiers agreed. Eric Codling noted a decline in the morale of the 8th Middlesex during the stalemate on Hill 112 and partly attributed it to the hard physical work and lack of sleep.⁶³ The 4th Dorsets (also on Hill 112) suffered a corresponding deterioration and, according to Wally Caines, the routine of holding the line had left him, 'extremely tired, worn out and weary'; so much so that

⁵⁷ White, *With the Jocks*, 166.

⁵⁸ Marcus Cunliffe, *The Royal Irish Fusiliers 1793-1950* (Oxford 1952), 390; John Longfield, 'D' Company, 1/4th KOYLI, quoted in Patrick Delaforce, *The Polar Bears: Monty's left flank: from Normandy to the relief of Holland with the 49th Division* (Stroud 2002), 130-132; Wingfield, *Only Way Out*, 109.

⁵⁹ Philip Brutton, *Ensign in Italy: a story of the Felix factor, the nine lives of a young Welsh Guards officer who fought in Italy with his regiment from the ruins of Cassino to the Alps* (London 1992), 69.

⁶⁰ Whitehouse and Bennett, *Fear is the Foe*, 32.

⁶¹ See for instance Newsum quoted in Delaforce, *Polar Bears*, 35; and Lieutenant Ken Wilson, 1st Royal Norfolks, quoted in Lincoln, *Thank God and the Infantry*, 53.

⁶² NA WO193/453, Morale Committee: papers. War Office Committee on Morale in the Army, November 1943 to January 1944, Mediterranean Theatre – morale in forward areas.

⁶³ IWM 88/4/1, Codling, Memoir, 43.

when heavy rain fell one night and his supposedly waterproof trench began to leak, drenching Caines and his mate to the bone, they paid little notice as they were, 'so washed up, [they] really did not care what happened at that particular time'.⁶⁴ Moreover, physical exhaustion turned most activities into a painfully debilitating ordeal. For instance, when the 4th Wiltshires attempted to consolidate on Mont Pinçon in 1944, many of the troops were so worn out that they fell asleep while digging, falling headlong, pick in hand, into the half-dug trenches, dead to the world.⁶⁵

It is little wonder that fighting efficiency suffered. Fatigue made even light duties an agonising struggle against aching muscles and feet, while sleep loss reduced the level of vigilance, slowed down reaction times, interfered with the ability to think logically, concentrate and remember, and could generate unusual behaviour patterns ranging from deep gloom to wild elation.⁶⁶ Moreover, impairments in these functions became apparent following only brief deficits in sleep time, such as several hours a day over a period of a week or two; while dramatic impairments were noticeable after twenty-four hours of sleep loss, with mental performance falling by 25% for every twenty-four hours without sleep.⁶⁷ Even when morale was sound, warned one War Office circular, most soldiers could only put up with a limited amount of stress, and loss of sleep could not be borne for more than forty-eight hours without loss of efficiency.⁶⁸ When morale was already low the effect was markedly worse. One prominent example was the veteran 50th (Northumbrian) Division, which, by D+10 in Normandy, was exhibiting signs of declining combat effectiveness, partly because the troops were exhausted after many days of unrelieved strain and no sleep. Brigadier James Hargest, a New Zealand Army observer attached to XXX Corps, noted that the Tyne-Tees men wanted to sleep as

⁶⁴ IWM 90/20/1, Caines, 'A Brief Account of the 4th Battalion the Dorsetshire Regiment', 9.

⁶⁵ Ellis, *Sharp End*, 238.

⁶⁶ G. Belenky, N. J. Wesensten, *et al.*, 'Patterns of Performance Degradation and Restoration During Sleep Restriction and Subsequent Recovery: A Sleep Dose-Response Study', *Journal of Sleep Research*, 12:1 (2003), 1–12; D. R. Halsam and P. Abraham, 'Sleep Loss and Military Performance', in G. L. Belenky (ed.), *Contemporary Studies in Combat Psychiatry* (Westport, CT 1987), 167–184; M. Harma, S. Suvanto, *et al.*, 'A Dose-Response Study of Total Sleep Time and the Ability to Maintain Wakefulness', *Journal of Sleep Research*, 7:3 (1998), 167–174; Holmes, *Acts of War*, 124; for first hand evidence see Borthwick, *Sans Peur*, 84; Forman, *To Reason Why*, 84; Grace, *Perilous Road to Rome*, 137.

⁶⁷ Belenky, Wesensten, *et al.*, 'Patterns of Performance Degradation and Restoration', 1–12; L. Rosenthal, T. A. Roehrs, *et al.*, 'Level of Sleepiness and Total Sleep Time Following Various Time in Bed Conditions', *Sleep*, 16:3 (1993), 226–232.

⁶⁸ NA WO222/218, Morale, discipline and mental fitness, circular to Medical Officers from AMD 11. (n.d.), 5.



Figure 10: exhausted troops asleep in a trench after a night battle (IWM Photo Archive NA1326)

soon as they had dug in and concluded that, 'they cannot be alert while in this condition'.⁶⁹ A similar deterioration was observed in his men by the CO of the 2nd Wiltshires in Italy, who complained that 'tired men will seldom do good patrols'.⁷⁰ A primary reason for the decline in fighting efficiency was the fact that, in addition to forcing soldiers to stay awake for long periods, the nightly routine also interfered with the body's natural rhythm, the internal clock which regulated many biochemical, physiological and behavioural processes. Soldiers were often most active when mind and body were at their least effective, between the hours of 03:00 and 06:00, the very time when many infantrymen were usually engaged in patrolling, stags, or stand-to, activities that required alertness, teamwork and decision-making skills.

Most importantly, tiredness was a major precipitating factor in psychiatric breakdown. 'In war,' wrote the psychologist F. C. Bartlett, 'there is perhaps no general condition which is more likely to produce a large crop of nervous and mental disorders than a state of prolonged and great fatigue'.⁷¹ Most units did what they could to ensure that soldiers got as much rest as possible.⁷² In Normandy, Lieutenant-Colonel George Taylor, CO 5th DCLI, emphasised the value of sleep before battle and developed a drill to make certain of this. Taylor was able to minimise the number of psychiatric casualties in his battalion by ordering that such men should not be evacuated beyond 'B' Echelon, where they were treated with sleeping pills by the RMO before being returned to duty.⁷³ Despite such efforts, fatigue remained a major underlying cause of many breakdowns. According to *Army Medical Services*, the bulk of psychiatric casualties among forward troops in North Africa were brought about by physical factors such as fatigue and lack of sleep⁷⁴; while the Adviser in Psychiatry to 21st Army Group listed shortage of sleep as one the 'big stresses' leading to psychiatric

⁶⁹ CAB 106/1060, Brigadier James Hargest, 'Reports from Normandy, 6 June – 10 July 1944', 11.

⁷⁰ NA WO170/189, 2nd Wiltshire Regiment, War Diary for June 1944. Notes on Recent Operations.

⁷¹ Quoted in Holmes, *Acts of War*, 115.

⁷² Copp and McAndrew, *Battle Exhaustion*, 105.

⁷³ Delaforce, *Wessex Wyverns*, 50.

⁷⁴ F. A. E. Crew, *The Army Medical Services. Campaigns, Volume II: Hong-Kong, Malaya, Iceland and Faroes, Libya 1942-1943* (London 1957), 493.

breakdown.⁷⁵ Ordinary footsloggers were all too aware of the relationship between physical fatigue and psychological collapse - Drury, felt that sleep deprivation contributed no end to the state of one's nerves.⁷⁶ In sum, exhaustion was not only harmful to morale, combat effectiveness and the ability to endure, but it also made soldiers more susceptible to psychiatric breakdown. An American neurologist, who treated many psychiatric cases in North Africa in 1943, wrote:

When the average soldier goes into combat he is usually rested, well fed, and able to withstand the normal emotional stresses of combat. As time goes on he becomes increasingly tired and less nourished, and with this decrease in physical well-being there is a corresponding decrease in his ability to cope with emotional stress Thus, physical fatigue operates by lowering the soldier's ability to withstand emotional stress.⁷⁷

All of this had a knock on effect in terms of discipline. Anecdotal evidence suggests that physical fatigue played a significant role in many cases of desertion, absence and SIWs, both directly and indirectly. In some cases soldiers were so worn out by active service that after a while they simply could not carry on. In Italy, one 46th Division infantryman was so fed up one wet night, with the incessant round of moving position and digging in, only to be ordered to move again, that he smashed his hand against a rock with a 2-inch mortar base plate to secure some much needed rest.⁷⁸ In terms of the indirect influence, many soldiers who deserted were suffering from 'bomb happiness' caused, or exacerbated by, physical exhaustion and lack of sleep and were thus unaware of what they were doing at the time of the offence.⁷⁹ According to one survey of 584 military prisoners in Italy in the spring of 1945, just over one-third were diagnosed as psychiatric cases; all of whom had been found guilty of absence or desertion, usually when the unit was in action or when action was imminent. Among them were a number of men who had been previously evacuated or treated in

⁷⁵ CMAC GC/135/B.1/4, Lt-Col T. F. Main, Quarterly report by the Adviser in Psychiatry - 21 Army Group BLA, 1944, 5

⁷⁶ IWM 99/85/1, Drury, 'One Man's Memories Fifty Years on', Part Two, 7.

⁷⁷ F. Hanson, 'The Factor of Fatigue in the Neuroses of Combat', *United States Army Medical Bulletin*, Vol. 9 (1949), 147-150.

⁷⁸ IWM Sound Archive, 16593, T. Chadwick.

⁷⁹ NA CAB101/224, Butler, *The British Soldier in Italy*, 36; NA WO32/15772, War Office Morale Committee: reports. Lt.-Col. J. H. A. Sparrow, 'Report on Tour of Italy, ME and PAIC, Jun-September 1944'.

their unit's transport lines for exhaustion and had returned to duty after treatment.⁸⁰ Psychiatrists in Italy spent much of their time dealing with such disciplinary cases, which they had to examine for signs of mental disorder. The Adviser in Psychiatry, Lieutenant-Colonel J. D. W. Pearce, reported that as many as 5,000 cases had come under review during the final year of the fighting in Italy. The majority were deserters, many of whom had been sentenced by FGCM before psychiatric scrutiny of disciplinary cases became common and were given heavy sentences despite being sick at the time.⁸¹

Of course, there was more to the daily routine than just nerve-shredding tension, physical exhaustion and lack of sleep. As counter-intuitive as it may seem, frontline infantrymen also had to put up with lengthy periods of intense boredom, which could, over time, sap their morale and contribute to a general weariness of spirit. In a diary entry dated 20 October 1943, Major Hardy Parkhurst, 2nd Royal Northumberland Fusiliers, complained about the dichotomy between long periods of abject boredom and moments of sheer terror.

What a queer mixture this military life is? You have long periods of boredom, rest periods so called, in which it is impossible to rest mentally, for you have more time to think of home and all its delights, of your loved ones and their blessed companionship. On top of that, you feel that you may be called at any time to fulfil some task, which is full of danger, suspense, and a strain on the nerves, certainly to an unwarlike person like myself. So you get the double pull! The precious hours do not seem so wasted when you are actively engaged.⁸²

Although tedium has always been a staple ingredient of military service throughout the ages, it was especially bad in static positions, where, in addition to an array of monotonous, repetitive duties, the intensity of battle and the close proximity of the lines ensured that soldiers often spent the day confined in a narrow slit-trench. In the forward positions at Cassino, the men of the 2nd Lancashire Fusiliers often spent all twelve hours of daylight cramped in their sangars. After being awake and

⁸⁰ Copp and McAndrew, *Battle Exhaustion*, 107.

⁸¹ CMAC GC/192/18, Papers of Lt.-Col. J. D. W. Pearce, 'Report by Adviser in Psychiatry', 10; see also Mark Connelly and Walter Miller, 'British Courts Martial in North Africa, 1940-3' *Twentieth Century British History*, 15:3 (2004), 217-242; Hillier, *Long Long Road to Victory*, 142.

⁸² Hardy Parkhurst, *Diary of a Soldier* (Edinburgh, 1993), 54.

alert for most of the night, a good proportion of the day was taken up by sleep, but it was seldom unbroken, leaving many hours of inactivity to contend with. For Fred Majdalany this was one of the worst aspects of life in the frontline. He wrote:

Life had resolved itself into that deadly sameness which is the hardest thing of all to bear in war.

A sustained emptiness of dull repetition, relieved only by spasms of danger, and the dread that goes with it. The same old day after day. The same small dull things happening time after time.⁸³

The insipid nature of daily life had a detrimental impact on morale. The War Diary of the 1/5th Welch Regiment, for example, noted that 'enforced inactivity' in one position in north-west Europe had made it unbearable, this in spite of 'very bad' weather conditions and several cases of exposure.⁸⁴ Even before Raleigh Trevelyan left for Italy he had been warned, presumably by a veteran of 1914-18, that doing nothing was the worst part of trench warfare. Trevelyan discovered the veracity of this during his first three weeks in the Anzio beachhead and confided in his diary that the boredom 'does get you down'.⁸⁵ In the similarly claustrophobic surroundings of Salerno, Bob Day remembered that tempers became frayed as time passed sluggishly; he ascribed this to seeing 'the same scene every day, the same faces, and [eating] the same monotonous food . . . for long periods'.⁸⁶ Undoubtedly the bland, repetitive food did not help any.⁸⁷ John Sparrow, on his tour of Second Army in the spring of 1945, noted widespread grumbling about the monotony of 'M and V' - a stew made from meat and vegetables and a staple of soldiers in both wars - and the scarcity of bread.⁸⁸ The nature of the physical environment also had some bearing; Africa was particularly bad as the usual constraints of army life were compounded by the bleak, monotonous terrain and by an almost complete lack of facilities.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, it was inactivity that was the most trying factor.⁹⁰

⁸³ Majdalany, *Monastery*, 46.

⁸⁴ NA WO171/5287, 1/5th Welch Regiment, War Diary for January 1945.

⁸⁵ Trevelyan, *Fortress*, 20, 54.

⁸⁶ IWM 83/36/1, Day, 'We Landed at Nightfall', 22.

⁸⁷ R. L. Crimp, *The Diary of a Desert Rat* (London 1971), 90; McCallum, *Journey with a Pistol*, 75.

⁸⁸ NA WO193/452, Lt.-Col. J. H. A. Sparrow, 'Report on Visit to 21 Army Group and Tour of Second Army, 30 Mar - 5 May 1945'.

⁸⁹ Crimp, *Diary of a Desert Rat*, 11, 23-24.

⁹⁰ Horsfall, *Wild Geese*, 140.

Soldiers attempted to alleviate the boredom in any way they could – reading, writing, playing cards, sleeping, drinking, even racing insects along the walls of their trench.⁹¹ Such distractions were fleetingly successful at best and periods of boredom would remain a stable facet of day-to-day existence throughout the war. While this in itself did not cause morale to crack, feelings of ennui, added to the pressures of frontline service, certainly contributed to low morale.

Soldiers also had to deal with poor hygiene in the trenches. One of the first things that many writers commented upon was the distinctive smell of the line, usually a combination of refuse and human waste. When Raleigh Trevelyan first moved into 'The Fortress' in March 1944, he described a heavy cloying smell, like fungus, coming from empty tins of bully beef that had been thrown into the bushes. In addition, the previous platoon had been 'none too particular' about the disposal of human 'excreta'.⁹² This was a major problem in positions overlooked by the enemy; soldiers often had little choice but to utilise the bottom of their trench and endure the foul-smelling consequences, or fill a suitable receptacle and toss it into no-man's-land, risking death by a sniper's bullet.⁹³ The former was a particularly humiliating and dispiriting option, as Brian Harpur recalled:

To try and stay alive to sweat it out, to keep up one's courage, to continue to make some contribution to the military operation and its objective while being cooped up in a tiny slit-trench and all the time being literally up to one's ankles in one's own stinking ordure for hours, even days, on end represents a confluence of agonies beyond the comprehension of any normal mortal except that of the infantryman who had to endure them.⁹⁴

Many soldiers found the lack of cleanliness and filthy conditions to be the most demoralising aspect of positional fighting.⁹⁵ Dirty and unpleasant trenches in particular sapped one's will to endure. 'What gets me down in this life is the filth', claimed E. Grey Turner in his diary. 'Filth on one's boots,

⁹¹ IWM Sound Archive, 2744, A. H. McGee; Majdalany, *Monastery*, 47; Samwell, *Infantry Officer*, 158; Trevelyan, *Fortress*, 98.

⁹² Trevelyan, *Fortress*, 17.

⁹³ Bulteel, *Something about a soldier*, 192; Gunner, *Adventures with the Irish Brigade*, 99; Harpur, *Impossible Victory*, 109; Jary, *18 Platoon*, 71; Trevelyan, *Fortress*, 68.

⁹⁴ Harpur, *Impossible Victory*, 109.

⁹⁵ Jary, *18 Platoon*, 70-71.

on one's clothes, on one's hands, on one's face. [A comrade] and I spent the morning digging sodden duckboards out of greasy urine-soaked slimy mud'.⁹⁶ In the forward trenches it was often impossible to wash, shave or change clothing. Only when they were out of the line did soldiers have the opportunity to take off their clothes and have a bath; usually they lived and slept in their grime encrusted battle dress for weeks at a time, with clean underwear only if they could get to a mobile bath unit.⁹⁷ With the dirt came the added discomfort of lice (see chapter five).⁹⁸

Another aspect of battlefield hygiene that impacted upon riflemen was the disposal of the dead. In many places the intensity of combat meant it was impossible to retrieve corpses for burial and so they lay festering between the lines. Over and above the odours mentioned earlier, then, was the nauseating stench of putrefying bodies, both human and animal. In 'The Fortress', a position littered with dead horses, cows, donkeys and humans in various stages of decomposition, John Hiller experienced the 'stinking' smell of death.⁹⁹ Vernon Scannell, who was eighteen when he joined 'The Young Soldiers', the 70th Battalion of the Argylls with his brother, even claimed the smell of the line was the same everywhere, the 'sweet yet pungent odour of cordite, fear and putrescence'¹⁰⁰; Neil McCallum maintained it was high explosive mingled with the smell of human guts.¹⁰¹ The combination of rubbish, human waste and dead bodies inevitably attracted a plague of vermin. On Monte Cairo, K. R. Drury's position was surrounded by decomposing corpses: not only did they smell awful, he complained, but they attracted great quantities of flies and rats.¹⁰² The latter were particularly reviled: the official history of the Northhamptons, whose 5th Battalion served on Monte Cairo, described the area as infested with the pests, who could be heard at night tearing at the

⁹⁶ CMAC GC/96/1, Diary of E. Grey Turner, 11 February 1945, 196.

⁹⁷ IWM 90/20/1, Caines, 'A Brief Account of the 4th Battalion the Dorsetshire Regiment', 67; NA WO171/1364, 6th Royal Scots Fusiliers, War Diary for August 1944; Lincoln, *Thank God and the Infantry*, 147.

⁹⁸ NA WO177/414, ADMS 56 Infantry Div, War Diary for March 1944 and January 1945.

⁹⁹ Hillier, *Long Long Road to Victory*, 134; see also IWM 90/20/1, Caines, 'A Brief Account of the 4th Battalion the Dorsetshire Regiment', 27; Nevil Griffin, 1st Royal Norfolks, quoted in Lincoln, *Thank God and the Infantry*, 42.

¹⁰⁰ Scannell, *Argument of Kings*, 151.

¹⁰¹ McCallum, *Journey with a Pistol*, 116.

¹⁰² IWM 99/85/1, Drury, 'One Man's Memories Fifty Years On', Part Two, 4.

bodies in no-man's-land.¹⁰³ 'The rats were revolting,' wrote one infantryman. 'They were so fat. We knew they gorged on the hundreds of bodies nobody could reach'.¹⁰⁴

The close proximity of the dead was horrible in other ways. Shelling and digging often churned up hastily buried corpses, meaning soldiers regularly confronted not only the recent dead, but older corpses in various stages of decay. This was a notable problem for the Highland Division in Normandy, where, after the gruelling struggle for Caen, it was relegated to holding the line on the very same battlefield it had fought over for the preceding six weeks. In a letter home the Commander Royal Engineers, Lieutenant-Colonel Ralph Carr, talked of a widespread depression, due in no small part to the grisly reminders left behind of the Division's 'fruitless endeavours', namely the sights and smells of the hastily buried dead.¹⁰⁵ Some unlucky men even suffered the gruesome ordeal of finding bodies in the walls of their trench.¹⁰⁶ Equally unsettling was the discovery of old corpses during routine trench digging. On the Franco-Belgian frontier in 1939-40, BEF soldiers constantly unearthed skeletons, equipment and ammunition belonging to the last war. The War Diary of the 4th Camerons, for instance, unceremoniously records the fact that the remains of five British soldiers of 1914-18 – with no ID tags - were dug up near Bailleul in April 1940.¹⁰⁷ As disturbing as such events were, they paled in comparison to uncovering more recent fatalities. Raleigh Trevelyan, who in his relatively short time at Anzio seems to have endured many of the worst aspects of trench warfare, recorded the following in his diary in May 1944:

Recently I was helping to extend [a crawl trench], hacking away with my pick, when I uncovered a black boot which soon showed itself to contain a human foot protruding from an unmarked grave. A sense of sneaking desecration made me hastily shovel earth over the thing. In so doing I dug up another object, much worse, green and slimy.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ Quoted in Ford, *Battleaxe Division*, 147.

¹⁰⁴ Trevelyan, *Rome '44*, 208.

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in Patrick Delaforce, *Monty's Highlanders: 51st Highland Division in the Second World War* (Barnsley 2007), 142.

¹⁰⁶ Jim Bellows, *'When in Doubt, Brew Up': his 12 years as an infantryman* (Bradford on Avon 2002), 145.

¹⁰⁷ NA WO167/720, 4th Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders, War Diary for April 1940.

¹⁰⁸ Trevelyan, *Fortress*, 82.

One can scarcely comprehend the trauma of such an experience, especially in those new to the front, and, to speculate for a moment, events such as this may well have been the catalyst of many psychiatric breakdowns. Certainly it must have removed any illusions about one's personal inviolability; in the words of the old axiom, the dead seemed to cry out to the living: As you are now, so once was I. As I am now, you soon shall be.

There was one final feature of daily life at the front that had a profound impact on the lives of infantrymen; one closely linked to a key difference between the wars, namely the permanence of the lines. We know that more fluid tactics and a sound understanding of the basic principles of fire and movement meant that steady forward progress was made, even if it was torturously slow and necessitated retrenchment after each frantic lunge.¹⁰⁹ This had a marked influence on living conditions: it ensured that most positions (with a few notable exceptions) were transient, rudimentary affairs, with the result that soldiers usually endured severe physical discomfort in the line. This was compounded by the related issue of poor welfare provision, which, for much of the war, was simply not up to scratch.¹¹⁰ This was particularly true in 1939-43 when, for a variety of reasons, the spread of welfare overseas was comparatively slow and late.¹¹¹ Even during the 'Phoney War', few arrangements were made beyond the usual NAAFI services supplemented by the YMCA and the Salvation Army - followed later by some of the other bodies who made up the CVWW - as it had been anticipated that the BEF would be engaged in constant fighting from the start. One journalist noted:

During the whole of the time I was in France, I never met a British soldier . . . who had discovered the whereabouts of . . . [a NAAFI canteen], let alone secured the permission or raised the transport to visit it; just as I never met a British soldier who possessed more than one blanket,

¹⁰⁹ Ellis, *Sharp End*, 36.

¹¹⁰ NA WO277/4, Brigadier M. C. Morgan, *Army Welfare 1939-1945*, 113.

¹¹¹ NA WO277/4, *Ibid.*, 113.

more than a memory of English cigarettes or London newspapers, or the hope of a letter from home written less than six days previously.¹¹²

As long as the troops were stationed just across the English Channel this was not a serious problem; deficiencies were eased by the efforts of Regimental Associations and the speedy arrival of care packages sent out from Britain. When the Army began to operate farther afield, however, the problem became more acute. This was particularly true in Eritrea in 1940 and the Western Desert in 1942, where amenities for the troops were severely limited and NAAFI stocks ran out frequently.¹¹³

Above all it was First Army's campaign in Tunisia that exposed the inadequacies of welfare provision. Early in September 1942, on the eve of the landings, the commander of the British forces declared that 'The First Army will fight hard and live hard. There is an acute shortage of shipping, and there will be no room for luxuries or amenities'.¹¹⁴ This was the basis on which the fighting in Tunisia began. Relatively little was asked for or provided other than the normal NAAFI services. By the closing months of 1942 First Army had, virtually without rest, forced its way to within sight of Tunis and during this time it had been shut off from the outside world and starved of news. There were almost no welfare wireless sets, no newspapers, no books, magazines or literature of any kind and no airmail, while the sea mail was slow and took weeks to arrive and return.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, there were no rest centres, few canteens and, due to long, tenuous lines of communication, even the NAAFI could only operate on a restricted scale.¹¹⁶ All of this was exacerbated by bad winter weather and heavy air attacks on the main base at Bone and elsewhere.¹¹⁷ To illustrate the consequences for the men, by December 1942, the 6th Royal West Kents had been living in holes in the ground for almost a month without proper sleep, existing on emergency rations and had had few chances to even take off their boots. An officer in the battalion recalled that 'The days dragged slowly by

¹¹² A. Gibbs quoted in Ellis, *Sharp End*, 36.

¹¹³ A. J. Barker, *Eritrea 1941* (London 1966), 126; Crimp, *Diary of a Desert Rat*, 13.

¹¹⁴ NA WO277/4, Brigadier M. C. Morgan, *Army Welfare 1939-1945*, 113.

¹¹⁵ NA WO163/161, Morale Committee Report for November 1942-January 1943.

¹¹⁶ NA WO277/4, Morgan, *Welfare*, 113.

¹¹⁷ NA WO277/4, *Ibid.*, 114.

without any mail from home, nothing to read, and no extra rations from the NAAFI; each man had only the daily ration of seven cigarettes and a bar of plain chocolate provided in the boxes of “compo” rations’.¹¹⁸ Nor were such problems limited to the African theatre. In Italy there was a feeling in responsible quarters that, despite improvements, the overall direction of welfare activities lacked co-ordination and, for that reason, the standard of welfare was not as good as it might have been.¹¹⁹ All of this was in stark contrast to the Western Front, where static trench lines permitted the growth of sprawling administrative areas and rest camps in close proximity to the front. Thus infantrymen of 1939-45 endured all the disadvantages of positional trench fighting, such as grim living conditions, nerve-shredding tension, physical exhaustion and sleep deprivation; but missed out on the few advantages: elaborate trench systems and the close proximity of first-rate welfare services.

To conclude, it is clear that the routine in the trenches exacted a high price. The day was structured around stand-to at dawn and dusk, with additional spells of sentry duty thrown in for good measure. Most soldiers spent a good deal of time on watch - in the case of the 4th KOSB cited earlier, it totalled at least eight hours during winter. Besides the obvious consequences for one’s sleeping pattern, these duties inflicted terrible mental strain: firstly, they required a high level of alertness and concentration at all times; secondly, waiting for the enemy to attack engendered a sense of tension and helplessness; and, thirdly, feelings of loneliness and isolation, particularly at night, were common and were greatly intensified by the small, dispersed trenches of 1939-45. When soldiers were not standing-to or on stag, they were most likely engaged in one of a multitude of tasks such as digging or extending trenches, minefields and barbed wire entanglements, or routine resupply and maintenance tasks involving carrying, distribution and more digging. These jobs were physically demanding and often highly dangerous. All together, the routine brought on chronic sleep deprivation and physical tiredness. Such fatigue had a noticeable effect on morale and combat

¹¹⁸ Bryan, *Wool, War and Westminster*, 75.

¹¹⁹ NA WO277/4, Morgan, *Welfare*, 132.

effectiveness: exhaustion caused spirits to dip or fluctuate wildly and led to impaired military performance. Furthermore, it was often the underlying cause of psychiatric breakdown and played a major role in disciplinary offences like desertion, absence and SIWs. At the other end of the spectrum, soldiers also had to contend with periods of interminable boredom, something which sapped their energy, lowered their morale and contributed to a general weariness of spirit. This could be alleviated by a good supply of hot food, mail, cigarettes, alcohol and, perhaps most importantly, 'char'; while a spell out of the line, even a few hundred yards back, proved to be a remarkable tonic. On the other hand, if some of these were in short supply morale could hit rock bottom (we will deal with this and the other more nebulous components of morale in chapter six). Such deficiencies were not unknown since, unlike the highly fixed lines of the Western Front, which allowed for the development of sophisticated rest centres and welfare provision arrangements just behind the front, soldiers of 1939-45 were frequently let down in this regard and had to rely on their own 'customary self-sufficiency and philosophic phlegm'.¹²⁰ In short, the pattern of life, made up as it was of chronic sleep deprivation, heavy manual labour, mental strain and crippling boredom placed a heavy burden on the physical and mental resilience of ordinary soldiers, often pushing them beyond breaking point. At best it was dirty and monotonous; at worst it was utter misery. The old maxim that war comprises protracted periods of boredom and extreme discomfort punctuated by moments of incredible violence and terror was never more fitting. It is to these violent intervals of life below ground that we now turn our attention.

¹²⁰ NA WO277/4, Morgan, *Welfare*, 113.

Chapter Four: Combat in Static Warfare

An offensive attitude must be maintained. Vigorous patrolling and minor offensive operations such as raids and ambushes must be regularly carried out. There should be no “no man’s land”. The ground between our own and the enemy defences must be brought and kept under our control.

War Office Training Pamphlet, 1942.¹

There is no glory in modern war. No bugles blowing and no flags flying. Just little groups of tired men in holes in the ground; trying to stay alive.

J. J. How, *Hill 112*, 1984.²

‘Combat’, according to Samuel A. Stouffer, was ‘the end to which all the manifold activities of the army are orientated, however indirectly’.³ Our thoughts shift, therefore, from the dirt, boredom and fatigue of everyday life in the line, to what was (and still is) the soldier’s ultimate function: to fight. For in spite of the dazzling technological advances of the twentieth century, the humble footslogger remained the *sine qua non* of land combat in 1939-45, just as he had been for thousands of years previously. Given the central role played by ordinary infantrymen, what can we say about their experience on the battlefield? At the risk of stating the obvious, it should be recognised that

¹ NA WO201/2589, War Office Training Pamphlet. Tactical handling of infantry divisions in the Middle East, August 1942, 28.

² J.J. How, *Hill 112: cornerstone of the Normandy campaign* (London 1984), 134.

³ Quoted in Holmes, *Acts of War*, 74.

attitudes and reactions to battle were governed by a variety of internal and external factors – whether it was the soldier’s first action; the state of morale, both individually and as a unit; and the tactical situation, to name a handful - and that, consequently, it could affect men in a host of ways. Furthermore, individual responses were seldom consistent; the soldier who in one engagement fought courageously and carried out his duty, could, in another instance, be convulsed with terror. Despite this complexity, there are many common threads running through reminiscences of battle and it is the aim of this chapter to tease them out. In keeping with the overall theme we will concentrate exclusively on the peculiar style of fighting generated by static warfare and consider the effect on morale and combat effectiveness. We begin with a detailed survey of the most commonly occurring forms of combat in trench fighting – patrols, snipers, artillery bombardments and the assault on fortified positions.

As the foregoing suggests, combat was more than just a succession of large-scale, set piece attacks (these were actually less frequent than one would think); in between times there were lengthy periods on all fronts in which sporadic shelling, mortaring and low-level patrol activity were the norm.⁴ Although battle may have been sporadic, it did not mean that soldiers were allowed to remain idle for long. One way in which the men were kept occupied - in addition to the multitude of tasks discussed in the previous chapter - was patrolling. Indeed, the military authorities viewed the latter as an indispensable tool in maintaining strong morale during periods of static warfare - *MTP* No. 3 (1943), for example, stressed the importance of bold, offensive patrolling, as it cultivated an ‘energetic and mobile attitude of mind’ and prevented the lowering of morale which ‘often occurs when troops are kept inactive within positions’.⁵ Although there may have been some truth in this, it

⁴ Holmes, *Acts of War*, 74. See for instance IWM 92/37/1, Evans, 35; Alastair Borthwick, 5th Seaforths, quoted in Belfield and Essame, *Battle for Normandy*, 118; Bryan, *Wool, War and Westminster*, 75.

⁵ *MTP No. 3. The Defence* (London 1943). See also LHCMA, Penney Papers 13/4: ‘Night Work’, 1 Div Tactical Notes No. 1, 25 February 1944; NA WO170/5033, 2nd Lancashire Fusiliers, War Diary for January 1945.

did, however, mean that bone-tired soldiers had to go out night after night, in foul weather, often for no other reason than to gain 'moral ascendancy' or 'dominate no-man's-land'.⁶

There were three types of patrol: reconnaissance, standing and fighting.⁷ Reconnaissance patrols were normally made up of anything up to half-a-dozen men led by an NCO and were primarily intended to gather information on the whereabouts, disposition and intentions of the opposition.⁸ Since the idea was to see and not be seen, 'recce' patrols tended to avoid contact with the enemy as much as possible (although it was not completely unknown for them to fight for information) and the men would carry minimal arms and equipment to ensure they moved as quietly as possible.⁹ Standing patrols, on the other hand, were static and were designed to provide early warning, additional security or to cover a particular geographical or tactical feature (such as dead ground) and required those involved to stay out for long periods of time.¹⁰ Lastly, a fighting patrol was a group of sufficient size¹¹ and resources to raid or ambush a specific enemy, often with the intention of bringing back a few prisoners, not to hold ground. As such they were akin to the trench raids of the previous war.

Infantrymen had little enthusiasm for any of the above.¹² Indeed, it would be fair to say that they were universally hated by those who carried them out (usually junior officers and other ranks). A major in the Irish Guards claimed that of all the things a soldier had to do to earn his keep, patrolling was unquestionably the nastiest. 'There are men who enjoy a set-piece battle', he wrote, 'many men are quite happy in the line, but everybody hates patrolling'.¹³ At Anzio they were one of the worst

⁶ See for instance IWM 06/126/1, Freeman-Attwood, 'Recollections of War', 55; NA WO231/10, Lessons learned from operations in Tunisia. First Army lessons from Tunisian campaign; NA WO231/16, El Alamein to Messina: lessons learned by 152 Infantry Brigade during the years of fighting, 2; NA WO201/2589, Training: pamphlet, August 1942.

⁷ For a good description of the different types of patrol see Lt. Russell Collins, 16th DLI, quoted in Peter Hart, *The Heat of Battle: the 16th Battalion Durham Light Infantry, the Italian campaign, 1943-1945* (Barnsley 1999), 32; Harpur, *Impossible Victory*, 32-33.

⁸ IWM 98/3/1, Bendix, 29.

⁹ See for instance Bond, *Steady, Old Man!*, 77; Lt. Parnell, 7th Argylls, quoted in Delaforce, *Monty's Highlanders*, 13; Hart, *Heat of Battle*, 32.

¹⁰ NA WO170/1412, 2/4th KOYLI, War Diary for February 1944; Lt. Jim Trousdell, 78th Division, quoted in Richard Doherty, *Clear the Way!: a history of the 38th (Irish) Brigade, 1941-1947* (Blackrock 1993), 211.

¹¹ Usually between a dozen men or a platoon, sometimes up to fifty depending on the target.

¹² Samwell, *Infantry Officer*, 24.

¹³ Fitzgerald, *History of the Irish Guards*, 140.

aspects of life in the forward trenches; Major-General Penney, reported that one corporal was facing a court martial for refusing to go out on patrol, even though he was quite happy to man a slit-trench in the front line.¹⁴

What was it that made them so unpopular? An obvious explanation was that they were a supremely nerve-wracking ordeal. Creeping out into the unknown at night, with the enemy also out on patrol, was a hugely demanding task for all concerned, as a historian of the Rifle Brigade observed:

There was first the problem of finding your way in the dark, of not making a noise, of not showing up against the moon or the skyline, and of distinguishing between bushes and enemy sentries. There was much creeping forward, much stopping to listen, many false alarms. And then, when something was found, there was the further reconnaissance, the little tactical plan, to gain more information or to try and nab a prisoner. On the return there was still a chance of being lost, of meeting an enemy patrol, of stepping on a mine, or of the coughers and stone-kickers giving away the path of the patrol, and then when our lines were reached there was always a chance that some trigger-happy sentry of our own might fire off in the darkness into the patrol.¹⁵

Nor did the tension ever ease. The previously cited Irish Guards officer felt that no amount of experience could reduce the nervous strain of making one's way through the dark, waiting for 'sudden shots'.¹⁶ To make matters worse, just as men's minds played tricks on them during night-time sentry duty, patrolling caused them to dwell on their worst fears and to see things that were not there.¹⁷ 'When you walk out in front of the front line your imagination can play tricks with you,' wrote Geoffrey Picot. 'Is that a face peering through that cluster of leaves? No, it is just more leaves. Is that a machine-gun over there? No, it is a protruding bough. You have to keep going carefully and

¹⁴ LHCMA, Penney Papers 13/4: 'Absentees and Deserters' to HQ VI (US) Corps (British Increment), 2 May 1944.

¹⁵ Robin Hastings, quoted in Arthur Bryant, *Jackets of green: a study of the history, philosophy and character of the Rifle Brigade* (London 1972), 426.

¹⁶ Fitzgerald, *History of the Irish Guards*, 140.

¹⁷ See for instance Gunner, *Adventures with the Irish Brigade*, 152-153.

steadily'.¹⁸ Feelings of loneliness and insecurity were also common in soldiers out on patrol. 'I hated it,' wrote a lieutenant with the 1st Royal Irish Fusiliers. 'I hated the cold and the dark, but above all I hated the loneliness'.¹⁹ Alex Bowlby, 'B' Company, 2nd Rifle Brigade, was prepared for night-blindness, but the isolation came as a great shock, causing him no end of worry. 'Instead of eighty men we were eight,' he wrote in his memoirs. 'And I felt just about ten times less secure'.²⁰ Worst of all was the grim knowledge that anyone wounded on a patrol was often left behind in the mêlée to die or, if they were lucky, to be picked up later.

Soldiers also despised the physical discomfort. Patrols habitually entailed long hours of listening in the dark, often in cramped cover; crawling large distances through freezing mud or snow; and painstakingly negotiating mine strewn paths or roads. Standing patrols, in particular, were, in the words of one 78th Division officer, 'long, cold and often tedious' and regularly called for troops to lay motionless for hours, usually in dreadful conditions, with no way of relieving the tension.²¹ In the winter of 1944-45, one patrol in Holland spent almost twelve hours lying in freezing snow, the men unable to move or talk, in temperatures subsequently reported as more than 30 °F of frost.²² One soldier recalled a similar patrol at Cassino which he spent lying in mud and cold all night, finger nervously locked on the trigger of his rifle, listening for any movement. 'We used to pray for dawn to come,' he wrote, 'so that we could crawl back to our own lines, by then we were so cold and stiff it was difficult to move'.²³

Another reason to explain their unpopularity was fatigue. It was usually after a long, hard day that soldiers were called upon to go out on patrol, often it was shortly after the troops had reached a battle objective; the men involved were sometimes so tired that they would fall asleep at every brief

¹⁸ Picot, *Accidental Warrior*, 78.

¹⁹ Gunner, *Adventures with the Irish Brigade*, 152-153.

²⁰ Alex Bowlby, *The Recollections of Rifleman Bowlby* (London, 1999), 101; see also L/Cpl E. Seaman, 1st Royal Norfolks, quoted in Lincoln, *Thank God and the Infantry*, 147.

²¹ Lt. Jim Trousdell quoted in Doherty, *Clear the Way!*, 211.

²² Lincoln, *Thank God and the Infantry*, 148.

²³ IWM 99/85/1, Drury, 'One Man's Memories Fifty Years On', Part Two, 6.

halt, even though they knew the enemy might be anywhere in the dark around them.²⁴ Nor were patrols infrequent affairs. In Italy, forward companies typically sent out a fighting patrol of about fifteen men every night and soldiers could expect to be involved in such ventures once every nine or ten days; for company officers it was even worse, as they were expected to lead patrols every second night. The majority survived on little more than four hours sleep every twenty-four hours and even that was taken in odd snatches.²⁵ This is not to mention the various other patrols one might be expected to take part in. By way of illustration, during forty days in the line in Italy, one battalion sent out no less than forty fighting patrols to raid or take prisoners, twenty-four reconnaissance patrols to gain intelligence and various security patrols. On temporarily assuming command the battalion's new CO cancelled all scheduled patrols save those intended to give warning of an enemy attack. 'The Company Commanders,' he wrote, 'felt that the men were being driven into the ground by the patrol policy which seems to be that every platoon here has to be on the go . . . all night'.²⁶ Predictably, his instructions were swiftly countermanded by his superior officers. Sadly this was not a one-off example. In all theatres comparable levels of patrol activity were common.²⁷ The result was that soldiers, already tired from the daily pattern of life in the trenches, quickly became utterly exhausted, both physically and mentally. Yet no matter how worn-out they were, they were still expected to go out on patrol, as Brian Harpur recalled:

The awful routine of patrol duty followed by more patrol duty, both by day and by night, continued incessantly. The infantryman . . . was never allowed . . . to have any rest at all. It did not matter a damn how sick or tired he felt, if he had any life left in him and was capable of shoving one leaden foot in front of another at less than one minute intervals he had to take his

²⁴ Harpur, *Impossible Victory*, 32; Bryant, *Jackets of green*, 426.

²⁵ Ellis, *Sharp End*, 55.

²⁶ Copp and McAndrew, *Battle Exhaustion*, 64.

²⁷ Sgt. Fred Hartle, 1st KOSB, quoted in Patrick Delaforce, *Monty's Iron Sides: from the Normandy beaches to Bremen with the 3rd (British) Division* (Stroud 2002), 64-65; Lt. Ken Wilson, 1st Royal Norfolks, quoted in Lincoln, *Thank God and the Infantry*, 53.

turn. It would be difficult to find any more frightening and soul-destroying activity of the individual, than going on patrol, especially at night.²⁸

Troops were particularly scathing of patrols that served no apparent purpose – especially those intended to ‘keep the men up to the mark’ and to give the enemy no rest.²⁹ Often they were sent out for no other reason than the Germans probably had patrols out too. Sydney Jary felt the policy of dominating no-man’s-land with constant fighting patrols was a costly relic of the Great War. When he queried the wisdom of such missions with his company commander, he was met with the standard reply: ‘I quite agree with you, but it all helps to dominate no-man’s land’. Although Jary conceded that there was some validity to this argument, he doubted it was worth the loss of good young officers and NCOs.³⁰ Fighting patrols in particular resulted in a slow but steady haemorrhaging of trained manpower amongst this group – men who played a critical role in binding an infantry battalion together.³¹ In June 1944, the 1st Royal Norfolks suffered numerous casualties as a result of ‘interminable’ patrol activity, thirteen of which were fatal. Among the dead were two company commanders, a captain and a lieutenant.³² In the following month, the 4th Lincolns had two platoon commanders killed in successive nights whilst leading patrols; while at the Sangro bridgehead in Italy the 6th Royal West Kents lost more men in just ten days of patrol work than any other battalion had in the main battle.³³ The disruption such losses caused were disastrous in terms of unit cohesion.

There is much anecdotal evidence to suggest that patrols were not always carried out enthusiastically. In January 1943, one officer in Tunisia observed his men’s eagerness for patrolling waning, as the voluntary system of producing manpower for patrols had to be replaced by what he called the ‘unrelenting roster’.³⁴ Similarly, the War Diary of the 2nd Wiltshires stated that tired men

²⁸ Harpur, *Impossible Victory*, 31-32.

²⁹ Ellis, *Sharp End*, 55.

³⁰ Jary, *18 Platoon*, 72; see also NA WO231/16, El Alamein to Messina: lessons learned by 152 Infantry Brigade during the years of fighting, November 1943, 2.

³¹ See for instance IWM 98/3/1, Bendix, 29.

³² Delaforce, *Monty's Iron Sides*, 73.

³³ Lieutenant John Lappin, 7th Duke of Wellington’s Regiment, quoted in Delaforce, *Polar Bears*, 104-105; Ford, *Battleaxe Division*, 136; Wingfield, *Only Way Out*, 86.

³⁴ LHCMA, Nelson, ‘Always a Grenadier’, 26.

seldom did good patrols.³⁵ All of this did not go unnoticed by the top brass. *NTW* no. 13, published in May 1943, contained a section on the fighting in North Africa, including a rebuke from one divisional commander who claimed that there had been a tendency for patrols to be half-hearted and concluded that a real desire for information needed to be instilled during training.³⁶ Whether the desire for information would ever prevail over the desire for self-preservation is open to debate. What is clear, however, is that, despite the best efforts of the military authorities, many soldiers elected to avoid patrols altogether. If the objective was not readily perceived or accepted, it was a straightforward matter to lie up short so as not to provoke a reaction.³⁷ Some patrols even went to ground as soon as they were out of sight of their own lines, only to return after a plausible interval and report that they had made no contact with the enemy.³⁸ All in all, patrols did little to improve morale. They certainly ensured a constant turnover of key personnel in infantry battalions, which seriously hampered their ability to function as a cohesive military unit.³⁹

But these exhausting, tension filled expeditions into no-man's-land were not the only distinguishing trait of combat in static warfare. Another feature of life in the trenches was the ever-present threat of enemy snipers. In Normandy they proved to be a constant menace; at night they would sneak through the lines, sometimes constructing elaborate hides that were difficult to locate, and would open fire in the morning on unsuspecting Allied soldiers. The preferred targets were officers, who soon learned to make themselves as inconspicuous as possible by wearing signs of rank on their sleeves instead of their shoulders, discarding binoculars, maps and other tell-tale signs of authority

³⁵ NA WO170/1489, 2nd Wiltshire Regiment, War Diary for June 1944. Notes on recent operations.

³⁶ *NTW* No. 13 (London 1943), 9; see also CAB106/1060, Hargest, 'Reports from Normandy, 6 June – 10 July 1944'. Notes General: Morale, 33.

³⁷ IWM Sound Archive 16719, Grey.

³⁸ Dominick Graham and Shelford Bidwell, *Tug of War: the battle for Italy, 1943-1945* (Barnsley 2004), 383; see also Gunner, *Adventures with the Irish Brigade*, 152-153.

³⁹ In the interests of fairness, though, we should perhaps point out that there is also evidence that patrols were not always loathed. In the early days of the Tunisian campaign they were moderately popular as it was possible to keep a little warmer while out on patrol than sitting motionless in a drafty sangar or damp slit-trench (LHCMA, Nelson, 'Always a Grenadier', 24). An officer with the 6th Royal West Kents in Tunisia even claimed they tended to raise spirits as it gave soldiers a feeling of superiority over the enemy (Bryan, *Wool, War and Westminster*, 75). Nevertheless, we should remember that both of these examples sprang from officers of field rank with units freshly arrived at the front. Certainly as time went on there was markedly less enthusiasm for these nocturnal trips into no-man's-land; in fact, for most troops, patrolling was a source of profound misery and low morale.

and carrying rifles like their men in place of revolvers.⁴⁰ Once a sniper's position had been identified, no effort was spared in an attempt to neutralise them.⁴¹ This was especially true in France, where machine guns, mortars, tanks and even artillery were directed at persistent marksmen.

Snipers were detested and feared as much for the strain and discomfort they caused – such as being confined, motionless in a slit-trench all day long - as for the casualties that they inflicted. Corporal G. S. Parkinson, 'D' Company, 5th Seaforths, remembered one trying position in Egypt known as 'sniper valley', where, due to a lack of available cover, he had to share a slit- trench with two comrades. During his three day spell here, the men ate, slept and lived in the trench; they could neither wash nor shave. Parkinson soon developed a healthy respect for the German snipers.

They were expert marksmen and we were forced to keep our heads well down all day long . . . a careless movement was answered by the snip of an automatic rifle fitted with telescopic sights. Nerves became frayed, and even at night one became fearful to move. One chap was so bad that he lay for two days at the bottom of his trench afraid to move and was too fearful to come out for food. He was taken to hospital on the third night and we never saw him again.⁴²

In some ways, snipers were worse than shelling, mortaring and machine gun fire, for unlike the generalised danger these weapons imposed, snipers were a much more personal, selective threat. Soldiers could be inspired to leave the trenches and charge into generalised fire; but it was terrifying to know that as soon as he revealed himself he might be deliberately targeted by a single, concealed marksman.⁴³ This, along with the physical discomfort, made snipers - even one's own - greatly reviled. 'I had little stomach for sniping,' admitted Sydney Jary. 'More often than not, it was a cold and calculated way of killing which achieved no military advantage'.⁴⁴ Rex Wingfield summed things

⁴⁰ NA CAB106/1060, Hargest, 'Reports from Normandy'. Battle Notes on Recent Operations up to D+10, 11; Belfield and Essame, *The Battle for Normandy*, 111; Whitehouse and Bennett, *Fear is the Foe*, 27-28.

⁴¹ Borthwick, *Sans Peur*, 24-26; Major Godfrey Harland, 1/4th KOYLI, quoted in Delaforce, *Marching to the sound of gunfire*, 105-106.

⁴² Quoted in Borthwick, *Sans Peur*, 24-26.

⁴³ Majdalany, *Cassino*, 196.

⁴⁴ Jary, *18 Platoon*, 60.

up even more succinctly: 'We didn't like snipers. Ordinary infantry were doing a job, like us, but snipers were low, nasty, mean fighters'.⁴⁵ Quarter was seldom given to snipers by either side.

Another characteristic of life in the trenches, arguably the most feared, was the all-pervading menace of enemy shelling. Like the last war, artillery was a crucially important weapon on both sides – especially in the European theatre – and was frequently used on a scale that rivalled the gigantic barrages of 1914-18. Troops in static positions could expect to receive at least some attention from the enemy guns, usually in the form of sporadic shelling and mortaring, or, if a local enemy offensive was brewing, a full-scale bombardment. If patrolling caused anxiety, then the guns – traditionally held to be the infantryman's greatest fear – produced terror. Even the fire of their own guns could be a painful and awe inspiring experience. 'All in the same second, every gun on the entire front, opened fire,' wrote Private C. T. Framp, 6th Black Watch, of an Allied barrage at Cassino, 'it was as if the very world itself had suddenly ripped apart'. He continued:

As far to the east and west as we could see ran an unbroken line of flashing white fire. The crashes of hundreds upon hundreds of guns combined to produce a thunder of stupendous dimensions. It was scarcely possible to believe it was the work of men; it seemed it must shake the very stars out of the heavens. I gazed upon the scene with awe, never, in my wildest imaginings, had I thought to see and hear such a mighty unleashing of naked terror.⁴⁶

Such barrages could also have a positive influence, especially among those waiting to attack. Stan Whitehouse witnessed the intense twelve-hundred gun bombardment during Operation VERITABLE in February 1945 and described it as a 'potent morale booster'.⁴⁷ Although artillery seldom managed to completely subdue the enemy, the sight of rippling explosions and the feel of concussions were without doubt a huge morale boost for the men waiting anxiously in the trenches.

⁴⁵ Wingfield, *Only Way Out*, 62.

⁴⁶ IWM 85/18/1, Framp, 'The Littlest Victory', 102.

⁴⁷ Whitehouse and Bennett, *Fear is the Foe*, 144.

Being on the receiving end was an altogether different story. Before we consider this, we need to take care to separate the physical destruction wrought by shelling from the psychological effects. In chapter two, we heard that units in well constructed trenches usually suffered relatively few casualties, even under heavy shellfire. Indeed, one of the benefits of life in a trench was the protection it offered and many writers commented on the surprisingly ineffective nature of artillery fire at breaking down such defences.⁴⁸ Furthermore, like the soldiers on the Western Front a generation earlier, men learned to predict where incoming shells would fall and take necessary precautions. 'One learns quickly,' wrote a newly appointed platoon commander with the 1st KSLI at Anzio. 'For the first few days in the line, your tendency is to duck every time you hear a whistling noise. And then you gradually begin to distinguish something that is coming from something that is going'.⁴⁹ Eventually most veterans were able not only to predict where a shell would land, but also the direction of the blast and shell fragments.⁵⁰ This fostered a complacent attitude at times, with some men treating individual shells as little more than a nuisance. The officer cited above, for instance, became so inured to individual shells that unless they sounded 'right on top' of him, he didn't even bother to duck.⁵¹ The extent to which this was genuine indifference or simply bravado is something that we will discuss later in the chapter. But we should point out that contempt for a single shell was not always the typical response. For many it was just as terrifying as a large-scale barrage.

But combat involved more than dodging the odd shell and while some veterans may have commented on the ineffectiveness of artillery at producing casualties, none denied its crippling psychological impact. The noise alone could have a severe effect on one's psychological well-being, as it frequently resulted in mental trauma and chronic fatigue, the concomitant being a marked

⁴⁸ Patrick Delaforce, *Monty's Northern Legions: 50th Northumbrian and 15th Scottish divisions at war, 1939-1945* (Stroud 2004), 118; Holmes, *Acts of War*, 171-172.

⁴⁹ IWM Department of Documents, 97/7/1, W. H. Mitchell, 'Wartime Letters from Abroad, 1942-1944', letter dated 14 May 1944; see also IWM Department of Documents, 87/23/1, J. F. Amsden, 'Cuidich 'N Righ', 14.

⁵⁰ IWM 82/37/1, Danger, 'Diary of a Guardsman', 46; Bulteel, *Something about a Soldier*, 109, 192.

⁵¹ IWM97/7/1, Mitchell, 'Wartime Letters', letter dated 14 May 1944.

disintegration of reasoning skills.⁵² One 4th Division infantryman recalled the distress caused by the sound of incoming projectiles: 'I don't think any war screams ever uttered by the most savage and blood-thirsty of warriors in the entire history of warfare, could have even near the same capacity to strike such instant terror into the hearts of men, as does the sudden ear-splitting shriek of shells by the mass, as they hurtle unstoppably to earth amongst you'.⁵³ Even for experienced soldiers it often seemed like stray shells were inexorably bound for their trench or dugout. Geoffrey Picot recalled an occasion when he heard the telltale swish of a shell approaching his position, growing progressively louder and more violent, seemingly headed straight for his mortar pit. 'One's heart panicked and one's knees shook,' he wrote. "'No, don't let it land near me,'" one appealed to an Omnipotent Being'. The first shell burst with a, 'wicked, terrifying crack,' throwing out white-hot, shards of metal for a distance of up to one hundred yards. The bombardment continued for approximately fifteen minutes, with a shell landing every few seconds. 'The human heart suffered palpitations over and over again'.⁵⁴ Statistically, the chances of a direct hit on one's slit-trench were low, but this was small comfort as, in the words of one corporal, 'each shell [came] screeching over with the distinct message that it is for *you* - and you alone. Sometimes, of course, a shell does hit a trench, leaving little trace of its occupants, the only thing then to do is to fill the hole in'.⁵⁵

A closely related factor was the excruciating interval between a distant gun firing and the arrival of the shell, during which time its screech intensified, forcing soldiers to brace themselves for impact.⁵⁶ 'Although this did give you time to take cover,' recalled one Grenadier Guardsman, 'the few seconds wondering where the shell was going to land was very nerve wracking. It was even worse when the enemy was firing on a regular schedule, perhaps one shell every two minutes. This was called

⁵² Chris McNab and Hunter Keeter, *Tools of Violence: Guns, Tanks and Dirty Bombs* (Oxford 2008), 134; see also Arthur V. Looker, *In at the Deep End* (Durham 1999), 31.

⁵³ IWM 85/18/1, Framp, 'The Littlest Victory', 102. See also Vernon Scannell quoted in Holden, *Shell Shock*, 75-76; Whitehouse and Bennett, *Fear is the Foe*, 30.

⁵⁴ Picot, *Accidental Warrior*, 253.

⁵⁵ IWM 92/37/1, Evans, 174-175.

⁵⁶ Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, 27.

harassing fire, and it certainly was'.⁵⁷ Equally unbearable was when one had little or no warning of an incoming shell, such as was the case with the German 88 millimetre gun, which, due to its high muzzle velocity, gave soldiers almost no advance warning. The most one heard was two bangs in extremely quick succession, the second of which was the shell exploding in one's midst.⁵⁸ 'When the shells were . . . definitely "yours",' recalled C. T. Framp, 'you had two, possibly three seconds . . . to hit the ground. For experienced soldiers, this was barely sufficient, for the inexperienced, it wasn't enough'.⁵⁹

Another terrible aspect of shelling was the horrendous consequences of shells bursting in trees. Most casualties from artillery fire, in Europe at least, were caused by shells exploding in tree-tops and scattering razor sharp fragments of shell casing and wood over a large area.⁶⁰ To combat this, soldiers added as much overhead cover to trenches as possible, usually planks or doors, even earth filled wardrobes, anything, to protect them from deadly splinters. When they were unable to do so, they suffered heavy casualties. The experience of one infantry battalion in the Reichswald was typical. In the dense forest, enemy shells continually exploded in the trees overhead, so that slit-trenches gave little protection. 'In the morning,' wrote one officer, 'a tall tree at the head of my slit-trench was standing only 3 feet high and most of my platoon was dead or wounded. Without doubt, it was the worst night of my life'.⁶¹ When the 1st Gordons were pulled out of the line near the River Orne, what the troops appreciated most about their rest area was the absence of trees. 'Everybody hates them as H.E. explodes when it hits a tree,' one officer wrote in his diary, 'which causes more casualties than when it bursts on the ground'.⁶² When shells struck bare rock, it was just as lethal.

⁵⁷ IWM 82/37/1, Danger, 'Diary of a Guardsman', 46.

⁵⁸ IWM 82/37/1, Ibid., 59; Max Hastings, *Overlord: D-Day and the battle for Normandy* (London 1989), 223; Looker, *In at the Deep End*, 31; Wingfield, *Only Way Out*, 27.

⁵⁹ IWM 85/18/1, Framp, 'The Littlest Victory', 131.

⁶⁰ See for instance CRO No. 71, 'Battle Impressions of a Rifle Platoon Commander' (London 1945), 1-2; Pte. T. J. Renouf, 1st Tyneside Scottish, quoted in Baverstock, *Breaking the Panzers*, 85-86; Charles Bedford, 1st Manchesters, quoted in Neillands, *Battle of Normandy*, 216.

⁶¹ IWM 87/23/1, Amsden, 'Cuidich 'N Righ', 21.

⁶² Martin Lindsay, *So Few Got Through: the personal diary of Lieut-Col. Martin Lindsay, D. S. O., M. P., who served with the Gordon Highlanders in the 51st Highland division from July, 1944, to May, 1945* (London 1946), 13; see also NA WO291/1327, Lt.-Col. L. J. Hudleston, No. 1 Operational Research Section, 'Bombardment to break morale', 14 February 1944.

This was most notably the case in Tunisia and Italy, where explosions routinely generated hundreds of jagged bits of stone every bit as deadly as flying shell fragments. K. R. Drury experienced this on the slopes of Monte Cairo, where his platoon held a line of stone sangars. 'The earth would shudder, bits of the shelter would be blown away and you would be able to hear hundreds of razor sharp bits of metal and stone flying about'.⁶³

But the worst aspect of shelling was the mental strain it inflicted. While we do not want to say too much on this subject, as it will be covered extensively in the next chapter, we should recognise the fact that 'shell shock' was as much a feature of the Second World War as it was of 1914-18, albeit renamed 'battle exhaustion' by the Army (the ordinary soldier went 'bomb happy'). This nebulous term reflected the fact that psychological breakdown in war could be the result of a variety of factors. The former expression does, however, convey the essential truth of the matter: that prolonged industrial-scale bombardments could completely overwhelm the mental stability of those who suffered them.⁶⁴ In a letter dated 3 June 1943, an officer with the 2nd Scots Guards in Tunisia wrote:

How I hate shells! I have seen strong, courageous men reduced to whimpering wrecks, crying like children. . . . And when one has nothing to do, the fumes and dust and echoed cries of 'stretcher-bearer' strain ones nerves almost to breaking point. Yet if one goes to ground how incredibly hard it is to get out into the open again to do a job of work! I would sooner have a thousand bullets or even dive bombers than a day's shelling.⁶⁵

An American survey – indicative of the British experience – revealed that breakdown among combat troops was often the result of genuine shell shock and that out of one sample of 115 successive patients no less than 105 of them were suffering from a type of severe anxiety caused by proximity

⁶³ IWM 99/85/1, Drury, 'One Man's Memories Fifty Years On', Part Two, 5; see also Rifleman Henry Taylor, 7th Rifle Brigade, quoted in Lee, *Up Close and Personal*, 206-207.

⁶⁴ McNab and Keeter, *Tools of Violence*, 135.

⁶⁵ IWM Department of Documents, 67/258/1, A. J. A. Weir, letter dated 3 June 1943.

to large explosions.⁶⁶ Many British authors observed this phenomenon. After one devastating bombardment in the Salerno beachhead, Norman Wray recalled a soldier in the neighbouring platoon who began muttering to himself and shouting ‘tinkle, tinkle, tinkle’, apparently imitating the sound of falling tiles in a ‘strange nursery rhyme tone’. As he was sent back for treatment, Wray recalled the haunted distant look in his eyes.⁶⁷

Above all it was the disempowering character of artillery fire that made it so traumatic. Many writers described the sense of impotence they felt during a bombardment - of feeling like a rat caught in a trap and that one’s life was in the hands of a remorseless, distant machine.⁶⁸ Vernon Scannell wrote:

The fury of artillery is a cold, mechanical fury but its intent is personal. When you are under fire you are the sole target. All of that shrieking, whining venom is directed at you and no one else. You hunch in your hole in the ground, reduce yourself into as small a thing as you can become, and you harden your muscles in a pitiful attempt at defying the jagged, burning teeth of the shrapnel. Involuntarily you curl up into the foetal position except that your hands go down to protect your genitalia.⁶⁹

Artillery was universally loathed, then, because there was nothing individual riflemen could do save cower in a slit-trench. The paradox was that this response, in addition to keeping one reasonably safe, also greatly heightened the sense of powerlessness and vulnerability. The restrictions on movement and vision imposed by the trenches, in conjunction with soldiers’ helplessness against shell fire, hindered the ‘flight or fight instinct’, and greatly amplified the level of stress experienced in danger. Recent psychological research supports this point: Stanley Rachman, a psychologist and Professor at the University of British Columbia, argued that there is a connection between our ability

⁶⁶ Ellis, *Sharp End*, 70; see also NA WO170/1429, 1st loyal Regiment (North Lancashire), War Diary for January 1944.

⁶⁷ IWM 99/85/1, Wray, ‘Infantry Man! Why Me?’, 91.

⁶⁸ McNab and Keeter, *Tools of Violence*, 134.

⁶⁹ Scannell, *Argument of Kings*, 165.

to control potentially threatening situations and the experience of fear. 'In face of threats, if a person feels unable to control the probable outcome, he or she is likely to experience fear'.⁷⁰

It is little wonder that many infantrymen preferred going forward in an attack, where they could (hopefully) see the enemy and use their weapons against him, to sitting passively in a slit-trench, straining to hear the sound of an incoming shell and hoping it did not have their name on it. The inability to respond in any meaningful way was something many veterans touched upon. One 53rd (Welsh) Division infantryman recalled cringing in his trench, listening to the screech and crack of the shells overhead during a heavy bombardment in the Reichswald. When the shelling abated for a while he and his comrades popped their heads up to see what was going on. 'We would dearly have loved to be able to see and shoot at an enemy. Anything to dispel the feeling of sheer helplessness one gets when under such shell and mortar fire, but Jerry was too well hidden'.⁷¹ Another soldier, recalling the ferocious German shelling at Mount Siela in Italy, described the inner turmoil of those suffering a bombardment in static positions: 'We just sat in the bottom of the slit-trench and waited . . . It was just going through your mind, "When am I going to get out of this, is the next one going to come down here?"'.⁷²

Another paradox was that, no matter how dreadful it was inertly enduring a barrage, being caught in the open was infinitely worse. When this happened a man's world was reduced to the little patch of ground he occupied. If the barrage lasted for more than a few minutes – and under such circumstances it felt like hours – it shrank even further. 'Deeper and deeper, a man withdraws into himself,' C. T. Framp recalled, 'until all that exists of him is a pounding heart, gripped in a fist of terror and protected by, just nothing. . . . Nothing else exists in the whole, wide world but it and the heaving, howling, exploding hell of flying earth and steel, raging over and all around it'.⁷³ The effects of shellfire on unprotected men could be utterly shocking. During the fighting near the River

⁷⁰ Quoted in Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, 29.

⁷¹ IWM 92/37/1, Evans, Memoir, 107.

⁷² Hart, *Heat of Battle*, 99.

⁷³ IWM 85/18/1, Framp, 'The Littlest Victory', 131; see also IWM 83/36/1, Day, 'We Landed at Nightfall', 32.

Garigliano a shell exploded in close proximity to David Cole. In a split second everything became silent and dark; Cole recalled the sensation of floating gently in the air, then landing in slow-motion, all the while feeling nothing. He had heard no explosion, nor seen a flash. Reluctantly he opened his eyes and found himself sprawled on the ground.

I slowly passed a hand over my body. On my haversack and map case I encountered lumps of what seemed like suet pudding. Below my knees my battledress was soaked with blood. God, I've lost a leg, I thought. I felt on and found my boots. I moved my legs. I breathed. Acrid fumes entered my throat. Any sounds I could hear seemed to be miles away. My eyes opened. . . . In the dim light I found myself cast like refuse amongst a heap of mangled bodies. In the eddying smoke of the exploded shell I saw men reeling away, nursing wounded arms or legs. In the middle was a pile of shattered corpses. Besides me [a comrade] to whom I had just been talking, lay in pieces. Part of somebody's brains was attached to my haversack. Half of another indistinguishable body lay at my feet, oozing intestines. Its blood had been squirted over my legs. On my left side was a boot with a foot in it and some other miscellaneous bloody objects. I felt no nausea. I felt nothing at all. I was in a state of deep shock.⁷⁴

Here is another reason to explain why artillery was so frightening: the injuries it inflicted were usually terrible. Most men, in fact, feared mutilation more than death, and wounds to the stomach, genitalia, jaws and eyes were particularly dreaded.⁷⁵

Another weapon that was greatly feared and despised was the mortar. This was because, unlike the flat trajectory of normal artillery shells, mortar rounds had a high angle of flight which meant they could drop directly into the trenches, making them effective against deep dugouts as well as flesh and bone. 'I never did like mortar shelling because they came straight down', remembered one soldier who fought in Italy with 46th Division. 'You can be in a slit-trench but it can drop right in with you, whereas a shell at least comes down at an angle'.⁷⁶ Moreover, due to their slow flight, such

⁷⁴ Cole, *Rough Road to Rome*, 146-147.

⁷⁵ IWM 92/37/1, Evans, *Memoir*, 107.

⁷⁶ L/Cpl. William Virr, 16th DLI, quoted in Hart, *Heat of Battle*, 78.

rounds were often completely inaudible, meaning a mortar 'stonk' could descend suddenly and without warning in the middle of one's position, shredding the nerves of those stuck helplessly in the trenches.⁷⁷ Most of all, men hated the *Nebelwerfer*, the multi-barrelled projector whose bombs were fitted with a fiendishly conceived siren, causing them to wail as they flew through the air, which had an effect often worse than their actual explosive power. Fred Majdalany, who suffered many such bombardments at Cassino, attempted to describe the sound:

The *Nebelwerfers* . . . [were] as horrific as their name: a typically Germanic terror machine. The barrels discharge their huge rockets one at a time with a sound that is hard to put into words. It is like someone sitting violently on the bass notes of a piano, accompanied by the grating squeak of a diamond on glass. Then the clusters of canisters sail through the air with a fluttering chromatic whine, like jet-propelled Valkyries. Only the Germans could have devised such a machine. But, give them their due, few men could truthfully say they weren't terrified when the 'Nebs' opened up.⁷⁸

Like artillery, the sound of these weapons had a tremendous psychological effect.⁷⁹ For Brian Harpur the howl of the *Nebelwerfers* was the most unnerving noise he had ever heard: 'It made the blood go cold and the hair on the back of the neck bristle with apprehension. At night when one was already sick with anxiety and up-tight with just plain terror, the addition of this awful sound and the menace behind it was paralysing'.⁸⁰ The effect was undoubtedly exacerbated by the fact that the projectiles could take between 60 and 90 seconds to arrive on target. Initially the six rounds made a curious wurr-ra, wurr-ra noise in flight, as they neared their destination the sound changed to a howling roar. The build up of fear in the minds of the men on the receiving end could be catastrophic.⁸¹ In June 1944, Alex Bowlby's unit came under *Nebelwerfer* fire near the village of Cantalupo in Italy. Bowlby threw himself into the nearest trench and held his breath, as the awful

⁷⁷ Hastings, *Overlord*, 222; see also Bowlby, *Recollections*, 31; IWM 92/37/1, Evans, *Memoir*, 61; Lindsay, *So Few Got Through*, 247.

⁷⁸ Majdalany, *Monastery*, 105.

⁷⁹ Lindsay, *So Few Got Through*, 26.

⁸⁰ Harpur, *Impossible Victory*, 57.

⁸¹ Alex Bowlby, *Countdown to Cassino: the Battle of Mignano Gap, 1943* (London 1995), 34; see for instance, Robert Woollcombe, *Lion Rampant* (Edinburgh 1994), 87

moan grew louder he had time to notice the 'exact growth' of his fear. He recalled that it had begun in his calves, welled up through his loins and stomach, before finally settling in his throat. 'As the moan changed to a deafening roar I think I screamed,' he wrote. 'A series of explosions shook the ground. Part of my parapet fell in. I let it lie on me. Bathed in sweat from head to toe I stared at the holes my fingers had clawed in the clay'.⁸²

An added strain on the nerves was friendly fire, especially indirect artillery fire. Problems such as worn barrels, faulty fuses, miscalculations on the gun position, incorrect grid references, and, perhaps most deadly of all, the deliberate engagement of a friendly position not recognised as such, resulted in numerous blue-on-blue incidents.⁸³ To be shelled by one's own guns was a profoundly demoralising experience, as Rex Wingfield recalled of one such incident in Holland in 1944:

Our nerve went completely to be shelled by our own people. We quivered and moaned, shouted and screamed at the shrapnel: "---- off! You stupid bastards! It's us!" The shelling grew heavier, more accurate. The shouting grew. "For God's sake, leave us alone!" We bounced and heaved with the earth's convulsions. We felt ourselves going. "Please God! Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!" Now all pretence was gone. We sobbed, we cried. Then the storm broke as reaction set in. We ranted and raved, we shouted and cursed the stupid bastards who had given the wrong map-reference. We soon quietened down and the normal process set in - fear - naked, stark, bloody funk! A counter-attack within the next hour would have been a complete success. There would have been no resistance.⁸⁴

In Italy, where artillery played a vital role in softening up the enemy prior to an assault, such casualties were often heavy, notably where frontline troops became intermingled with those of the enemy in street fighting. In one incident of this type, the men of the 2nd Rifle Brigade were shelled by British 25-pounders as they formed up for the attack on Tossignano on the night of 12/13

⁸² Bowlby, *Recollections*, 57; see also Whitehouse and Bennett, *Fear is the Foe*, 164.

⁸³ NA WO171/1361, 7/9th Royal Scots, War Diary for November 1944; NA WO171/1364, 6th Royal Scots Fusiliers, War Diary for June 1944; NA WO170/1489, 2nd Wiltshire Regiment, War Diary for January 1944; Capt. F. W. 'Tim' Marten, 2nd Rifle Brigade, quoted in Lee, *Up Close and Personal*, 134-135, 141, 157; Lt. Norman Brunning quoted in Lincoln, *Thank God and the Infantry*, 46.

⁸⁴ Wingfield, *Only Way Out*, 63.

December 1944, causing twenty casualties. On the following day this unlucky battalion sustained yet more losses, this time due to supporting shells falling short. The diary of R. L. Crimp, HQ Section, recorded the fact that 'Corporal Furze, with one or two others, was whacked in the opening assault . . . they say our creeping barrage got him. It wasn't creeping fast enough and when it was lifted 400 yards forward it was too far forward to give much help'.⁸⁵

It was not just indirect artillery fire at fault. Many such incidents occurred when sentries fired on comrades or friendly strangers. This was often the case when a returning patrol crossed through the lines of another unit; exhausted, jumpy soldiers on stag would often fire first and ask questions later.⁸⁶ Lieutenant Eddie Hastings, 1st Royal Norfolks, recalled the danger posed by such trigger happy men: 'nice people but anything but helpful to the patrol ahead of them!'⁸⁷ John Horsfall wrote sadly of a platoon commander killed in this way in Tunisia: 'It was a hazard inseparable from war and only hard experience taught us how to avoid such things'.⁸⁸ Nor was it unknown for patrols to stumble upon one another in the dark, opening fire in the confusion, resulting in numerous casualties.⁸⁹ The December 1943 War Diary of the 7th Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, even noted a number of casualties in 'B' Company as a result of British machine-guns.⁹⁰

The greatest offender was air power. In almost every theatre, British troops were mistakenly attacked by friendly aircraft. In November 1941, during the Crusader battles, the 1st Essex Regiment was hit by bombs meant for the position they were attacking, resulting in forty casualties. Throughout the fighting at Cassino there were numerous errors. During the third battle, one flight of bombers dropped their load some ten miles away from the intended target, destroying the Eighth Army's commander's caravan, some of 4th Indian Division's 'B' Echelon and a Moroccan military hospital, causing over 150 casualties. The worst blunders occurred in the first few months of fighting

⁸⁵ Lee, *Up Close and Personal*, 191; see also NA WO169/10245, 2/4th KOYLI, War Diary for September and October 1943; Lincoln, *Thank God and the Infantry*, 117-118.

⁸⁶ NA WO171/1384, 2nd Royal Ulster Rifles, War Diary for November 1944.

⁸⁷ Lincoln, *Thank God and the Infantry*, 142; see also Trevelyan, *Fortress*, 36.

⁸⁸ Holmes, *Acts of War*, p. 189.

⁸⁹ NA WO171/1384, 2nd Royal Ulster Rifles, War Diary for August 1944.

⁹⁰ NA WO169/10278, 7th Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, War Diary for December 1943.

in Normandy where, on 7 August, the Eighth US Air Force dropped several bomb loads on the Highland Division, killing 60 men and wounding a further 300.⁹¹ Nor were bombers the only culprit; the record of fighters was scarcely any better. When the beleaguered defenders of Pavée, the 1st Royal Norfolks, saw several US Thunderbolts swooping out of the sky they thought that help was on the way from an unexpected quarter. 'Good old Yanks! They circled and then swept down, spraying us with machine gun fire,' remembered Captain R. W. Hodd, OC HQ Company. When the Norfolks recovered from their surprise they frantically displayed the ground/air recognition signal – a patch of luminous yellow and green fabric triangles. The Thunderbolts returned and this time treated the battalion to bursts of cannon fire, then 'thankfully they disappeared presumably to report to base how they had beaten up a bunch of krauts'.⁹²

This relatively harmless encounter with Allied fighters was atypical. A more representative account is provided by a corporal in 43rd (Wessex) Division, who took part in the bloody assault of the village of Maltot. In the confusion, a squadron of rocket-firing RAF Typhoons dropped out of the sun and began firing on the 4th Dorsets. 'The field seemed to rise up in flames [and] there was a great noise of rending metal,' recalled the twenty year old NCO.

Rooted to the spot, we gazed upwards as another plane dived; we saw the wings shudder as the rockets were released. Explosions tore at the tortured earth. We hung on with our bare hands clutching the soil. My comrade at my side had become a mass of gory rags. In front of me was the company despatch-rider, with no legs. A man came running out of the dust and smoke, total bewilderment on his face.⁹³

Such incidents, in addition to other forms of friendly fire, had an effect out of all proportion to the casualties they inflicted or the damage they caused. They seriously weakened the morale of troops

⁹¹ Ellis, *Sharp End*, 71-72.

⁹² Lincoln, *Thank God and the Infantry*, 71; see also Ron Ludgater, 1st Manchesters, quoted in Neillands, *Battle of Normandy*, 377.

⁹³ How, *Hill 112*, 172-173.

who were already at full stretch coping with life in the trenches and a determined enemy.⁹⁴ One psychiatrist, faced with the sudden arrival of numerous cases from a single unit, found that nearly all of them complained of being caught in their own barrage. It was, he later wrote, 'peculiarly demoralising to be shelled or bombed by one's own side'.⁹⁵ Major-General Penney declared that there was nothing more 'disconcerting or demoralising to our infantry than to know *or believe* that they have been shelled by their own artillery'.⁹⁶

As powerful as such stories were, we would do well to remember that combat in the Second World War involved more than just shelling, mortaring, patrols and occasional friendly fire. The fundamental objective of the Allies was to attack the enemy and destroy his forces in the field. Combat, therefore, was generally a matter of attack versus defence; of infantry advancing across more or less open ground under a hail of fire to assault the enemy's works. Invariably this entailed putting one's life on the line, not just once, but on a regular basis, even when the odds were heavily stacked in the enemy's favour and the enterprise seemed doomed from the start. The experience of the 1st Gordons in north-west Europe was typical of British units throughout the war. From landing in Normandy on 7 June 1944, to the end of the campaign in May 1945, the battalion fought in a total of thirty-six major actions and in all but two they were attacking.⁹⁷ One should not be overly surprised at this. This is a soldier's *raison d'être* after all, and, as we have seen, the Second World War had a great deal more in common with earlier conflicts than one would think. The fighting was no exception and the savage artillery barrages that preceded Alamein or VERITABLE, the attritional battle for Caen, or the slow, grinding warfare in Italy and the Scheldt estuary bore more than a passing resemblance to operations on the Western Front. This trend was even more pronounced at a lower level, where the troops routinely fought in bloody trench battles. One suspects that they

⁹⁴ Geoffrey Regan, *Backfire: a history of friendly fire from ancient warfare to the present day* (London 2002), 122-127.

⁹⁵ CMAC GC/135/B.1/1, Major John Wishart, 'Experiences of a psychiatrist with BAF and CMF Jan 1943 to Jan 1944, with special reference to work in the Forward Areas, 1944', 6.

⁹⁶ LHCMA, Penney Papers 8/15: 'Short Shooting', 3 February 1944.

⁹⁷ Ellis, *Sharp End*, 72.

would have been equally at home on the battlefields of the Somme or Passchendaele; such was the analogous nature of the fighting.

When the Highland Division attacked near Abbeville in the Somme Valley on 4 June 1940, there was more than a hint of *déjà vu* about the event. At 3.00am the Allied artillery opened up. Thirty minutes later the whistles sounded and the Scots climbed out of their trenches and advanced on the first objective to the skirl of the pipes. On the right, the 4th Camerons were to attack Caubert and a wooded ridge dubbed the 'Hedgehog'. One private in the battalion recalled the position as shrouded in smoke and fumes, and rocked by aerial and ground explosions. Here, after only a hundred yards the Camerons came under intense machine gun and mortar fire. 'The racket was hellish,' recalled Private Sandy Russell of 'B' Company, 'with Jerry mortars falling in all directions and men spinning and falling or being blown up. I saw my old friend from schoolboy days hit by a burst from a machine-gun . . . and several others being hit in succession'.⁹⁸ Private Alexander Grant of the 3-inch mortar platoon watched the attack from a sunken road near the start line and could not believe his eyes: 'It was suicide. Men were going down like flies, falling all over the place. What sheer madness, they went forward without a tank, without anything'.⁹⁹ Russell, pinned down by heavy machine-gun fire, eventually crawled to a nearby trench and took cover. Suddenly there was a bright red flash and he found himself lying on top of a semi-conscious comrade, half buried under a heap of earth. When the shelling eased, Russell and the remaining men of 'B' Company withdrew to link up with the rest of the battalion.¹⁰⁰ It had been a costly encounter and only one 'B' company officer and forty other ranks had survived the attack on the 'Hedgehog'; losses in the brigade had been equally severe, with 20 officers and 543 other ranks killed, wounded or missing.¹⁰¹ The image of ranks of Highlanders going over the top to the sound of bagpipes, only to be cut down by German machine-guns, is a powerful one; indeed the only fundamental difference between this attack and some of those

⁹⁸ David, *Churchill's Sacrifice of the Highland Division*, 79.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁰¹ Richard Doherty, *None Bolder: the history of the 51st Highland Division in the Second World War* (Stroud 2006), 34-36.

launched during the Great War was the uniform - the kilt was officially abandoned on 17 December 1939.

In other theatres, the fighting was just as reminiscent of the savage close quarter fighting on the Western Front. When 1st Division attacked Grich-el-Oued in the closing stages of the Tunisian campaign they found a complete German trench system extending for over four miles which fell only after a brutal hand-to-hand struggle.¹⁰² Earlier in the same campaign, Eighth Army encountered the Mareth Line - described as the African Maginot Line - stretching from the Mediterranean coast to the Matmata Hills, a distance of some twenty miles in all. The Germans had strengthened the pre-existing defences with concrete blockhouses, steel gun cupolas and a huge belt of mines (see page 132). The GOC 51st (Highland) Division, a veteran of the First World War, remembered being struck by the strength of the Mareth Defences. 'Not only was there plenty of concrete to be seen, but there were complete communication trenches, and forward saps, such as reminded me of the 1914-18 War'.¹⁰³ On 19 March 1943, a head on assault by 50th (Northumbrian) Division succeeded in penetrating the line near Zarat, only for the resulting pocket to be destroyed by a fierce German counterattack a few days later; a pattern most Great War veterans would have instantly recognised.

Outside North Africa, the fighting would have been just as familiar. One regimental history captured the bewildering nature of the fighting at Anzio:

The London Irish now moved to the western flank – into the Wadis [a valley or dry riverbed] – those muddy death traps into which complete sub-units of men, tortured by lack of sleep, would vanish from the ken of commanding officers . . . In the Wadis there was a continuous draining of strength by casualties from mortaring and shelling and 'disappearances' on reconnaissance and on patrol. Another complete company disappeared, having stumbled by night into enemy held territory, and was swallowed up. Unknown and heterogeneous reinforcements had to be

¹⁰² Ellis, *Sharp End*, 73.

¹⁰³ Major-General Douglas Wimberley quoted in Doherty, *None Bolder*, 107.



Figure 11 men of the 1st Black Watch searching deep trench for stray prisoners (IWM Photo Archive NA1536)

absorbed in the heat of battle and there was constant reorganisation and 're-squadding'. There had been an 80 per cent change-over in personnel since January.¹⁰⁴

Unlike most of the fighting elsewhere, the Allied forces at Anzio spent a great deal of time on the defensive, repelling a string of ferocious German attempts to drive them back into the sea. Edward Grace recalled one such attack where the enemy troops had to climb over the bodies of their own dead to assault the British positions. All along the line the German infantry hurled themselves at the defenders - throwing grenades and peppering the British trenches with rifle and machine gun fire, even attempting a bayonet charge at one point - in some places overrunning the thinly held lines, but never being able to consolidate their position. Eventually the attacks petered out as night fell, with both sides pausing to lick their wounds and tend to the casualties.¹⁰⁵

This type of bloody trench warfare was common in north-west Europe. The fighting in the Scheldt Estuary during late 1944 was a case in point. Here the opposing lines were almost right on top of one another – as little as ten yards separating them in some cases – and enemy grenades and the frequent threat of infiltration ensured the men had to be constantly vigilant. A vast amount of ammunition was expended, with men throwing up to twenty-five grenades each night to beat back the enemy; the same was true of the artillery and mortar platoons, who used a prodigious quantity of shells and mortars in support of the infantry.¹⁰⁶ Elsewhere in the theatre, two examples from the Battle of Normandy are particularly applicable. On D-Day the 2nd East Yorkshire Regiment was ordered to attack the Daimler strongpoint (a heavily defended gun battery of four 75mm guns capable of firing onto the invasion beaches) south of Ouistreham. One private in the attacking company recalled advancing behind a barrage, with rifles and bayonets at the ready, towards the outer wire and pill-boxes. He later wrote: 'We were in a single line abreast in what could have been seen as rather a futile gesture, had fate decreed it so, for there was every possibility of the German machine-gunners opening up their fire from the pill-boxes even before the wire was reached.

¹⁰⁴ Ellis, *Sharp End*, 73.

¹⁰⁵ Grace, *Perilous Road to Rome*, 150; see also Majdalany, *Cassino*, 142-144.

¹⁰⁶ Ellis, *Sharp End*, 73.

Miraculously, nothing happened and we reached the wire fence unscathed!’¹⁰⁷ Another illustration was the 146th Brigade attack on 25 June 1944 on Fontenay-le-Pesnel and Tessel Wood. The regimental historian described the action:

The early morning mist had lifted and the smoke and dust of the barrage on Fontenay had cleared away revealing another cloudless hot summer’s day, when the guns roared and thundered into action again. The barrage fell thick on the hillside beyond the village . . . [when] the 1/4 King’s Own Yorkshire Light Infantry . . . poured out of Fontenay village and swept on up the hillside, walking behind a wall of hideous noise and smoke and dust and flame which moved forward in jumps of a hundred yards at a time ahead of them. The Tessel Wood feature . . . was taken and consolidated, and a counter-attack the same evening was successfully beaten off.¹⁰⁸

If one did not know better, it would be easy to believe that this passage related to the Battle of the Somme in 1916. All the ingredients were there - infantry closely following a creeping barrage, capturing a wood and then digging in to wait for the obligatory German counterattack – even the battalion involved, the 1/4th KOYLI, did actually fight on the Somme.¹⁰⁹

As we can see, the creeping barrage, a Great War innovation, still played an important role in the fighting and many writers left vivid accounts of their experience ‘leaning on the barrage’. One relates to an attack staged during VERITABLE in February 1945 by the 7th Hampshires, with a creeping barrage moving forward at a set speed of about one hundred yards every minute. Like all such artillery fire it was designed to suppress the enemy so the attackers could reach their objective with minimal casualties; if they arrived at the enemy’s position when the barrage lifted, they would, in theory, kill or capture them all. ‘All depends on our keeping up with the shell-fire,’ wrote Geoffrey Picot, by now a lieutenant commanding a rifle platoon. “‘Lean on the barrage,” we have been taught in training. “It is better to risk casualties from the occasional shell from your own side falling short than to allow the enemy a few seconds to recover”’. For the attack, Picot placed a section of ten

¹⁰⁷ IWM 94/41/1, Roebuck, ‘The Five Yorkshire Tykes’, 33.

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in Sheffield, ‘The Shadow of the Somme’, 29.

¹⁰⁹ See Woollcombe, *Lion Rampant*, 90.

men in front, line abreast, with the rest of the platoon strung out behind. When the barrage started they followed close behind, with Picot shouting directions for what, he claimed, felt like an eternity.

‘Keep up the pace. Don’t slacken. Keep up the pace. Keep up. Don’t stop. Keep up’.

A soldier complains. ‘But there’s a Spandau firing at us from over there on the right. I had better take it on’.

‘No,’ I yell. ‘Don’t stop for anything. Fire the Bren back at him from the hip if you like, but keep moving. Throw a smoke grenade if you like, but keep up, keep moving, keep up, don’t stop’.

Another soldier reports. ‘Two wounded enemy here, sir, we can’t leave them’.

I reply, ‘Yes, you can. Leave them. Leave everything. Just keep up with the barrage, that’s all we’ve got to do. Keep up. Keep up. Don’t lose the barrage’.

‘It might be dangerous to leave them,’ the soldier persists.

‘Shut up,’ I bellow. ‘Don’t stop. Keep up. Keep up. There’s plenty of shells landing everywhere. I’m not surprised there’s some wounded’.

One of my men reports, ‘There’s movement on our left, sir’.

‘Fire as you go with anything you’ve got,’ I reply. ‘But don’t stop. Keep up. Keep up. Faster, faster, keep up’.¹¹⁰

These barrages were used throughout the war, but from D-Day onwards it became the predominant method to support an attack, leading many contemporary soldiers to criticise what they saw as simple First World War tactics. Sydney Jary recounted being locked into the timetable of meticulously planned set-piece battles and complained this left the junior infantry commander little scope for exploitation. ‘If you found a gap in the enemy defence,’ he wrote in his account of the campaign, ‘adherence to the artillery programme, which could rarely be altered, effectively stopped any personal initiative’.¹¹¹ This trend became even more marked in the final months of the war; from VERITABLE onwards, according to a rifle company commander in 15th (Scottish) Division, it was

¹¹⁰ Quoted in Delaforce, *Marching to the Sound of Gunfire*, 181.

¹¹¹ Jary, *18 Platoon*, 104; see also LHCMA, Nelson, ‘Always a Grenadier’, 45.

‘really rather like the infantry assaults of World War One’. The same officer described the format of operations at this time:

White tape was put down, people formed up and went forward at a certain regulated pace behind a barrage of, in the case of VERITABLE, twelve hundred guns. The barrage then halted for three minutes, then coloured smoke and then it lifted and on you went. Really very undemanding. But anything more ambitious I think would have been beyond us, simply because the trained leaders and trained soldiers were no longer there. That was the sort of instrument with which we had to complete the campaign, from New Year 1944/45 onwards.¹¹²

The parallels with the Western Front do not end there. In both conflicts it was the Allies that had to attack the enemy and force them out of conquered territory. These attacks were hardly ever swift thrusts through the enemy’s operational depth or round his flank or rear, as in the popular mythology, but rather frontal assaults against heavily fortified defensive positions. This was certainly the case in Africa and Europe, where the fighting revolved around lines – Buerat, Mareth, Gustav, Gothic, Siegfried – and fortified high ground – Keren, Longstop, Camino, Cassino, Verrières Ridge, Mont Pinçon. These defences were usually a devilish combination of the natural topography and the enemy’s ingenuity and industry. The Germans were highly skilled at such enterprises and could turn even thinly held positions into virtually impregnable strongholds incorporating a combination of deep bunkers, trenches, minefields, booby traps, machine-guns firing on fixed lines and even hull-down tanks. As a result, the British infantryman’s experience of combat boiled down to a series of head-on assaults against formidable German entrenchments. Even the fighting in the Western Desert – the closest on paper to the war of movement presaged by interwar military experts - involved numerous attacks on heavily fortified static positions. This proved to be the case during the Crusader battles (18 November to 30 December 1941), when an attack was launched on heavily fortified Axis strong-points extending from Sidi Omar to the coast at Halfaya. Second Alamein, too, was a frontal assault against prepared positions in the mould of the attritional battles of the

¹¹² IWM 8337, Graham.

Western Front; while every major engagement thereafter was, essentially, a head-on assault against German entrenchments on ground of their choosing. A soldier with the 2nd Rifle Brigade witnessed one such attack in Tunisia in April 1943:

Men have begun drifting back in small groups, most of them badly shaken. They talk of crawling up sheer precipices to find every level expanse swept by machine gun fire; of wounded rolling all the way to the bottom; of tripwire mines and booby-traps on handgrip ledges; of areas automatically illuminated on approach by flares and bulbs, immediately drawing fire; of premature rifle shots from stumbling men, supposed to have given the game away; and of walls and caves and all sorts of cunning defensive devices on the summit, piled round with the dead of previous assaults.¹¹³

In Italy, almost every attack followed this pattern as Field-Marshal Kesselring (German commander-in-chief south) withdrew his forces northwards, shrewdly using mountain ridges and rivers to underpin a series of formidable *stellung* – most notably the Gustav and Gothic Lines - that straddled the country from the Adriatic to the Tyrrhenian.¹¹⁴

Not all enemy positions were this sophisticated. But as a minimum, attacking riflemen could expect to encounter well dug in infantry behind a belt of barbed wire, possibly with a minefield, and numerous machine-guns laying down a terrible volume of suppressing fire. Yet such measures were not the be-all and end-all of a determined defence. In parts of Normandy the Germans had scarcely any need to construct elaborate trench systems as the terrain itself offered ample protection.¹¹⁵ This was the notorious *bocage*, a web of constricted, sunken roads and tall, dense, nearly impassable hedgerows and solid high banks separating a patchwork of small fields. Among these hedges the Germans placed small groups of machine gunners, snipers and anti-tank crews who were nearly impossible to detect until one had inadvertently stumbled into their sights, more often than not with

¹¹³ Crimp, *Diary of a Desert Rat*, 197.

¹¹⁴ See Ellis, *Cassino, the Hollow Victory*, 67-69; Harpur, *Impossible Victory*, 79; Barrie Pitt (ed.), *The Illustrated History of World War II* (London 1989), 192.

¹¹⁵ Jary, *18 Platoon*, 6.

devastating results. Elsewhere, the defence solidified around towns and villages – such as Caen, where the Germans constructed a formidable interlocking network using the town itself and many of the surrounding woods, ridges and villages. By now the layout of such defences followed a set pattern, consisting of three lines of fortified posts often extending up to ten miles behind the frontline. The first belt was made up of a series of Battle Outposts which were considered expendable but which had to be manned for as long as possible. Any useful natural features were integrated into this line and were enhanced by hidden weapons pits and dugouts. Communications trenches linked the Posts both laterally and vertically, so that they could be easily reinforced or abandoned as the situation warranted. In addition to machine-guns, likely targets were pinpointed beforehand so the defenders could call for artillery and mortar fire to be brought down quickly. The next belt, known as the Advance Position, made greater use of barbed wire entanglements and minefields and was supported by large numbers of tanks, self-propelled guns and mortars. It was the responsibility of the infantry in this line to respond to events as they developed, sitting tight and holding their ground or launching a counterattack depending on the state of affairs in the outpost line. Under no circumstances were they expected to retreat. Finally there was a flexible defence line called the Main Position. This incorporated high ground for observing artillery and mortar fire and acted as a base for reserve troops and larger tanks and guns.¹¹⁶

We should not be fooled into thinking that German infantrymen merely crouched in their pill-boxes or dugouts, passively waiting for the next Allied assault. Rather they were always expected to try and gain the initiative by continuous probing and harassing of the attacking forces. A German divisional order from 1944 outlined this philosophy, stating that ‘the mission . . . is above all to send out reconnaissance parties and patrols to ensure the safety of the heavy weapons, to take part in close-quarters fighting, and to conduct counter-attacks’.¹¹⁷ This was the key element of German defensive tactics, something that many British units discovered to their cost. The Germans knew well that the

¹¹⁶ Ellis, *Sharp End*, 77; Antony Beevor, *D-Day: the Battle for Normandy* (London 2009), 252-253.

¹¹⁷ Quoted in Ellis, *Cassino*, 68-69.

best time to catch Allied troops flat-footed was just after they had taken a position - more casualties were usually inflicted at this moment than during the attack itself – as they were slow to dig in afresh and often made do with recycling enemy slit-trenches. In many cases these were booby-trapped, but always they would be pre-registered by the supporting German artillery, all set to fire the instant the defenders pulled out. Throughout the war, British troops were persistently caught out in this manner. Worn out from the assault and complacent from success, they frequently did not adhere to the well known motto urging them to ‘dig or die’, resulting in many unnecessary casualties.¹¹⁸

Up till now we have mostly dealt with the actualities of combat in static warfare; what we might term the nuts and bolts of positional fighting – patrolling, sniping, bombardment and assaulting fortified positions. What we have not yet considered is the simple question: how did the individual soldier feel when it was his turn to go into battle and put his life on the line? This is a query that countless authors have attempted to answer with varying degrees of success. The present work will address this question insofar as it can be specifically related to static warfare. Despite this, it has proved difficult to examine the latter in isolation and some general points about the psychological experience of combat as a whole will have to be made. The first half of this section, therefore, will consist of a broad overview of the behaviour of men in battle; while the second half will go on to think about trench warfare in particular.

Earlier in the chapter we heard that battle was the ultimate end of all military activities, but that, paradoxically, it was also a relatively rare event. This last detail was of scant comfort to those waiting to go forward in their first assault or to the old hands all too aware of just how terrible combat could be. Despite its infrequency, battle came to dominate the soldier’s mind more than any other event and the overwhelming feeling, whether one was a raw recruit or a seasoned veteran, was that of fear. This is not to suggest that this was the only emotion; many thoughts and feelings flitted

¹¹⁸ Ellis, *Cassino*, 68-69; Beevor, *D-Day*, 254-255.

through men's minds, from the momentous to the utterly mundane. While we cannot possibly hope to cover them all, we can at least examine those that all fighting men shared, such as what was going to happen to them when the shooting started. In fact, from the moment they donned the uniform most soldiers speculated about little else. Initially many regarded battle with an enormous sense of curiosity. 'The shooting, the battle, these things had to be seen,' declared Neil McCallum. 'That was personal curiosity. The shooting was not to be missed. Curiosity was stronger than patriotism or politics and one went to the shooting with the speculative interest of a man examining a new microbe under a microscope'.¹¹⁹ Without doubt many were genuinely excited or enthusiastic to experience battle, but such feelings were usually tempered with an undercurrent of apprehension, a nagging fear that grew exponentially as the moment of truth grew nearer. As a nineteen year old, Bob Day rejected the opportunity to stay in England to train for a commission and instead volunteered for a reinforcement draft bound for Salerno. 'Up to now I had been very anxious to get into action,' he recalled of the journey to the beachhead, 'but when I knew that I would soon get what I had asked for, I felt that all my spirit had left me'.¹²⁰ He was not the only soldier to express such sentiments. One Grenadier Guardsman, later to win the Military Medal in Italy, confessed that he was 'very apprehensive', but having been well trained at Caterham and Pirbright, 'was raring to go'.¹²¹

As the prospect of battle grew nearer the balance between apprehension and enthusiasm tilted increasingly towards the former, and the physical symptoms of fear began to manifest themselves.¹²² According to one study of neurosis in war, most soldiers approaching the front displayed 'uneasiness and apprehension by restlessness, irritability, artificial jubilancy or silence and withdrawal, or by unusual perspiration, diarrhoea and frequency of micturition'.¹²³ Even when the physical symptoms were not as dramatic, most men felt some sort of powerful reaction to the

¹¹⁹ McCallum, *Journey with a Pistol*, 13.

¹²⁰ IWM 83/36/1, Day, 'We Landed at Nightfall', 3.

¹²¹ Jack Chaffer quoted in Holmes, *Acts of War*, 137-138.

¹²² See for instance Pte. Albert Kings, 1st Worcesters, quoted in Delaforce, *Wessex Wyverns*, 37.

¹²³ Quoted in Holmes, *Acts of War*, 138.

looming prospect of combat. For one private with the 7th Green Howards this took the form of an overwhelming sense of dread. He recalled how his stomach would sink and a leaden feeling would spread through his body before an attack.¹²⁴ One soldier with the 5th Wiltshires, who served in Italy and north-west Europe, described 'The strange terror that afflicts the body regardless of his will, a twitching in his calves, a fluttering of the muscles in his cheeks, the breath like a block of expanding ice in his lungs, his stomach contracting, the sickness rising in his throat'.¹²⁵ Most infantrymen discovered that such fear was seldom restricted to the hours immediately before the battle; often their torment went on for days on end. For some it never stopped. One officer complained that the days before a major battle were always 'long and fidgety', and observed how the men in his company suffered from constant fear, which was exacerbated by the artillery rumbling on night and day. 'There is a great deal of forced activity - inspections, competitions, lectures on the coming encounter - and a lot of forced cheerfulness'.¹²⁶

It is difficult to overstate the level of stress pre-contact apprehension imposed. The crucial point to bear in mind is that such emotions usually occurred before *every* action to a varying degree. Nor did one ever get used to it. Obviously as one began to master the art of soldiering one could, ever so slightly, increase one's chances of survival, but no man would ever claim that combat became routine. The raw recruit improved in that he managed to suppress his initial feelings of total panic and fight on despite his fear. But the fear never left. Raleigh Trevelyan, on the eve of the breakout at Anzio, prayed 'God give me strength for tomorrow, for I can think of nothing else', while Rex Wingfield declared 'It is a fact that no normal man is not scared by the thought of action. Any man who won't admit that he's scared is either a liar or a B[loody] F[ool]'.¹²⁷ Thus combat was a constant source of anxiety for most soldiers.¹²⁸

¹²⁴ IWM Department of Documents, 92/10/1, Tom Tateson, 'While I was Away, an Account of One Year in my Life', 15.

¹²⁵ Alexander Baron, *From the City, from the Plough* (London 1972), 110.

¹²⁶ Forman, *To Reason Why*, 80; see also Woollcombe, *Lion Rampant*, 52-53.

¹²⁷ Trevelyan, *Fortress*, 107; Wingfield, *Only Way Out*, 45.

¹²⁸ Holmes, *Acts of War*, 138-139; Ellis, *Sharp End*, 100-103.

The degree to which an individual suffered from anxiety was influenced by his rank.¹²⁹ Most officers worried that their decisions might lead to unnecessary casualties and this tension only heightened in the run up to battle.¹³⁰ On the other hand, officers and NCOs were generally so preoccupied before a battle with the practical problems of movement, supply, organising supporting fire, and so on, that they had little time to speculate on what awaited them in combat. Paul Bryan, who would receive the MC and DSO, felt certain that such distractions made it easier for officers and NCOs to be brave during an attack.

When you are leading troops in action your mind is so full of your own responsibilities and worries, for example: how your men are going to fight; when the hell are they going to start the barrage; what on earth has happened to No. 2 Platoon? Why can't I find this place on my map? What shall I do about the wounded corporal? All this preoccupation makes you less concerned about the shells that are falling about you than the private soldier who has nothing to think about but going over the top in a few minutes time.¹³¹

Furthermore, a desire to safeguard one's status encouraged leaders to conceal their anxiety. One sergeant-major who served in the DWR in 1940 was scared by the thought of battle but, 'being a warrant officer I dared not show it'.¹³²

The apprehension and fear usually disappeared once the ordeal was underway. The torment of waiting was often so bad that many welcomed the opening of an attack and the relief it provided. Lieutenant D. J. Fenner, OC 13 Platoon, 6th DLI, hated the limbo period before an attack: 'The presence of your friends around you is your only comfort. It is a relief when the time comes to advance'.¹³³ This attitude was echoed by Bob Day, who welcomed the order to move up to the front after a tense wait on the beach at Salerno. If there was one thing guaranteed to 'brown off' a soldier,

¹²⁹ Holmes, *Acts of War*, 142-143.

¹³⁰ Trevelyan, *Fortress*, 96, 215.

¹³¹ Bryan, *Wool, War and Westminster*, 92; see also LHCMA, Papers of Lt.-Gen. Sir Charles Walter Allfrey 2/6: Text of an address by Allfrey to officers concerning morale, giving a brief survey of the causes of demoralisation amongst troops and methods of combating it, 3.

¹³² Sgt.-Maj. Michael Reed quoted in Holmes, *Acts of War*, 143.

¹³³ IWM Department of Documents, 84/2/1, D. J. Fenner, TS account, 4.

he declared, it was hanging about, waiting for something to happen. 'None of us, I hardly think, wanted to go into action, but now that we were so near to it we were impatient to overcome the initial dread of the unknown'.¹³⁴ In battle, such dread quickly vanished and few soldiers remember feeling afraid during combat or, indeed, much about their feelings or actions at all. Many went through the ordeal as if on automatic pilot:

The strange thing is that the waiting for action is frightening, but, once the battle or the patrol starts, fear vanishes. The clue is that word "Action". In battle so much is happening at once, you're so busy that you haven't time to be scared, you haven't even time to think. You do things instinctively.¹³⁵

Another sensation involved the conflict between one's instincts and the dictates of conscience. This was especially true before a soldier's first battle, when his anxiety focused on the struggle between his instincts telling him to seek safety above all else and the desire to meet the standards expected of him by his peers. Other common fears – of being crippled, killed, captured and tortured – were strikingly absent among troops going into action for the first time (veteran soldiers, in contrast, displayed less fear of being a coward and were much more concerned with the risk of being crippled or disfigured). Even a cursory examination of the primary material reveals that such concerns were common.¹³⁶ For example, one Highland Division soldier prayed to God, not to ensure his own survival, but to preserve his self-respect and honour. 'I always prayed to myself,' he admitted. 'I asked especially for courage, *not* for vain glory, but merely that I might be strong enough to cope with any situation in which I might find myself'.¹³⁷ Raleigh Trevelyan was another who beseeched God not to let him disgrace himself, and, later wrote:

I remember father saying on embarkation leave that the worst part of battle was wondering how you were going to behave in front of other people . . . I don't think even now I really fear death,

¹³⁴ IWM 83/36/1, Day, 'We Landed at Nightfall', 11.

¹³⁵ Wingfield, *Only Way Out*, 45-46; see also Veron Scannell quoted in Holden, *Shell Shock*, 76.

¹³⁶ NA WO222/124, Moral effect of weapons, investigation into reactions of group of 300 wounded men in N. Africa, 1943.

¹³⁷ Pte. Ian Kaye, 5th Black Watch, quoted in Grant, *51st Highland Division at War*, 129.

or even the process of dying. It is only the thought of whether or not I shall acquit myself honourably that obsesses me.¹³⁸

It would appear that a strong internal restraint on fear was the desire to live up to stereotypes of masculinity, that is to say, of being a man amongst men and behaving courageously in battle.¹³⁹ Consequently, many soldiers found the fear of shame or disgrace or, indeed, of showing fear itself, more powerful than that of death (perhaps explaining why so many seemingly did not flinch at individual shells). One soldier who served in Normandy wrote, 'the thing I feared more than anything in the world was to break up in battle and give way to . . . cowardice. I made up my mind that as long as I had the strength, never, under any circumstances, would I allow that to happen; I prayed, until a lump came into my throat, to be spared that degradation'.¹⁴⁰ Clearly the fear of shame caused a tremendous amount of anxiety. It was also an important factor in motivating men to stay the course and carry out their duties, no matter how much it went against their natural instincts. Many soldiers cited this as the most important source of courage. When Alex Bowlby's unit came under heavy mortar fire during an assault in Italy, several men panicked and ran away. Bowlby remained where he was, but later admitted that it was touch and go whether or not he joined them. The only thing that held him back was a strong sense of shame. He insisted that his immediate source of courage was the 'fear of disgrace'.¹⁴¹ According to Paul Bryan, the fear of shame was a powerful stimulus to courage. He attributed this to the fact that the men in his battalion knew each other well as nearly all came from the county of Kent, so in some cases knew each other's families, and had spent two years training together in England. 'No-one wanted to behave in a way which would bring the scorn of his friends'.¹⁴²

¹³⁸ Quoted in Holmes, *Acts of War*, 142.

¹³⁹ Ellis, *Sharp End*, 106; Holmes, *Acts of War*, 142; S. L. A. Marshall, 'Combat Leadership', in *Symposium on Preventive and Social Psychiatry* (Washington D.C. 1957), 305.

¹⁴⁰ John Basil Watney, *The Enemy Within: a personal impression of the invasion of Normandy, 1944* (London 1946), 192.

¹⁴¹ Bowlby, *Recollections*, 146, 195.

¹⁴² Bryan, *Wool, War and Westminster*, 92-93.

Such fears caused soldiers to adopt a brave face in battle, which could have a profound effect on those around them. 'Fear is contagious but courage is not less so,' observed S. L. A. Marshall. 'To the man who is in terror and verging on panic, no influence can be more steady than that he see some other man near him who is retaining self-control and doing his duty'.¹⁴³ It can be argued that these feelings - fear of shame and the desire to display bravery in the company of men - were the very basis of discipline in war; for if the fear of battle had been greater than that of cowardice, most soldiers would never have left the trenches. Geoffrey Picot, for example, found the prospect of combat horrifying, but the courage displayed by his comrades propped up his morale and was thus a key factor helping him to endure.

I could see that most men were absorbing the strain reasonably well, so I decided I had better try to look as if I was. Only later did I learn that all were frightened and most took pains to conceal their fear. Nearly all of us played this concealment game. Thus, a man pretending to be brave gave bravery to his comrades; as they, with their pretence, likewise gave bravery to him.¹⁴⁴

Peter Cochrane was of the opinion that, since nobody actually wanted to fight, men were inclined to do what they *imagined* their comrades expected them to do and from this came cohesion of action. 'Whether this be mutual deception or mutual support it does the trick'.¹⁴⁵ Maintaining an outward show of bravery inflicted a great deal of strain and it rarely, if ever, helped to assuage their fear. Most soldiers remained terrified behind the mask of courage. A moving description of this inner tension features in a letter home written by a sergeant in the 5/7th Gordons:

The boys marvel at my apparent lack of nerve. Some say "He'll get it yet". Others refer to me as mad, while I myself - well, if they only knew how really scared I am, how I've had to fight it, how I've had to bluff it, to carry on to be able to say, "I've not let them down". Frankly, every day that passes I feel less able to meet the responsibilities thrown on me, but with boys like I've just told

¹⁴³ Marshall, *Men against Fire*, 148.

¹⁴⁴ Picot, *Accidental Warrior*, 12-13.

¹⁴⁵ Cochrane, *Charlie Company*, 173-174.

you about I just cannot let them down. If they can stick it - I can stick it. But how, oh how, I would welcome the finish of it all.¹⁴⁶

Clearly, such a facade exacted a terrible psychological price.

We have dealt with the psychology of soldiers in the period *before* combat, what then of battle itself? As we heard, many soldiers went into automatic pilot and were often unable to recall their feelings or actions. This was hardly surprising given that so much of battle, from the individual's point of view, was simply deafening noise and utter confusion. Another closely related feature was the feeling of being swept up in events that were outwith one's control, the belief that one was unable to exert any meaningful influence over them, and of being completely intimidated by the chaos and immensity of battle. This last point brings us to the fundamental contradiction at the heart of modern warfare, what John Ellis defined as, 'on the one hand the mind-numbing vastness of the whole military effort and the extreme mental anguish of those risking death time and again, and yet on the other a pathetic sense of inconsequentiality, bewilderment and helplessness'.¹⁴⁷ Often the troops had very little idea of where they were or what they were supposed to be doing. Vernon Scannell remembered:

The sense of being dehumanised, reduced to little more than an extension of your equipment and weaponry, the constant feeling of being used as an object, manipulated by blind, invisible hands, controlled by a force that was either malignant or stupid, the sense of being quite lost, of staggering about with no conscious direction in a metaphorical and quite often literal darkness . . . And ignorance, stupefying, brutalizing ignorance. You never knew where you were or where the enemy was, what you were supposed to be attempting to achieve.¹⁴⁸

The passage above reveals much about the reality of battle for most infantrymen. The extent to which soldiers held romantic ideas about combat is, given the popular memory of the Great War, open to question. But it would be foolish to suggest that none cherished ideas of performing noble

¹⁴⁶ Quoted in Grant, *The 51st Highland Division*, 105.

¹⁴⁷ Ellis, *Sharp End*, 110-111.

¹⁴⁸ Scannell, *Argument of Kings*, 165; see also McCallum, *Journey with a Pistol*, 50.

and heroic deeds, of saving the day at the critical moment or of winning a chest full of ribbons and medals. Nevertheless, it seems that despite all their preparation and training, the true nature of the battlefield still took many of them by surprise. Dreams of glory were overwhelmed by feelings of confusion, powerlessness and inconsequentiality.

This was exacerbated by the fact that soldiers very rarely saw their enemy in trench warfare; they merely spotted where their fire was coming from.¹⁴⁹ The general rule was that anyone who was seen, unless he was moving sufficiently fast, was killed or wounded. A battlefield generally looked pretty empty, except perhaps during a set piece attack and even then one did not see much of the defenders until one was right on top of them.¹⁵⁰ S. L. A. Marshall held that the battlefield is 'the loneliest place which men may share together'. For the infantryman new to combat, the emptiness of the field was troubling. 'No people stir about. There are little or no signs of action. Over all there is a great quiet which seems more ominous than the occasional tempest of fire'. Once he was in range of the enemy's small-arms, however, he experienced a transition which was wholly abnormal. 'He had expected to see action. He sees nothing. There is nothing to be seen. The fire comes out of nowhere. He knows that it is fire because the sounds are unmistakable. But that is all that he knows for certain'.¹⁵¹ Many soldiers commented on this peculiar emptiness. Geoffrey Picot felt that anyone who relied on films for their picture of a battle would have had difficulty in imagining a *real* battlefield. Instead of hundreds of rival soldiers packed into a few hundred square yards, as in the Hollywood interpretation, Picot found that, 'You and a couple of pals can be hundreds of yards away from anybody else; you may not have much idea where friend or foe are. You fired from a concealed position to a hidden target. And how on earth do you find out what is going on?'¹⁵² At the end of the fighting in Tunisia, a major with the 1st East Surreys estimated that as much as ninety-five per cent of the soldiers in First Army had never seen a live German (with the

¹⁴⁹ Sgt. Jimmy Blair, 2nd Glasgow Highlanders, quoted in How, *Hill 112*, 34; Woollcombe, *Lion Rampant*, 116.

¹⁵⁰ Pte. John Longfield, 1/4th KOYL, quoted in Delaforce, *Polar Bears*, 35.

¹⁵¹ Marshall, *Men against Fire*, 44, 47.

¹⁵² Picot, *Accidental Warrior*, 69.

exception of POWs). Even as a rifle company commander at the sharp end he had not seen all that many. 'If you did then you were definitely too near! I hope I killed lots of Germans (it was my job); if I did then it was mostly by directing artillery and mortar fire, etc. I personally only shot one, and he was not looking my way!'¹⁵³

Many men went through whole campaigns without ever firing their rifles; whether soldiers were reluctant to fire because of the values instilled in them since birth, as Marshall would have us believe, or because they simply did not have anything to aim at is uncertain.¹⁵⁴ One suspects a combination of the two. Either way, it is clear that during any given action, a minority of men actually fired their weapon (while certainly not as low as Marshall's estimate of fifteen per cent, it was, in all likelihood, at least less than half those engaged). This was something that Fred Majdalany witnessed at Cassino, where the enemy was rarely seen and even less frequently engaged with small-arms. He wrote: 'A thing few people realize is that you hardly ever see a German. Very few men - even in the Infantry - actually have the experience of aiming a weapon at a German and seeing the man fall'.¹⁵⁵ Similarly, by the end of hostilities in North Africa Neil McCallum had still not fired his pistol. A great many infantrymen in Eighth Army had, he claimed, come all the way from Alamein without firing their rifles. 'A soldier is often a speculator in land,' McCallum observed. 'He goes through battles, he gets killed, or wounded, or he survives, but - apart from that - he does little more than occupy ground with the persistence of an estate agent'.¹⁵⁶

It should be evident that combat in the trenches was an impersonal and remote affair. We have already considered this point with reference to the artillery, but the fact that one seldom saw the enemy, let alone came close enough to engage him man-to-man, had a significant psychological influence. Infantrymen realised that death in the trenches would come not from a knightly duel between equally matched opponents, but rather it would be, in all likelihood, a case of being in the

¹⁵³ Major R. C. 'Toby' Taylor quoted in Ford, *Battleaxe Division*, 58.

¹⁵⁴ Marshall, *Men against Fire*, 50-63.

¹⁵⁵ Majdalany, *Monastery*, 57.

¹⁵⁶ McCallum, *Journey with a Pistol*, 141.

wrong place at the wrong time, killed by a piece of equipment many miles away, against which there was no reply. When Walter Elliott, a young platoon commander with the 2nd Scots Guards, experienced battle for the first time at Salerno, he very quickly lost any romantic notions he held about war. 'I was beginning to feel that war was not quite so glorious as the history books described. For here people managed to get killed without ever seeing the enemy'.¹⁵⁷ After more than a month in the line at Mareth, Neil McCallum was of a similar opinion, he found it 'terrifying to know that from a few hundred yards away to a few miles there are people trying to kill you. . . . The terror is not in a cloak-and-dagger thriller. There is nothing of that. I do not believe it is entirely personal, either, the fear of personal death. It lies in the fact that killing is quite impartial; it has the cold indifference of a great organisation, it is impersonal routine, a job'.¹⁵⁸

This leads us to another point, one that is particularly relevant to static warfare: the impact of witnessing a steady drip of casualties during everyday frontline service and the knowledge that death could come at any moment, whether one was advancing across no-man's-land or cringing in a slit-trench. We can divide this issue up into three main elements: the attrition of prolonged bouts of positional warfare; the fatal lottery and the odds of survival; and the ubiquity of death. Without wishing to spend too much time on the first of these topics (we will cover casualties in the next chapter), we can say that the very proximity of the lines meant that, even in the relatively quiet periods of line holding, infantrymen came under fire at regular intervals. Every day the occupying battalion's strength was whittled down by a constant dribble of casualties. When No. 4 Company, 5th Grenadier Guards, spent ten days in the trenches at Grich-el-Oued in May 1943, its strength dwindled from 8 officers and 130 other ranks, to 1 officer and 30 other ranks. Of the casualties, 5 officers and 16 other ranks had been killed outright. With typical British understatement one

¹⁵⁷ Elliott, *Esprit de Corps*, 30.

¹⁵⁸ McCallum, *Journey with a Pistol*, 88.



Figure 12: four Highland Division 'Jocks' dig in near El Alamein (IWM Photo Archive E18625)

Guardsman recorded: 'We were still losing men at the rate of three or four a day and it was a bit wearing, wondering whether you were going to be the next'.¹⁵⁹ Likewise, the War Diary of the 2nd Wiltshires recorded the loss of nine men during an ordinary twenty-four hours at Anzio:

[16th March] Desultory shelling and mortaring throughout the night. Rain had ceased by first light, but ground was still difficult. 3 wounded B Coy.

Number of mortar bombs landed in area of C Coy. LIEUT. K. LYNCH wounded in face and legs.

Enemy shelled S Coy area. 20 shells 11 of which were duds. NO casualties.

Ambush patrol from B Coy under L/S BROWN ran into uncharted minefield laid by previous unit.

1 man killed and 1 man wounded. Patrol had to return.

Enemy fired on tracks used by maintenance parties with no effect.

[17th March] Night passed without any unpleasant incidents. 15-20 enemy aircraft raided beachhead area and several bombs fell in our 'B' Ech area. 1 man killed and 2 injured. Several vehicles were damaged, some beyond repair.¹⁶⁰

After witnessing such attrition, most soldiers came to realise that there was absolutely nothing preventing them from being killed or wounded too; indeed, there seemed to be no particular rhyme or reason to who lived and who died, meaning that their chances of survival were in the hands of what Frederick the Great called 'His Sacred Majesty Chance'.

Naturally this produced a great deal of tension. Men dwelt on the knowledge that they were just as likely to be hit as the next man and wondered when, where, how it might happen. This was certainly true for the British troops in the trenches of Anzio, where the fighting was predominantly a matter of bloody attrition and grim endurance. Edward Grace knew that at any moment a shell, grenade or bullet could end his life and asked himself 'the unspoken and unavoidable question . . . will it be my

¹⁵⁹ IWM 82/37/1, Danger, 'Diary of a Guardsman', 59; see also NA WO171/1364, 6th Royal Scots Fusiliers, War Diary for July 1944; Sgt. John Eagles, 2nd Royal Ulster Rifles, quoted in Delaforce, *Monty's Iron Sides*, 65.

¹⁶⁰ NA WO170/1489, 2nd Wiltshire Regiment, War Diary for March 1944.

turn next?’¹⁶¹ A soldier in the equally gruelling Salerno beachhead, who served in North Africa and Italy with the 6th York and Lancasters, bemoaned the feelings of despair and apprehension that this question generated in his mind. ‘Service in the front line continued in seemingly endless action week in, week out,’ he wrote. ‘The, It can't happen to me, was beginning to be questioned as we thought of the casualties and our future chances. . . . With little exception we became less bold and towards the war's end with the many casualties, both dead and wounded, we all thought our chances of survival were slim’.¹⁶²

Most veterans were highly pessimistic about their chances of surviving the war. When Rex Wingfield first joined the 1/6th Queen's his section corporal spoke to the new arrivals about life in a rifle platoon. His words were far from encouraging:

Now consider our case. We're in trouble 24 hours a day. We get used to the idea of danger until even Death is the normal thing, so we build up a way of life, a state of mind, at first a resistance to Death, a fight for life, but that finally becomes a submission and resignation to constant danger. You've heard the old gag, 'Any change in the Infantry is bound to be for the worse'. If you accept that, you've conquered Fear. Death doesn't worry you anymore. We have little hope of survival. We accept that and spin it out as best we can. We don't have any distractions like comfort. Our life goes along smoothly at a permanent level of tension. We're as good as dead. A slit-trench, after all, is the nearest thing to a grave we'll be in while we're alive. It *is* a grave!¹⁶³

Whereas the first few battles helped inexperienced soldiers grow in confidence and improve in tactical ability, subsequent actions often had the reverse effect. Seeing their friends cut down affected them deeply and they began to feel that their chances of survival diminished with each action, and that they were fighting a losing battle with the law of averages. As time passed they became more and more fatalistic.¹⁶⁴ Geoffrey Picot described the process:

¹⁶¹ Grace, *Perilous Road to Rome*, 157.

¹⁶² IWM 99/85/1, Wray, 'Infantry Man! Why Me?', 91, 105.

¹⁶³ Quoted in Delaforce, *Marching to the Sound of Gunfire*, 108.

¹⁶⁴ Holmes, *Acts of War*, 218.

The soldier thinks of all the battles he has fought in the past, of all the narrow escapes he has had from death, of his pals who one by one have fallen; and he wonders how much longer his luck can last. The average infantryman does not fight many battles before he becomes a casualty. If he has fought in six major attacks without being hit he knows he won't last another six. There is a feeling that sooner or later death catches up with you.¹⁶⁵

Peter Cochrane, on the other hand, saw the random nature of death in the trenches as crucial in helping men fight on. Every order for an attack, he declared, carried the unspoken message that 'you, or you, or I, will probably be dead in the morning', but what made this tolerable was the 'Russian roulette implicit in "or"'. Predicting who it might be was impossible and so officers and men alike were hopeful that it would be someone other than them. 'The fact that your optimism has been justified if you do come out unhurt is another of the reasons for the philosophic attitude men take to the death of friends'.¹⁶⁶ Death was an ever-present companion and became a matter of course at the front. Most soldiers grew accustomed to the sight of so much death. But they were still afraid. Neil McCallum experienced the pervasive, almost routine nature of death at Mareth and described the constant fear that went with it: 'The state of mind that action induces primarily and superficially is fear, with peaks of almost hysterical tension. Fear becomes commonplace - like death, an accepted every-day ever-present condition.'¹⁶⁷

There were limitless ways in which one could meet one's maker. More often than not you had little idea what had hit you. The end often came not in a glorious, honourable way, but squalidly, suddenly and without warning. This was certainly the case with snipers, who usually aimed for the head. The suddenness of such a death was difficult to comprehend. On one occasion in 'Sniper Valley' a sergeant foolishly peeped over his slit-trench to talk to one of his men. Although he had only shown his head for a split second, he was hit squarely between the eyes and was killed

¹⁶⁵ Picot, *Accidental Warrior*, 134.

¹⁶⁶ Cochrane, *Charlie Company*, 139-140.

¹⁶⁷ McCallum, *Journey with a Pistol*, 88.

instantly.¹⁶⁸ The history of the Irish Brigade recorded a similar death near the River Senio in March 1945. A sergeant of the London Irish had crawled up to an OP from where the enemy position could be seen through a periscope. He was wearing a regimental bonnet with hackle, which, during his time in the trench, was spotted by a sniper who simply waited for the unlucky soldier to make a mistake. When moving away from the periscope the sergeant duly obliged: he straightened up momentarily whereupon he was shot through the head and died instantly.¹⁶⁹

The effects of shells were less predictable. A direct hit could instantly vaporise a man so completely that there was nothing left for his comrades to bury, let alone recognise.¹⁷⁰ One soldier with the 2nd Lancashire Fusiliers in Sicily recalled being subjected to a barrage of *Nebelwerfer* rockets. One of these hit a section of his Support Company sheltering in an apparently secure hollow: 'The cries and screams following the explosions still haunt me now. In the morning, looking around I went to investigate. There was what appeared to be a heap of bloodstained equipment, but turned out to be pieces of human flesh including a boot with a foot still in it. All that remained of three or four of our men had been collected together in a gas cape'.¹⁷¹ The manner of such a death was particularly disturbing for those left behind since it undermined their belief in the inviolability of their own existence. Many men were prepared to face a quick death, some may even have preferred it to a crippling wound or personal disgrace. But the prospect of being blown to pieces by a shell was almost too much to contemplate. It was, as Lord Moran put it, 'something more than death, [and] all their plans for meeting it with decency and credit were suddenly battered down; it was not so much that their lives were in danger as that their self-respect had gone out of their hands'.¹⁷² It was at the very least, reflected David Cole in the aftermath of the Battle of the Garigliano in January 1944, 'a

¹⁶⁸ Borthwick, *Sans Peur*, 26.

¹⁶⁹ Doherty, *Clear the Way!*, 224.

¹⁷⁰ Jary, *18 Platoon*, 48.

¹⁷¹ Ford, *Battleaxe Division*, 79.

¹⁷² Lord Moran quoted in Holmes, *Acts of War*, 199.

messy way . . . to meet one's Maker - being lifted on a shovel in pieces into an old blanket and dumped in a shallow earthy ditch'.¹⁷³

To conclude, what have we learned about combat in the trenches of 1939–45? Firstly, we can categorically state that despite *blitzkrieg* and all the technological leaps of the twentieth century, it remained an infantryman's war. In between large, set-piece battles (which were relatively infrequent), the infantryman settled into routine line-holding, a morale sapping low-intensity form of combat. The latter involved numerous tension-filled patrols into no-man's-land, sometimes for tangible military purposes, other times simply to gain 'moral ascendancy'; the constant menace of enemy snipers and the physical discomfort they wrought; and, above all else, regular attention from the enemy's guns, generating mental strain at one end and all out shell-shock at the other. A third point was that attacking was generally a matter of head on infantry assaults against heavily fortified positions. Indeed, the dominant German mode of warfare, by force of circumstance, was to establish a static defensive line and hang on to it for as long as possible. Next, in terms of general combat psychology, we discovered that inexperienced troops thought of battle with apprehensive-enthusiasm, but as the prospect of fighting grew nearer their initial keenness gave way to nagging fear. This pre-contact apprehension was not solely confined to green troops. It affected everyone at all times and the crucial point to bear in mind was that most soldiers were *always* scared at the thought of going into action. Another common fear was the fear of failure or of not living up to perceived stereotypes of masculinity, which prompted men to put on a brave face in battle and was, in all likelihood, a crucial mainstay of military discipline. Once they were in battle their fears largely disappeared and they went into a kind of emotional vacuum, remembering little about their actions or feelings. Finally, trench warfare greatly increased one's feelings of isolation as one rarely saw the enemy, let alone came to grips with him; it also highlighted the random and ubiquitous nature of death; and made the fighting increasingly impersonal. Men realised that they would not be killed in a valiant life or death struggle with another soldier, but that their death would come suddenly and

¹⁷³ Cole, *Rough Road to Rome*, 152.

with little dignity, most likely at the hands of some far off machine. Combat in static warfare was for the most part a bewildering experience and one that left most soldiers feeling totally helpless.

Chapter Five: Casualties

It is more fruitful to wound than to kill. While the dead man lies still, counting only one man less, the wounded man is a progressive drain upon his side. Comrades are often called upon to accompany him back; stretcher-bearers and ambulance drivers to carry him back; doctors and orderlies to tend him in hospital. And on his passage thither the sight of him tends to spread depression among the beholders, acting on morale like the drops of cold water which imperceptibly wear away the stone.

Captain Sir Basil Liddell Hart, *Thoughts on War*, 1944.¹

A community at war has as much right to demand that the soldier give his 'nerves' for his country, as in principle it exercises the right to demand that the soldier gives his eyes, limbs or even his life for his country.

Major H. A. Palmer, 'The problem of the P & N [Psychotic and Neurotic] casualty - a study of 12,000 cases', n.d.²

In view of the similarities between combat in the two world wars, one might be forgiven for thinking that casualty rates would be equally comparable. The raw data would appear to suggest otherwise. On the Western Front from 1914 to 1918, the army suffered a total of 677,515 men killed, died of wounds or missing, and 1,837,613 wounded; or 13.4% and 36.4% respectively of the total number of men who served in France and Belgium. During the Second World War, on the other hand, the army called up 3,788,000 men, of whom approximately 2.75 million served overseas. Of these 126,734

¹ Peter G. Tsouras, *The Book of Military Quotations* (St. Paul, MN 2005), 495.

² CMAC GC/135/B.1/2, Major H. A. Palmer, 'The problem of the P & N [Psychotic and Neurotic] casualty - a study of 12,000 cases', 11.

were killed or died of wounds and 239,575 were wounded; 4.6% and 8.7% respectively.³ Given this obvious disparity, it would seem logical to conclude that infantryman in 1939–45 had things a great deal easier. But was this really the case? In fact, when one takes into account the small proportion of fighting troops and examines individual units and campaigns a radically different picture emerges, one in which the casualty rates often exceeded those of the first war by a considerable margin. For example, the loss rate of British and Canadian infantry battalions on the Western Front during the First World War ran at approximately 100 per month. In north-west Europe from D-Day to VE Day (6 June 1944 to 8 May 1945), battalions suffered a *minimum* of 100 casualties per month, but figures as high as 175 were not unknown.⁴ Clearly we need to look further than the crude numbers to get a truly accurate picture. For that reason we will provide the reader with a broad overview of casualties and, in particular, those associated with periods of static warfare. The chapter begins with a statistical analysis of British Army losses during the war and then goes on to consider the actual human cost – both physical and mental – of life in the trenches.

It will come as no surprise that the bulk of the fighting was carried out by the infantry, a relatively small proportion of the Army's total manpower, who also suffered the preponderance of the casualties. This point is illustrated when one compares casualty figures to the relative fighting strength of the 'Queen of Battles'. From September 1939 to June 1945, it is estimated that the Army's average strength was 2,267,447 men, of which 586,982 belonged to the infantry, some 25.9% of the average strength.⁵ Battle casualties in this group amounted to 266,649 men, some 58.8% of total British Army losses (453,625); or, to put it another way, a quarter of the Army's manpower sustained well over half the casualties.⁶ If we narrow the focus to only those arms that engaged the enemy directly (Royal Armoured Corps, Royal Engineers, Infantry, Infantry - airlanding and Army Air Corps) then the disparity becomes even more pronounced. In the same period,

³ Ellis, *Sharp End*, 156.

⁴ Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory: The First World War, Myths and Realities* (London 2002), 276.

⁵ NA WO32/10810, Battle Casualties: all theatres.

⁶ NA WO32/10810, *Ibid*.

September 1939 to June 1945, infantry losses accounted for 79.4% of the overall casualties within this group; breaking the figures down further, in the directly engaged arms infantry officers suffered 70.5% of the total officer casualties and 80.4% of all other ranks casualties came from the infantry.⁷

The preponderance of infantrymen among the casualty figures is also evident when we analyse individual theatres. In North Africa from 8 November 1942 to 13 May 1943, infantry officers suffered 52.3% of all officer battle casualties, while infantry other ranks made up 63.1% of total other rank losses.⁸ In the Italian theatre from 26 August 1944 to 2 May 1945, the average strength of infantry officers and other ranks, as a percentage of the cumulative strength of all forces engaged, stood at 15.8% and 18% respectively, but infantry officers made up 48.6% of total officer casualties and infantry other ranks accounted for 71.1% of all other rank losses; in north-west Europe (6 June 1944 to 8 May 1945) the equivalent figures were 24.5% and 29.4% and 50.2% and 63.3%.⁹

This disparity was not just evident at army level. On 7 June 1944 the fighting strength of 1st Division at Anzio – namely three infantry brigades and one machine-gun battalion - stood at 318 officers and 7,413 other ranks, less than half the paper strength. Since the initial landings on 22 January 1944, a total of 285 officers and 5,413 other ranks had been lost, which works out as 89.6% of the officer fighting strength and 73% of the other rank fighting strength - a combined total of 73.7% of the Division's 7 June 1944 fighting strength.¹⁰ Naturally such carnage exacted a heavy toll and many units experienced more than a 100% turnover in personnel during this period - such as the 2nd North Staffordshire Regiment (105.1%)¹¹, 1st DWR (112%) and 2nd Sherwood Foresters (102.8%).¹² Losses of this magnitude were by no means unique to the Anzio beachhead. The 15th (Scottish) Division fought in north-west Europe and between 13 September and 15 November 1944, sustained a total of 2,860 battle casualties. Of these 2,562 (89.6%) came from the ranks of the nine infantry

⁷ NA WO162/306, Battle Casualties: correspondence and miscellaneous analyses, 1943 to 1945.

⁸ NA WO106/2736, North African Campaign: Casualties, November 1942 to May 1943.

⁹ NA WO32/10810, Battle Casualties: all theatres.

¹⁰ NA WO204/8235, British Infantry Divisions: daily returns of fighting strengths and battle casualties, March to June 1944.

¹¹ Including a 159.3 per cent turnover in officers.

¹² NA WO204/8235, British Infantry Divisions: daily returns of fighting strengths and battle casualties, March to June 1944.

battalions.¹³ From D-Day to the end of the war, each battalion in this division suffered more than 100% casualties.¹⁴ Some units endured even higher rates. The story of the 1st Hampshires is a particularly grim example. Between 6 June and 17 November 1944, the battalion, whose fighting strength was usually between 500 and 600 men, lost 231 killed - nearly twice what most other battalions suffered - and about 1,050 wounded, for a total of 1,281 men. In other words, with each casualty being swiftly replaced by reinforcement, the Hampshires had been wiped out twice over.¹⁵

It should be obvious that the raw figures tell only part of the story. If we take into account the low proportion of British soldiers exposed to combat in World War II - estimated to be as little as 20% to 25% of the total paper strength - and the comparatively high proportion of fighting men in the First World War (the bulk of serving soldiers in 1914-18 were line officers or riflemen)¹⁶ it is clear that for a more balanced picture of casualty rates, the total for 1939-45 should be multiplied at least threefold.¹⁷ This produces average casualties in the region of 13.8% killed or died of wounds and 26.1% wounded; figures a great deal closer to those of the first war.¹⁸ For the ordinary rifleman, therefore, the Second World War was not the painless experience that the gross data implies, far from it. A case in point was that of the 50th (Northumbrian) Division: throughout the campaign in north-west Europe the Tyne-Tees men sustained a total of 452 officer and 6,002 other rank casualties. We can reasonably assume that something like 90 per cent of these came from the nine infantry battalions, and that the division as a whole had an 80 per cent replacement rate, meaning that just over 49 per cent of all the men who served in these units became battle casualties – in

¹³ Ellis, *Sharp End*, 159.

¹⁴ NA WO193/452, Lt.-Col. J. H. A. Sparrow, 'Report on Visit to 21 Army Group and Tour of Second Army 30 Mar - 5 May 1945'. Morale Committee, agenda and minutes (March 1942 to February 1946).

¹⁵ Picot, *Accidental Warrior*, 263.

¹⁶ On 1 September 1914, the non-combatant proportion of all British troops in France stood at 16.63%; in contrast, the infantry represented 53.89% of the total strength and some 64.64% of the total number of fighting troops. The equivalent figures for 1 July 1918 show an increase in the number of rear area troops - 33.45% non-combatants against 34.10% infantry – but their numbers remained modest by modern standards and the infantry still accounted for some 51.25% of the total number of fighting troops (*Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire During the Great War* (London 1922), 65). In fact, the 'teeth to tail ratio' of the BEF in the First World War was consistently better than that of the British Army in the Second World War - the latter required 84,000 men to maintain one division, while in 1914-18 the figure fluctuated between 44,600 in February 1917 and 64,100 in May 1918 (Holmes, *Tommy*, 191).

¹⁷ Ellis, *Sharp End*, 156-160.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 159.

other words, a *fifty-fifty* chance of getting hit. The corresponding figure for the 15th (Scottish) Division, going on the same premise, is 58.4%. If we narrow our focus to battle fatalities in each division, we find that in the 50th one had a 1 in 10 chance of being killed and in the 15th a 1 in 9 chance. The odds were even worse in individual battalions. In the 6th KOSB one had a 63.9% chance of being hit, whilst 1 in 10 were killed. In the 1st Royal Norfolks, 66.3% became battle casualties and no less than 1 in 6 were killed, while the equivalent numbers in the 1st Dorsets were 63.9% and 1 in 7.¹⁹

Needless to say, losses on this scale ensured an almost constant turnover in infantry personnel, which led to a marked deterioration in unit cohesion and combat effectiveness. Take for example, this account from a private in the 1st Suffolks:

I can only tell you what happened from when we landed on D-Day until August 18 – nearly the end of the battle of Normandy. On that day I was clobbered by a mortar round and wounded in both legs and my right hand . . . A corporal and myself were evacuated that day, the last of the platoon which had landed on D-Day – so our casualty rate in the Normandy battle was 100 per cent.²⁰

Such losses could be inflicted in a much shorter space of time. It took just one or two well-sited machine guns or an ill-timed mortar concentration to utterly decimate an infantry company in a few minutes; and a poorly-conceived attack could prove immensely costly. When the 4th Somersets took part in a set-piece attack on Hill 112 in Normandy, it met with limited success due to the enemy's overwhelming superiority in men and firepower. Of the 36 men in 18 Platoon who went into battle, a mere 9 remained – a 75% casualty rate. 'The cost in casualties,' wrote Corporal Doug Proctor, 'was too awful to comprehend. The battalion as we had known it no longer existed'.²¹ Similarly, in the Western Desert, on 20 November 1941, the 2nd Black Watch were recklessly thrown forward against

¹⁹ Ellis, *Sharp End*, 163.

²⁰ Neillands, *Battle of Normandy*, 389; see also Ray, *Algiers to Austria*, 107.

²¹ Neillands, *Battle of Normandy*, 218.

three German strong-points known as Butch, Jill and Tiger. In less than two hours they lost 24 officers and 440 men.²²

Another point to bear in mind is that officers suffered a disproportionately higher rate of casualties. There is much anecdotal evidence to support this: after the first and second battles of Monte Camino (November to December 1943), one nineteen year old subaltern in the 6th Grenadier Guards was amazed to find that he was the only rifle platoon commander left unscathed; while of the thirty officers of the 6th Royal West Kents who landed in Algeria in November 1942, Paul Bryan was the sole survivor less than one year later.²³ Statistical analysis provides more comprehensive evidence. In north-west Europe, officers were lost at a rate of 26.5 per thousand men per month, compared to 19.6 casualties per thousand men per month for other ranks.²⁴ Numerous other figures reinforce this point. At full strength an infantry battalion contained 36 officers, roughly 4% of the overall ration strength, yet in Sicily this group constituted 17.7% of the total British killed and wounded; in Tunisia, 15.1% of First Army's total dead and wounded were infantry officers. Out of a random sample of hospitalised soldiers in Italy during 1944, 26.8% of them were officers compared to only 13.8% other ranks (it is likely that the overwhelming majority of these officers would have been drawn from the infantry battalions).²⁵ The most dangerous job in the army, in fact, was that of commanding a rifle platoon or rifle company. An analysis of 2,407 infantry casualties from seven divisions in 21st Army Group (6 June to 6 November 1944) revealed that 31.2% and 30% respectively of rifle platoon and rifle company commanders became casualties each month (the next highest was 20.1%, that of rifle company second-in-command).²⁶ Nearly 70% of officer casualties took place

²² Ellis, *Sharp End*, 164-167.

²³ IWM 06/126/1, Freeman-Attwood, 'Recollections of War', 54; Bryan, *Wool, War and Westminster*, 94; see also Cole, *Rough Road to Rome*, 179.

²⁴ French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, 77. This statistic relates to all arms. The ratio for infantry officers alone would be considerably higher.

²⁵ Ellis, *Sharp End*, 163.

²⁶ NA WO291/2454, 'Infantry officer casualties', No. 2 Operational Research Section, 21 Army Group.

when units were attacking (the defensive phase still accounted for a third of all losses) and 40% of them took place when the attacking troops were less than 500 yards from the enemy.²⁷

All of this meant that most officers did not last long at the front. When one newly commissioned officer joined the 2nd Seaforths at Nijmegen, his company commander took a 'gloomy satisfaction' in telling him that the average life expectancy of a platoon commander in the division was just six weeks.²⁸ Martin Lindsay, CO 1st Gordons, came up with a similar figure at the end of the war when he counted the number of officers who had served in his battalion since D-Day:

Up to March 27th, the end of Operation Plunder [the crossing of the Rhine], it is 102. . . . I found that we have had 55 officers commanding the twelve rifle platoons and that their average service with the Battalion was thirty-eight days, or five and a half weeks. Of these fifty-three per cent were wounded, twenty-four per cent killed or died of wounds, fifteen per cent invalided, and five per cent had survived.²⁹

A mere 5%, then, had survived the campaign intact.

Officer casualties in 1939-45 were proportionately higher than in 1914-18, which may come as something of a surprise to most readers. The HLI, for instance, lost 1 officer to every 16 other ranks during the Great War; whilst in World War Two the figure was 1 officer for every 12 other ranks. The equivalent rates for the Coldstream Guards are 1:20 and 1:12.³⁰ If we look at casualties sustained by the seven infantry divisions that fought in north-west Europe from 1 August to 6 November 1944 we find that these figures are not isolated discrepancies. Again the raw data, which was based on the paper strength, is initially misleading and gives varying figures between 1:28 and 1:70. However, when we adjust for the fact that the infantry constituted only a tiny fraction of the division's total manpower – often less than a quarter – the results are significantly different. Based on this assumption we get the following officer to other rank casualty ratios: 15th (Scottish) – 1:7; 53rd

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ IWM 87/23/1, Amsden, 'Cuidich 'N Righ', 14; see also Jary, *18 Platoon*, 1.

²⁹ Lindsay, *So Few Got Through*, 267.

³⁰ Ellis, *Sharp End*, 164.

(Welsh) – 1:7; 43rd (Wessex) – 1:8; 50th (Northumbrian) – 1:12; 3rd – 1:13; 49th (West Riding) – 1:16; and 51st (Highland) – 1:18.³¹ As we can see, leading from the front was an extremely risky business and one that resulted in a steady drain of qualified personnel from the frontline. The main point that the reader should take from the foregoing is that, if the fighting in the Second World War was as mobile as the popular misconception would have us believe, why then were the losses of a similar rate to those of the static Western Front? In actual fact, the casualty figures offer further evidence of the true nature of combat in 1939–45.

Given the torrent of statistics cited above, one could easily lose sight of the fact that we are dealing with the human cost of static warfare - flesh and blood, instead of ratios and percentages. Let us consider the experience of the wounded soldier. In terms of medical care, the fighting men of World War Two were a great deal better off than any preceding generation. By 1939 medicine had made great leaps forward (most notably penicillin, sulphonamides and blood transfusion), which were rapidly applied to the battlefield and which gave the wounded a much greater chance of recovery. In spite of these discoveries, medical arrangements often failed to meet the standards set in the Great War. This had little to do with the level of medical proficiency, but instead reflected a key fact touched upon in earlier chapters. On the Western Front in the First World War the highly static lines ensured that the wounded were never far from a RAP, usually in the foremost trenches, or a large casualty CCS, typically set up in close proximity to the front. Even allowing for the difficulties of getting the wounded from A to B, one could at least expect to receive comprehensive treatment reasonably quickly. During the second war, the lines were never as fixed and constant progress, albeit aching slow, was usually made. This made it difficult for medical installations to stay in one place for any length of time; equally, if there was a particularly swift advance or withdrawal (such as

³¹ NA WO291/2454, 'Infantry officer casualties', No. 2 Operational Research Section, 21 Army Group.

in France and Belgium or Libya), most CCS were too cumbersome to be moved very far, meaning wounded men often had to travel huge distances to receive treatment.³²

If we go back to the beginning, the process begins with a rifleman becoming a casualty. There were countless ways this might happen and it is impossible to treat each one individually. We will focus our attention on the main types of wounds suffered by infantrymen in the trenches and the agents that caused them. As we established in the previous chapter, much of the fighting in the Second World War was dominated by the explosive missile, meaning weapons of this sort were the principal source of most wounds. This was particularly true in Europe, where from 6 June to 30 September 1944, of the 1,641 battle casualties seen by 21st Army Group's Ophthalmic Department, the causal agent in 30% of cases was a shell, while bombs (air or mortar) accounted for 20%, and blasts (origin unspecified) accounted for 16%. Bullet wounds, in contrast, featured in only 11% of cases. In total, no less than two-thirds of all eye injuries were caused by explosive missiles or unidentified blasts.³³ Another less specialised sample reinforces this point. Over the thirteen week period ending 30 September 1944, some 29,860 Second Army battle casualties were admitted to medical units; in 30% of cases the wound had been caused by a shell splinter, while in 15% the causal missile was a mortar. For approximately 15% of patients the origin of the wound could not be identified. Thus it seems fair to say that at least half of the battle casualties admitted in this period received their wound as a result of shell or mortar fire.³⁴ Overall it is thought that as much as 75% of all wounds were caused by mortars, grenades, aerial bombs or shells. Bullets or anti-tank shells came in a distant second with 10%.³⁵

Although there can be little doubt that shells and bombs accounted for the majority of casualties, these figures do seem to be at odds with other more modest samples, especially where the prominence of bullet wounds is concerned. In the Second Army case cited above, one-third of battle

³² Ellis, *Sharp End*, 172-173.

³³ F. A. E. Crew, *The Army Medical Services. Campaigns, Volume IV: North-west Europe* (London 1962), 591.

³⁴ Crew, *Army Medical Services*, vol. IV, 571.

³⁵ Ellis, *Sharp End*, 177.

casualties were caused by gunshot wounds, the same proportion as shell splinters. A more realistic estimate of the proportion of such casualties would be somewhere in the region of between 25% and 30%, especially in Africa and north-west Europe. We should also remember that the statistics are somewhat skewed in that they only deal with *wounded* men; in reality, bullet wounds accounted for many men who later succumbed to their injuries, while a great deal of soldiers were killed instantly by sniper or machine-gun fire.

When a bullet struck a soldier one of two things would happen. It would either pass straight through his body, leaving an exit wound similar in diameter to the entry wound; or, if it was deflected by bones or organs, cause a much larger, distorted exit wound. Given that the human body contains a great deal of bones and organs, most bullets distorted when they hit.³⁶ This was not the worst feature of a gunshot wound though. A bullet kills and wounds according to the law of kinetic energy, whereby the force of a projectile is the product of its mass and half the square of its velocity. Thus a small object travelling at high speed can strike its target with enormous power. The actual force of impact was determined by a variety of factors - besides speed, a bullet's yaw, its shape and air resistance could affect its striking power. Over long distances a tumbling bullet lost speed and impact, but would, at close range, cause a great deal more damage than a smoothly flying projectile (amongst the obstacles and debris of the trenches, tumbling bullets were common). Speed was the single most important factor. A bullet of 150 grains that struck a thigh with an impact speed of 2,500 feet per second would pass through 8 inches of bone and tissue in 0.00033 seconds; and in so doing, release 1,330 foot-pounds of energy.³⁷ It was this aspect of being hit – the abrupt release of energy – that is the most devastating consequence of a wound, even more destructive than the penetration. Some 1,330 foot-pounds absorbed in 0.00033 seconds was the equivalent of 7,200 horsepower – one horsepower being the energy required to lift 550 pounds one foot in one second. Sudden bursts of energy on this scale caused body parts to explode. For this reason, head wounds

³⁶ Lee, *Up Close and Personal*, 36.

³⁷ These figures relate to the British Lee-Enfield Mark III rifle used during World War One. In World War Two, the bullets were heavier and had a greater muzzle velocity.

were nearly always fatal. Muscle was torn and bone was shattered, but softer body parts, like the brain, disintegrated when struck by a bullet. Moreover, single wounds were relatively rare. Small arms fire was often so intense that men received multiple wounds simultaneously.³⁸

If the preceding has resulted in an air of ambiguity, we should reiterate the fundamental point that the majority of battle wounds were not caused by bullets, but by artillery. The effect of shellfire is something we have touched upon in previous chapters; at this stage it would be of some use to consider the experience in greater detail, with particular reference to the fragile human body. For those nearby, a shellburst appeared as a sudden orange-yellow flash inside a dark plume of smoke and smashed earth, often with larger pieces of slower-moving debris suspended on the periphery.

Alex Bowlby described one such explosion:

in the split-second between the blast and my reaction to it, I saw two different shades of red - the dark red of disintegrating metal, the funnel of flame opening around it. Then I went to bits myself. The reds of the explosion were clamped on my retina. For several minutes I could see nothing else.³⁹

In the aftermath, the bigger, heavier pieces of earth and stones thrown up by the blast fell nearby first; the smaller debris, propelled much higher, would rain down for an extended period and over a larger area and could cause severe injuries.⁴⁰

The explosion itself created an abrupt change in air pressure as compressed air at the epicentre moved outwards at supersonic speed. It was followed after a slight interval by the blast wind – the bulk flow of hot gases, fragments and ground debris away from the blast. Those in the target area experienced the pressure wave as an acute squeezing sensation in the chest, and through the ground as violent tremors underfoot; the latter were powerful enough to convince people sheltering in trenches that they were about to be buried alive, while those hugging the ground felt themselves

³⁸ Robert Whalen, *Bitter Wounds: German victims of the Great War, 1914-1939* (Ithaca, NY 1984), 50.

³⁹ Bowlby, *Recollections*, 183.

⁴⁰ Martin Windrow, *The Last Valley: Dien Bien Phu and the French defeat in Vietnam* (London 2005), 371-372; see also NA WO195/6645, Static Detonation Committee, Fragmentation Panel: wounding power of debris caused by bombs, 1944.

hurled forcefully into the air. These sensations, along with the unbearable wall of noise, meant that the physical senses were completely overloaded during a prolonged barrage. Shelling of this magnitude often caused soldiers to become temporarily unhinged – ‘shell-shocked’ in the very truest sense of the word – and lose all semblance of physical and mental control. A report written in 1944, by No. 1 Operational Research Section, concluded that ‘if men are exposed to sufficient strain for a sufficient length of time they will be brought to a state of morale collapse such that for a considerable period they will be unable to fight effectively’.⁴¹ This was particularly noticeable among green troops exposed to shellfire for the first time. Vernon Scannell described the psychological collapse of one inexperienced member of his company in Normandy. The soldier in question was found curled up on a cellar floor, howling and sobbing. ‘The smart, keen young soldier was now transformed into something that was at once pitiful and disgusting. The neatly-shaped, alert features had melted and blurred, the mouth was sagging and the whole face, dirty and stubbled, seemed swollen and was smeared with tears and snot’.⁴² These unintentional reactions were, nonetheless, based on an entirely rational fear: the majority of casualties were produced by shells and mortar bombs.⁴³

Exploding shells or mortar bombs produced a variety of different casualties. Broadly speaking, there were three distinct types of blast injury: primary – the direct effect of the pressure wave; secondary – the effect of projectiles and debris carried by the blast wind; and tertiary – the consequences of the body being thrown through the air and smashing into the ground or colliding with other obstacles. The most obvious sign of primary injury was ruptured eardrums, which resulted from a sudden rise in air pressure of between 5 and 15 pounds per square inch (psi) and most memoirs describe men killed in this manner who appeared to be sleeping peacefully save tell-tale bleeding from the ears.⁴⁴ On occasion the blast froze soldiers in a grotesque tableau of their final moments,

⁴¹ NA WO291/1327, Lt.-Col. L. J. Hudleston, ADSR, No. 1 Operational Research Section, ‘Bombardment to break morale’.

⁴² Beevor, *D-Day*, 187.

⁴³ Whalen, *Bitter Wounds*, 51; Windrow, *Last Valley*, 372.

⁴⁴ Martin Lindsay quoted in Holmes, *Acts of War*, 179.

which, in the absence of obvious visible injuries, made for some particularly chilling scenes. In Normandy, one British unit stumbled upon four German soldiers sitting around a table in a farm garden, frozen in the attitude in which they had met death; one even had an arm raised with a fork in his hand.⁴⁵ Although the fatal internal damage caused by pressures of 50psi and above did not present dramatic outward signs, the gas containing organs sustained immediate lethal damage: the lungs and occasionally the colon suffered ruinous injury from the rapid compression effect produced by the blast. Large blood-filled cavities formed in the lung and fatal air embolisms were released into the arterial system; less frequently, the bowels ruptured, as did the spleen and liver.⁴⁶ Even outside the fatal radius of the blast, the injuries could be severe. In Holland, one soldier had his left arm struck by a concentrated blast from an exploding shell. 'The skin only had a burn-like mark,' he remembered, 'but inside everything was broken: bones, blood vessels, the lot'.⁴⁷

Secondary injuries were a great deal more dramatic. Shells were designed to fragment on detonation, producing pieces of jagged steel in all shapes and sizes, from needle like shards to twisted lumps weighing several pounds.⁴⁸ These – along with stones, pieces of weapons and equipment, even bone fragments from casualties nearer the blast – whirled outwards from the epicentre at varying speeds. The consequences of being hit by such fragments differed enormously. Those struck by tiny splinters were often completely unaware they had been hit at all; while larger fragments, tumbling erratically through the air with serrated edges and hooks, caused utterly horrific injuries.⁴⁹ The diary of Private Jim Wisewell, medical orderly in 223rd Field Ambulance, 185th Brigade, provides graphic testimony of this. In the early stages of Operation Charnwood (8 July 1944), the first wounded men Wisewell treated had been cheerful and optimistic; his unit splinted

⁴⁵ How, *Hill 112*, 77.

⁴⁶ Windrow, *Last Valley*, 373.

⁴⁷ Major John Evans, 1/5th Queen's, quoted in Robin Neillands, *The Conquest of the Reich: from D-Day to VE-Day: a soldiers' history* (London 1996), 68.

⁴⁸ See for instance NA WO185/146, Military Operational Research Report, Interim Report No. 1 on an Examination of the Zuckerman Criteria of Wounding, based on a review of the available literature by Major H.B. Wright, MB, RAMC of the Military Operational Research Unit; Erik Gray, OC anti-tank platoon, quoted in Lincoln, *Thank God and the Infantry*, 76.

⁴⁹ Ellis, *Sharp End*, 178; Whalen, *Bitter Wounds*, 51; Windrow, *Last Valley*, 373.

fractures, covered wounds with sterile dressings and relieved each other for breakfast at 6.30 a.m.

'As the day wore on, sunny and scorching hot,' he wrote, 'the tide of casualties rose'.

Ghastly wounds there were, of every type and state of severity. Heads with skulls so badly smashed that bone and brain and pillow were almost indivisible; faces with horrible lacerations; jaws blown completely away leaving only two sad eyes to plead for relief from pain. Chests pierced through with shrapnel and lungs that spouted blood from gushing holes. Arms were mangled into shapeless masses left hanging by muscle alone and waiting the amputation knife. There were abdomens perforated by shell splinters and displaying coils of intestine, deadly wounds. Buttocks were torn and in some cases spinal injury had followed bringing paralysis. But the leg wounds! Thigh-bones splintered; knees without knee caps; legs without feet; red, mangled flesh and blood flooding the stretcher. And others trembling uncontrollably, sobbing like children, strapped to the stretcher and struggling to be free; screaming and, when a shell landed near the ADS, shouting, 'They're coming again! O God, they're coming again'. Not heroes, but sufferers nonetheless.

Wisewell's unit was eventually relieved by 9th Field Ambulance at 6 p.m. They had treated 466 British soldiers and 40 Germans.⁵⁰

On the rare occasion when a soldier suffered a direct hit from a shell, the body was completely vaporised. Private R. G Freeman, 'D' Company, 1st Royal Norfolks, saw his mates blown to pieces by a Moaning Minnie bomb during an attack in Holland in late 1944. 'All we found was a hand,' he remembered. 'We knew it was the Bren gunner's hand because it had freckles and he was a very freckled man indeed'.⁵¹ An infantryman with the Worcesters in north-west Europe recalled the death of a friend with utter disbelief: 'The shell hit him. I'm telling you, it blew him to tiny little bits . . . a booted foot, a section of human cranium, a bunch of fingers, a bit of clothing . . . it was simply a matter of *little tiny bits*'.⁵² Such blasts sent fragments of the body flying in all directions, sometimes

⁵⁰ Delaforce, *Monty's Iron Sides*, 81.

⁵¹ Lincoln, *Thank God and the Infantry*, 123.

⁵² Ellis, *Sharp End*, 114.

causing injuries themselves. One platoon commander in Italy was temporarily stunned by the impact of a comrade's forearm, easily recognisable from its tattoos; while a private who fought in France (1940), recalled being struck in the face by another man's jaw.⁵³ Sometimes troops moving into a position stumbled upon grisly reminders of the deadly consequences of a shell strike. After the 7th DWR dug in at Cagny, the men were provided with a meal. As one private soldier reached up in the dark for a sandwich he found something soft and lifted it down to his face for closer inspection. It was three fingers attached to half of a human hand.⁵⁴ We need say little more on this shocking aspect of shellfire, save to emphasise the fact that to witness such a death – perhaps of a friend – was intensely shocking; besides the anguish of losing a mate, it suddenly and incontrovertibly removed any illusions about one's own inviolability. Such hits were relatively rare, however. Most injuries occurred further out from the site of the initial explosion.⁵⁵

So far we have dealt with the physical elements of wounds thereby neglecting the implications for morale. The next section will ponder some of the psychological aspects thrown up by such injuries, not only in relation to the wounded man himself, but for his comrades too. The first thing to acknowledge is that while most soldiers became inured to the sight of death, it was far more difficult to grow accustomed to the sight and sound of the wounded. Men were often more shaken by the sight of a badly wounded man than they were by that of a corpse. One such soldier was Doug Proctor, who witnessed a particularly traumatic incident during a night attack on Hill 112. One unlucky man had been hit in the chest by a bullet, but not killed outright. The bullet, however, had passed through the man's webbing equipment pouch and struck a phosphorous smoke grenade he was carrying. Proctor takes up the story:

Caught on barbed wire, the poor soldier lay disembowelled, for all around to see, his writhing body a smoking mass of burning phosphorous. Responding to his agonized screams to put him

⁵³ Holmes, *Acts of War*, 179; Lincoln, *Thank God and the Infantry*, 47.

⁵⁴ Delaforce, *Polar Bears*, 114.

⁵⁵ Windrow, *Last Valley*, 372-373.

out of his misery, his platoon commander shot him through the heart and finally through the head, after the poor man's final frenzied plea, 'Not there, sir, through the head'.⁵⁶

In contrast, Raleigh Trevelyan witnessed something so appalling that he could not even begin to describe it fully, even in the pages of his diary: 'Yesterday evening there was something on a stretcher that was the worst sight I have ever seen at this bridgehead . . . and it was still alive'.⁵⁷ Seeing the enemy's wounded could prove just as distressing. Private John Longfield of the 1/4th KOYLI recalled coming across a German sitting on the edge of an enormous bomb crater during the attack on Tessel Wood. Longfield was about to shoot him when the man looked up and raised his arms. 'There were no hands on the ends of his arms. I was so horrified at his predicament that I considered killing him to put him out of his misery'.⁵⁸ Undoubtedly, the sight of a badly wounded man could be damaging to morale; more than anything else, it made men realise that there was no special reason why they themselves could not get hit too.

Not all wounds were a source of profound misery though. Like the last war, a 'Blighty Wound' – one serious enough to necessitate time away from the front to recover, but not serious enough to kill or cripple the victim – was hoped for by many, and sometimes self-inflicted (more on this in the next chapter). W. S. Scull, a private who fought with the 1st Black Watch in 1945, described the leg wound his platoon sergeant received as a 'nice Blighty one'.⁵⁹ Rex Wingfield remembered how one man in his unit received 'a nice clean wound' and how, as he made his way slowly back to the RAP, his comrades chaffed him, envious of his luck.⁶⁰ Such was the warped nature of life in the trenches that those fortunate enough to escape – even if it required serious injury to do so – were thought of as 'lucky bastards'. Fred Majdalany certainly thought so: 'You thought of the peace and quiet to which those wounded were going. You thought of a clean hospital bed. And it seemed the most

⁵⁶ Delaforce, *Marching to the Sound of Gunfire*, 75.

⁵⁷ Trevelyan, *Fortress*, 73-74.

⁵⁸ Delaforce, *Marching to the Sound of Gunfire*, 60.

⁵⁹ IWM 06/41/1, W.S. Scull, 11.

⁶⁰ Wingfield, *Only Way Out*, 98; see also Lt. George D. H. Dicks quoted in Lincoln, *Thank God and the Infantry*, 158.

wonderful and desirable thing in the world to be wounded'.⁶¹ When a German plane dropped a bomb near Tom Gore's trench during February 1945, a sudden stinging sensation in his hand led him to believe he would soon be away from the horror and discomfort of the front. 'I thought that I had caught a light one,' he later wrote, 'a wound that was not too bad, but bad enough to get a few days rest and some good food. It's a thought that often goes through the mind on the front line'. As it turned out, the injury to his hand was simply a burn from the cigarette he had been smoking. His relief at the prospect of escaping the battlefield vanished, prompting Gore to curse his luck.⁶² In the words of Vernon Scannell, it was 'a funny old world where you call someone lucky because they've had their foot blown off'.⁶³

Wounds were not the only way out of the trenches. In every theatre a great deal more riflemen were lost to disease than enemy action. Although battle casualties in the infantry battalions were high, for the medical authorities they represented only the tip of the iceberg – approximately 240,000 wounded, against 5 million cases of all kinds. A ratio of 1:21. The problem of handling battle casualties, therefore, was never as arduous as that of dealing with the vast numbers of sick. Numerous sources stress this point: in Tunisia from 8 November 1942 to 1 January 1943, the daily hospital admission rate due to sickness was 1.9 per thousand men, compared to just 0.72 per thousand for wounds.⁶⁴ In the brief campaign in Sicily, conducted in highly malarial country, the Eighth Army lost some 11,590 men to this disease alone, compared to 9,000 battle casualties.⁶⁵ In mainland Italy from 1943 to 1945, the average number of admissions to medical units on account of sickness was 509.49 per thousand men per year; battle injuries averaged just 54.42 over the same period.⁶⁶ In north-west Europe from July to December 1944, the total number of sick admitted to medical units from I Corps was on average 388.84 per thousand men per annum, while battle

⁶¹ Majdalany, *Monastery*, 13.

⁶² IWM 99/85/1, Gore, 'Reluctant Hero, Reluctant Coward', 25.

⁶³ Scannell, *Argument of Kings*, 160.

⁶⁴ Crew, *Campaigns*, ii, 373.

⁶⁵ Crew, *Campaigns*, iii, 53.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 504.

casualties accounted for 297.05 (a reflection of the intensity of the fighting in this theatre).⁶⁷ As most sickness was far from trivial, it imposed a huge drain on manpower. In Italy, the mean duration of stay in hospital and convalescent depot for disease was slightly less than three and a half weeks. Even allowing for the fact that wounded men stayed for nearly seven weeks, it is clear that the overwhelming bulk of man days lost was not caused by enemy action.⁶⁸

One time-consuming illness was 'trench foot', or 'immersion foot' as it was officially known, a condition similar to frostbite resulting from soldiers having continually wet feet for days on end whilst wearing constrictive footwear.⁶⁹ The condition, which was widespread during the First World War, was seen in considerable numbers during the Second, particularly in the winters of 1943–44 and 1944–45.⁷⁰ In November 1943, in Italy, about 30 cases of trench foot were reported among forward troops in X Corps. The medical history was that the men had spent three to six days in an exposed position on the mountain side under enemy observation, unable to light a fire or to take off their boots and all the time subjected to torrential rain (all the cases required hospitalisation for six weeks). During the period December 1943 to March 1944, trench foot remained one of the most prevalent diseases in X Corps. Most cases were mild, caused by exposure in the mountains from two to eight days in continuous rain and with no opportunity for foot care.⁷¹ In the ridges south of Monte Cassino - where soldiers manning the front line stood to in bitterly cold weather in water-filled slit-trenches for days and sometimes weeks at a time - the condition was common.⁷² 'I don't know how they managed to keep going for so long,' wrote Sister Pamela Barker, appalled by the state of some of the men's feet when they hobbled into her CCS (often nurses had to cut their boots off). 'Some men with the Battleaxe Division [78th Division] sign on their shoulders said they'd had very little time out of the line during the two months in the Monte Cassino front'.⁷³ If left untreated, the feet

⁶⁷ Crew, *Campaigns*, iv, 564-566.

⁶⁸ Crew, *Campaigns*, iii, 505.

⁶⁹ NA WO177/414, ADMS 56th (London) Division, War Diary for November 1943.

⁷⁰ NA WO177/414, ADMS 56th (London) Division, War Diary for November 1943, January 1944, January 1945.

⁷¹ Crew, *Campaigns*, iii, 547-548.

⁷² Taylor, *Combat Nurse*, 173.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 174.

went numb, turned purple and, in extreme cases, the nerves died off and gangrene set in. When this happened toes, sometimes even the entire foot, had to be amputated.⁷⁴

Surgeon Edward Churchill toured the front lines in Italy and witnessed the awful conditions in which infantrymen were fighting. He noted in his subsequent report that a man would become a casualty if he fought under those conditions for more than five days at a stretch. Some he had seen as patients had not had their boots off for twelve days in cold, rain and mud. 'The answer lies in more frequent relief,' he stated in his report.⁷⁵ According to the official history, the provision of extra socks and the enforcement of rigid foot discipline eventually alleviated the problem.⁷⁶ So much so that *Medical Services in War* sanctimoniously announced, 'the condition should not arise in well-disciplined units if the necessary supplies of suitable footwear are available and the rules for the care of feet, drawn up in the First World War, are observed'.⁷⁷ In terms of treatment, there was much continuity with the earlier conflict, due in no small part to the influence of senior officers, many of whom as young subalterns would have served on the Western Front and would have been all too aware of the importance of hygiene and organisational matters. This was especially true of Montgomery, who enforced stringent measures to prevent trench foot. In 21st Army Group soldiers had to wash their feet twice a day with foot soap, apply generous amounts of foot powder, a blend of talc, camphor and boric acid, and then put on a dry pair of socks.⁷⁸ The incidence of the disease, given the conditions that prevailed for much of the campaign, was remarkably low – the rate per thousand per week stood at 0.08 in January, 0.04 in February and 0.02 in March.⁷⁹

The other great scourges of 1914–18, the louse and the mite, remained a problem in World War Two, albeit substantially reduced by innovations such as DDT and benzyl benzoate. Despite this,

⁷⁴ Arthur MacNalty, *Medical services in war: the principal medical lessons of the Second World War: based on the official medical histories of the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and India* (London 1968), 460.

⁷⁵ Taylor, *Combat Nurse*, 174.

⁷⁶ Crew, *Campaigns*, iii, 547-548.

⁷⁷ MacNalty, *Medical services in war*, 399-400; see also CMAC GC/46/A/9, Brigadier E. R. Boland, Consulting Physician AFHQ, 'AFHQ Directive on Immersion Foot, Trench Foot or Frostbite', 25 December 1944, 1-2; see also NA WO177/414, ADMS 56th (London) Division, War Diary for November 1943, January 1944, January 1945; NA WO170/1489, 2nd Wiltshire Regiment, War Diary for June 1944.

⁷⁸ Ellis, *Sharp End*, 186.

⁷⁹ Crew, *Campaigns*, iv, 573.

countless man-days were lost to pediculosis (lice infestation) and scabies (a skin infection caused by the itch mite). The problem was particularly bad in the early months of the campaign in France (1940), where one senior medical officer noted that:

A considerable proportion of sick wastage in the Field is due to skin diseases, scabies and infestation with lice. These conditions are brought about by a failure to maintain a satisfactory degree of personal cleanliness. All junior officers should be taught how to spot them and when discovered the men suffering should be ordered to report to their medical officer for treatment. The Regimental Medical Officer will also inspect the men at frequent intervals but it should be fully understood that the responsibility for maintaining cleanliness in the unit falls solely on Unit Officers.⁸⁰

At agreed intervals the troops were subjected to the mandatory FFI – the Free From Infection examination – which was principally intended to detect scabies and lice. It was to all intents and purposes a relic of the last war and many MOs were unconvinced that it did much good, but when it was used in combination with regular baths and changes of clothing, it may have had some effect upon the rate of louse-borne infections.⁸¹ Despite improvements in the following years, cases of pediculosis continued to appear among frontline troops. The War Diary of the ADMS of 56th (London) Division, noted a steady increase in louse infestation in the early months of 1944; while at Anzio, one officer complained to his company commander that the meagre allowance of AL 63 powder was insufficient to cope with the lice that plagued the majority of his unit.⁸² From December 1943 to March 1944, X Corps, in Italy, recorded some 717 cases, and from July 1944 to June 1945 the figure in V Corps was 1,227.⁸³ Even in Montgomery's 21st Army Group, the incidence was relatively

⁸⁰ Mark Harrison, *Medicine and Victory: British military medicine in the Second World War* (Oxford 2008), 48.

⁸¹ Harrison, *Medicine and Victory*, 48.

⁸² NA WO177/414, ADMS 56th (London) Division, War Diary for March 1944; Trevelyan, *The Fortress*, 42.

⁸³ Crew, *Campaigns*, iii, 516-518, 521.

high at times; the monthly rate per thousand men peaked at 1.523 during January 1945 to March 1945 (in XXX Corps the rate was 3.07 per thousand).⁸⁴

Scabies proved to be a major problem. It was one of the principal diseases affecting the troops in Italy, increasing in the last week of September 1944 and rising steadily thereafter. In V Corps, for instance, there were 93 cases during July to September, 393 cases in October to December, 1,106 during January to March and 639 from April to June. The problem peaked in January, when the incidence among all British troops in the country was 1.29 per thousand per *week*. Most units produced unusual numbers at one time or another during the campaign and there appears to have been a general surge in the disease, resulting in a significant drain on manpower (the mean duration of the stay in hospital due to scabies was some 18.4 days).⁸⁵ The same was true of the campaign in north-west Europe, where from June 1944 to March 1945, scabies was *the* most common disease afflicting the troops. In this period, the mean monthly rate per thousand ration strength stood at 2.633, while for January to March 1945 it was 4.287, with XXX Corps alone recording 1,057 fresh cases, a quarterly incidence rate of 9.74 per thousand.⁸⁶ In general, though, the standard of hygiene was fairly high throughout the war; one notable success in this respect was the low rate of typhus, a potentially fatal louse-borne disease.⁸⁷

Returning to battle fatalities, the way in which one dealt with the dead was another important aspect of life in the trenches, one that had significance far beyond the physical act of disposing of the body. Although most soldiers became accustomed to the sight of the dead, a corpse nevertheless provided them with compelling evidence of their own mortality. The majority of men were greatly concerned about what would happen to their body after death and, for that reason, took great care to recover fallen comrades. E. Grey Turner wrote of his surprise at the risks taken by Guardsmen to collect the dead for burial, and how they themselves were often killed or wounded in

⁸⁴ Crew, *Campaigns*, iv, 561, 569.

⁸⁵ Crew, *Campaigns*, iii, 508, 516-518, 544; see also NA WO177/414, ADMS 56th (London) Division, War Diary for January 1945.

⁸⁶ Crew, *Campaigns*, iv, 561, 569.

⁸⁷ Crew, *Campaigns*, iii, 369; Harrison, *Medicine and Victory*, 94; MacNalty, *Medical Services in War*, 83-84.

the process.⁸⁸ Undoubtedly retrieving the body could pose significant problems - in many cases, the intensity of the fighting meant that truces to collect the dead and wounded were not possible.⁸⁹ Of course, this was not always the case, as Geoffrey Picot recalls after one skirmish in Normandy during August 1944:

After a brief encounter both sides withdrew slightly, leaving their casualties in no man's land. A German came forward slowly with a Red Cross flag; so one of our stretcher bearers, with a Red Cross armlet, went out to meet him. They met in no man's land. The stretcher bearer looked at a British casualty and saw the man was dead. The German looked at his wounded and prepared to carry him back to his lines. When the German saw our stretcher bearer had nobody to carry away he made signs to him, requesting him to help carry the wounded German back. This the stretcher bearer agreed to do, and as he carried the enemy back to his medical station he passed through all the German defences. Then he walked back to our positions. . . . During all this time an unofficial local truce was strictly observed.⁹⁰

During the fighting around Roosendaal, Holland, in October 1944, the German commander asked the British for a truce to evacuate the wounded. According to Lieutenant John Lappin, 7th DWR, this led to a 'ridiculous' situation for an hour. 'The Red Cross flag went backwards and forwards and one just walked up and down in the open. Jerry could see where we were. We could see him'.⁹¹ Such truces also took place in Italy. The War Diary of the 2nd Royal Scots Fusiliers, recorded that stretcher bearers in the beachhead at Anzio operated under cover of the Red Cross flag, which was recognised by the enemy, who would signal safe passage by firing a machine-gun burst into the air.⁹²

These truces occurred intermittently throughout the war, but were more common when British units faced German paratroopers or regular army, as opposed to the SS. When a pause in the

⁸⁸ CMAc GC/96/1, E. Grey Turner, Diary of RAMC Service in World War II, 1942-5, entry of 14 April 1944, 126.

⁸⁹ Compared to World War One the lines were much less static and the fighting more continuous.

⁹⁰ Picot, *Accidental Warrior*, 142.

⁹¹ Delaforce, *Polar Bears*, 170; see also NA WO171/1364, 6th Royal Scots Fusiliers, War Diary for September 1944; Woollcombe, Lion Rampant, 175-176.

⁹² NA WO170/1470, 2nd Royal Scots Fusiliers, War Diary for March 1944; see also NA WO170/1412, 2/4th KOYLI, War Diary for February 1944; Rifleman Robert Beech, 2nd Rifle Brigade, quoted in Lee, *Up Close and Personal*, 193; Trevelyan, *Fortress*, 74.

fighting was out of the question, men were usually unable to recover those left behind in no-man's-land; and as we have seen, especially in attritional stalemates such as Anzio, Cassino and Normandy, bodies were left between the lines for many weeks to putrefy. Following the German withdrawal at Anzio, David Cole left the Fortress and cautiously walked out into no-man's-land.

There was a slight breeze coming in from the sea, but it carried with it no tang of salt, only the sour smell of death. For all around us lay the unburied dead: some reduced by time to skeletons parcelled together with leather straps and faded and bloody uniform: others still quite new with white waxen faces and bristle on their chins: some dreadfully mangled, others so complete as to seem almost asleep.⁹³

In many cases, it was left to grave registration teams to remove and bury the dead once the fighting had eased. The activities of these units were specifically designed to help sustain the morale of the troops left behind - the dead were removed and buried as quickly as possible and the removal was conducted in a considerate manner (bodies were covered, especially when they were in a mangled or unpresentable condition when carried or transported to the place of interment; the routes chosen avoided contact with the troops as much as possible; and the places of burial were often screened from the road). Unfortunately, the activities of other troops were not quite so sensitive. Norman Wray recalled being stationed next to some divisional pioneer troops in Italy during January 1944: 'I looked over a wall one morning and saw, in a clearing, one of them placidly making wooden crosses and stacking them in neat piles. This threatening portent dented my shaky morale'.⁹⁴

Of course, one need not have his flesh ripped apart to become a casualty of war. Another all too common response to combat – and, indeed, army life in general - was psychiatric breakdown (the latter accounted for no less than 40.5% of all medical discharges from the Army in 1944).⁹⁵ Breakdown was influenced by a wide range of factors, such as the competence of the selection

⁹³ Cole, *Rough Road to Rome*, 222.

⁹⁴ IWM 99/85/1, Wray, 'Infantry Man! Why Me?', 137.

⁹⁵ NA WO32/11550, Executive Committee of the Army Council, Psychiatric Treatment in Operational Theatres, Status of Psychiatrists, Memorandum by AG for consideration by the ECAC, June 1945.

process, the intensity of battle, the time spent in combat by a unit or individual, non-battle elements such as the terrain and climate, the general attitude to fear and breakdown, and the state of morale – not to mention non-military stressors like family problems.⁹⁶ During the war, psychiatric cases represented 10% to 15% of all battle casualties; the exact proportion fluctuated between individual campaigns and units. In the Middle East, the great separation from home, the inhospitable surroundings in which the men lived, the poor food and water supply, the infrequency of action, the occasional big battles dominated by the machine-gun, the 88 mm and the mortar, which lasted only a few days, contrasted greatly with the battles of the Normandy Bridgehead which ground on relentlessly for over two months in familiar green fields and woods, with little sleep, the dreaded *Nebelwerfer*, and sustained bloodshed, as the primary stresses.⁹⁷ As a general rule of thumb, though, as the surgical casualties mounted, so the psychiatric cases increased⁹⁸; depending on the type of battle, up to 2% to 30% of all casualties were psychiatric.⁹⁹ If we look at the figures for 21st Army Group from D-Day to VE-Day, we find that the highest rate of exhaustion (20.2%) occurred in the three month period, July to September 1944, when battle casualties peaked for the whole campaign. Conversely, the lowest incidence of exhaustion (7.9%) was in the period 1 April to 9 May 1945, when battle losses were also at their lowest.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, there is a strong correlation between a high incidence of psychiatric casualties and static warfare; where the fighting descended into attritional slogging matches – as was the case in Italy, Normandy and the Low Countries - the rate of psychiatric breakdown was high. This was partly due to the rate of battle casualties, but the added pressure of a dreary existence in a slit-trench in appalling conditions could hardly have helped. It is to this interrelationship – static fighting and psychological breakdown – that we now turn our attention.

⁹⁶ Todd C. Helmus and Russell W. Glenn, *Steeling the Mind: Combat Stress Reactions and their Implications for Urban Warfare* (Santa Monica, CA 2005), 25.

⁹⁷ Robert H. Ahrenfeldt, *Psychiatry in the British Army in the Second World War* (London 1958), 165.

⁹⁸ Helmus and Glenn, *Steeling the Mind*, 32.

⁹⁹ Of course, many units suffered rates in excess of 30 per cent. During November 1944, for example, no less than 37 per cent of 78th Division's total battle casualties were psychiatric cases, while for 8th (Indian) Division, in the same period, it was 44 per cent.

¹⁰⁰ Crew, *Campaigns*, iv, 557.

It should be highlighted that the role of military psychiatry in the Second World War is beyond the scope of the present work. This is an area that has been comprehensively dealt with by more knowledgeable writers.¹⁰¹ What we are concerned with is exploring the relatively neglected link between periods of attritional, trench fighting and the rate of psychiatric collapse. Before we can do this, it may be worthwhile to consider the various types of psychological casualties that such fighting entailed. One particularly noticeable group were men who suffered a sudden, dramatic breakdown due to heavy and prolonged shelling, often as a result of a real or perceived near miss.¹⁰² 'Any man is liable to suffer a temporary nervous upset if a shell or a mortar-bomb lands within a yard or two of him,' warned an Army Psychiatry Memorandum from October 1944. 'He may appear dazed and slightly tremulous or acutely agitated. The mildest cases will clear up within an hour, others are alright after a night's sleep . . . The remainder require evacuation to the Corps Exhaustion Centre for specialist treatment'.¹⁰³ Severe bombardments, on the other hand, could completely overwhelm one's mental stability, leading to complete physical and mental collapse. Peter White witnessed this after a series of direct hits on his company HQ in January 1945. When the shelling eventually died down he was

shocked to realise as I looked about among the craters that those . . . left who had not been killed, wounded or previously evacuated were largely so stunned with the blast and shock or outright 'bomb happy' as to be useless. No matter how these individuals strove to pull themselves together, the repeated shock and blast on top of their lack of sleep and general exhaustion seemed to have destroyed all coordination between mind and body. One or two lay head down, quivering with cold and shock in their pathetic scoops, apparently quite deaf to my voice. It was difficult to tell, but for the shivering, which were still alive, which wounded and which hit mentally.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ See for instance Ahrenfeldt, *Psychiatry in the British Army*; J. M. W. Binnevel, *From Shell Shock to Combat Stress: a comparative history of military psychiatry* (Amsterdam 1997); Harrison, *Medicine and victory*; Holden, *Shell Shock*; Shephard, *A War of Nerves*.

¹⁰² CMAC GC/135/B.1/2, Palmer, 'The problem of the P & N [Psychotic and Neurotic] casualty - a study of 12,000 cases', 4.

¹⁰³ CMAC GC/135/B.2/1, Army Psychiatry Memo, Notes for regimental officers on psychiatric casualties, Oct 1944, 4.

¹⁰⁴ White, *With the Jocks*, 115.

Another example occurred in the Italian theatre during early 1944. In this instance, unrelenting mortar fire caused a number of men in 'B' Company, 16th DLI, to breakdown. 'I've never been under shellfire like it before or after,' one corporal remembered. '[The Germans] tossed everything at us that afternoon. We had a string of blokes went shell shocked - just lost their nerve - they were crying, laughing, crying one minute laughing the other'.¹⁰⁵

Heavy shelling could produce hysterical reactions with external physical symptoms. Like the 'hysterics' of the last war, some men suffered from tremors and twitches, dumbness and loss of vision and, in rare instances, paralysed limbs and deformed gaits.¹⁰⁶ During an experimental demonstration of noise training at Ripon in March 1942, one man, who had been subjected to numerous severe explosions at a varying distance from his slit-trench, developed a hysterical paralysis of an arm struck by a small piece of flying earth.¹⁰⁷ In combat, such stress reactions were even more powerful. When four shells burst simultaneously a few yards from the trench of one mortarman in Normandy, the unfortunate soldier broke down, hugging the earth and crying like a child. When his comrades, after some difficulty, persuaded him to go to the RAP, it emerged that he was suffering from a severe headache and his sight had become blurred.¹⁰⁸ In extreme cases the afflicted soldier could lose control entirely. At one point during Second Alamein, a soldier with the 7th Rifle Brigade became so severely shell-shocked after prolonged shelling by enemy tanks that his fellow riflemen had to tie him to a stretcher using machine-gun belts and put a pencil between his teeth.¹⁰⁹ Dramatic cases such as these were exceptional, though. Most men were able to harden themselves and did their best to live with their fear.

A second, more widespread category was 'battle exhaustion', the preferred term for neuropsychiatric casualties. Needless to say, it was largely an infantryman's problem. Between 26

¹⁰⁵ IWM Sound Archive, 12680, Tom Turnbull.

¹⁰⁶ Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, 57; see also NA CAB101/224, Diana Butler, *The British Soldier in Italy, September 1943 – June 1944*, 36.

¹⁰⁷ NA CAB 21/914, 'Appendix 'C'. Battle Inoculations', Committee on the work of Psychologists and Psychiatrists in the Services.

¹⁰⁸ Picot, *Accidental Warrior*, 96.

¹⁰⁹ IWM 87/35/1, D. A. Main, 'Motor Battalion', 50.

and 30 June, for example, during Operation Epsom, 15th (Scottish) Division suffered 152 cases of exhaustion, of whom 140 were drawn from the nine infantry battalions, even though the infantry made up barely a quarter of the division's total strength.¹¹⁰ More than 90 per cent of all recorded cases during the war were among the infantry.¹¹¹ Yet, as Alastair Borthwick observed, it was not always directly related to losses: 'nervous strain cannot be assessed by counting casualties and nervous strain is what matters at the end of the day'.¹¹² The military authorities came to realise that soldiers went through a cycle of efficiency. Before training they were practically useless as combatants. After training, but before they had become seasoned, units could display almost suicidal bravery while still inexperienced in the finer points of combat. The first action was the critical test of courage, which could prove the formation's worth or lead to swift disintegration. Having had a taste of battle, but still fresh, a unit was likely to be at peak efficiency. As exposure to combat increased, so soldiers inevitably succumbed to wear and tear and the slow sapping of their nerves, which, according to J. F. C. Fuller (writing in reference to the First World War, but equally applicable for the Second), imposed a pattern whereby:

The normal healthy man arriving from England showed definite signs of physical fear when first coming under fire. The fear very shortly wore off and was replaced by a kind of callousness which sometimes increased when until a man took very little trouble to protect himself . . . When this condition was well advanced a man became liable to breakdown mentally or to show a nervousness which may be defined rather as a mental terror than a physical fear . . . First of all the man was healthily afraid of what was happening, then he became callous and after that he sometimes became obsessed with fear.¹¹³

Eventually, as Fuller observed, the strain would prove too much and the soldier would reach the point of collapse.

¹¹⁰ David French, "'Tommy is No Soldier': the morale of the second British army in Normandy, June-August 1944', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 19:4 (1996), 163.

¹¹¹ Terry Copp, "'If this war isn't over, And pretty damn soon, There'll be nobody left, In this old platoon . . .': First Canadian Army, February-March 1945' in Addison and Calder, *A Time to Kill*, 149.

¹¹² Bull, *World War II Infantry Tactics*, vol. I, 7.

¹¹³ Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, 57.

There can be little doubt that infantrymen had limited combat lives. But how limited? In the spring of 1944, Lieutenant-Colonel John W. Appel, an American psychiatrist, spent six weeks at an exhaustion centre near the Cassino and Anzio battlefields. He subsequently produced a strongly-worded report which drew attention to what he called the 'psychiatric problem'. 'The danger of being killed or maimed,' he wrote, 'imposes a strain so great that it causes men to breakdown'. Psychiatric casualties were inevitable, Appel argued, and there was no such thing as getting used to combat, as it imposed a strain so great that men would breakdown in direct relation to the intensity and duration of exposure. His experiences here and in North Africa had shown that practically all men in rifle battalions who were not otherwise disabled ultimately became psychiatric casualties.¹¹⁴

Just as an average truck wears out after a certain number of miles, it appears that the doughboy wore out, either developing an acute incapacitating neurosis or else becoming hypersensitive to shell fire, so overly cautious and jittery that he was ineffective and demoralising to the newer men.¹¹⁵

Appel estimated that most soldiers would last between 200 and 240 combat days before becoming ineffective – though a mere 7% actually made it that far without getting wounded or killed.¹¹⁶ They were at their peak in the first ninety days, but, if involved in attritional bloodbaths like Cassino or the Rapido River crossing, wore out much sooner. British infantry, on the other hand, could last about twice as long – 400 combat days¹¹⁷ – thanks to the system of reliefs whereby units were pulled out of the line every twelve days or less for a period of rest. After 400 days, *should they survive*, they would almost certainly breakdown.¹¹⁸

Lord Moran, a MO in the First World War and Churchill's personal physician in the Second, came to a similar conclusion in *The Anatomy of Courage*. Moran came to believe that even the strongest

¹¹⁴ Ahrenfeldt, *Psychiatry in the British Army*, 172; Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, 245.

¹¹⁵ Ahrenfeldt, *Psychiatry in the British Army*, 172.

¹¹⁶ In this article, 10 combat days were taken as equivalent to 17 calendar days.

¹¹⁷ Thus, British troops would wear out in just under two years.

¹¹⁸ Ahrenfeldt, *Psychiatry in the British Army*, 172-173; Helmus and Glenn, *Steeling the Mind*, 34; Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, 245.

nerves would break due to the strain of trench warfare and that men had but a finite bank of courage, which would inevitably be expended under the conditions of the Western Front in 1914-18.¹¹⁹ 'A man's courage is his capital,' he wrote, 'and he is always spending. The call on the bank may be only the daily drain of the front line or it may be a sudden draft which threatens to close the account'.¹²⁰ Although some of Moran's arguments have been challenged by more recent theorists, there is a general consensus that the well of courage premise is broadly correct; at any rate, most veterans described their experience in these terms. 'Each one of us had his own depth of reserve with which to control our fear,' wrote Lieutenant-Colonel (later Major-General) John Nelson, CO 3rd Grenadier Guards, 'after so many shells overhead, so many near-misses, those reserves were gradually whittled away'.¹²¹ Eric Codling confessed that months of action had seen his courage whittled away and that his 'bank-balance' was running out.¹²² Thus breakdown was the final part of a long process of deterioration in fighting men, culminating in a final surrender after weeks or months of tremendous suffering and acute tension. Eventually every man had his breaking point.¹²³

When a soldier was nearing his, there were many tell-tale signs including dizziness, nausea, stomach cramps, profuse sweating, exaggerated jumpiness, headaches, palpitations, a constant gnawing in the pit of the stomach, insomnia, and nightmares – many of which were classic symptoms of exhaustion. Rough guidance on this troublesome subject was given in a pamphlet entitled 'Morale and the Officer' (1944), which claimed that the indicators of a soldier 'cracking up' were clear and varied in degree with the individual. The forewarning came in the man's reaction to noise, meals, sleep and comfort. If he responded to these in a different way from normal, then he had started to

¹¹⁹ Simon Wessely, 'Twentieth-century Theories on Combat Motivation and Breakdown', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 41 (2006), 271.

¹²⁰ Lord Moran, *Anatomy of Courage*, xxii.

¹²¹ LHCMA, Nelson, 'Always a Grenadier', 47.

¹²² IWM 88/4/1, Codling, 110.

¹²³ The amount of time required to produce combat exhaustion depended on a number of factors, not least the intensity of the fighting. In the *bocage*, according to a study of Allied soldiers in Normandy in 1944, the figure was sixty days.

crack up.¹²⁴ A more detailed set of warning signs was included in an Army Psychiatry Memorandum from October 1944, 'Notes for regimental officers on psychiatric casualties'. They included:

gross irritability in a formerly cheerful individual; marked loss of concentration and efficiency; solitary tendencies in a man who is usually sociable. Extreme loss of appetite and sleep; a constant nervous rushing about from one thing to another and difficulty in making decisions. In a different type of man, apathy, dullness and lethargy, with a slowing of thought, speech and action.¹²⁵

An intelligent officer would watch out for these (and other less obvious) signs and take appropriate action. 'Everybody has a breaking point,' stated one rifle company commander in 15th (Scottish) Division:

Some people break earlier than others, but everybody breaks sooner or later. The job of a commander is to watch when an individual or group of individuals is approaching this point and say right back you go, five miles back, a really good kip in a village or a barn or something, good square meal, then their batteries are recharged and they can go back to the line and start again.¹²⁶

When regular reliefs and adequate rest were impossible, as was frequently the case in prolonged defensive operations that featured heavy shelling (and few opportunities for personal retaliation), it was vitally important to watch out for these tell-tale signs.¹²⁷ If the process was not arrested, a full psychiatric breakdown would inexorably follow. When this happened the sufferer often earned little sympathy from his comrades or superior officers and, as one Grenadier Guardsman recalled, 'the stigma, if not the hurt, stayed with him for the rest of his days'.¹²⁸

¹²⁴ NA WO 204/6702, 'Morale and the Officer', draft pamphlet (Aug-Sep, 1944); see also Helmus and Glenn, *Steeling the Mind*, xvii.

¹²⁵ CMAC GC/135/B.2/1, Army Psychiatry Memo, Notes for regimental officers on psychiatric casualties, Oct 1944, 3-4.

¹²⁶ IWM 8337, Graham.

¹²⁷ Frank M. Richardson, *Fighting Spirit: a study of psychological factors in war* (London 1978), 77.

¹²⁸ IWM 87/42/1, Waller, 'How Ever Did We Win?', 85.

The large majority of individuals diagnosed as suffering from battle exhaustion exhibited acute fear reactions and acute and chronic anxiety manifested through uncontrollable tremors, a marked startle reaction to war-related sounds and a complete loss of self-confidence. The next most frequent symptoms were depression with associated withdrawal. Conversion states such as amnesia, stupor, partial blindness, mutism or hysterical gaits, which were so common in the first war, were seen less frequently.¹²⁹ 'Every sort of clinical picture was seen,' recorded one psychiatrist working in an Italian base hospital, 'gross hysterias with mutism, paralysis, aphonia. Gross ticquers [sic] were common and the range went from these to the poor inadequate personality who showed little outward evidence of anxiety but said simply – "I can't take it"'.¹³⁰ A larger more representative sample of 9,000 cases of combat neurosis, recorded in the Middle East during 1942, found examples of panic reactions such as screaming, laughing or crying; hysterical fits; stupor or coma; gross tremors; and staring cataleptic states.¹³¹ These diverse symptoms could appear before, during or after a battle and were, in all probability, straightforward psychological responses to fatigue, fear and danger, and could usually be addressed with rest and reassurance. Post-battle reactions were generally more complicated, being related not only to fear but also to guilt over one's actions during combat, such as killing. These cases manifested themselves in a number of ways, such as the so-called campaign neurosis, a mild form of chronic anxiety state indicated by tremors and loss of appetite; or what were known as personality reactions, including mild hysteria, alcoholism and delinquency.¹³²

On the ground, most veterans simply recalled two basic types: men who became excited and violent, and others who were speechless and appeared to be in a trance. Amongst the latter was K. R. Drury, who eventually cracked after many weeks of fighting at Cassino and drifted back to the RAP like a sleepwalker.¹³³ Another example was Vernon Scannell who finally succumbed after being under fire

¹²⁹ Copp, 'First Canadian Army', 149.

¹³⁰ Copp and McAndrew, *Battle Exhaustion*, 57.

¹³¹ Crew, *Campaigns*, ii, 491; Harrison, *Medicine and Victory*, 122.

¹³² Harrison, *Medicine and Victory*, 122.

¹³³ IWM 99/85/1, Drury, 'One Man's Memories Fifty Years On', part two, 7.

almost continuously for six months. The final straw came when a group of soldiers, who had spent the previous night with his unit near Wadi Akarit on the Libyan-Tunisian border, were mown down by German artillery. Scannell's comrades began to loot the bodies and he thought, 'I can't take anymore of this', and turned round and walked away. 'I walked and walked and walked, and covered something like a hundred miles,' he later wrote.

It was all so dreamlike and weird and strange. It was like a fugue state, a time of arrested experience. Everything was held in abeyance. I wasn't aware of who I was, what I was or where I was. I seemed to be floating rather than walking. There was no premeditation, it seemed outside my control. It was partly physical exhaustion and constant strain and it just wears and wears away at you. I think you tend to retreat into an almost zombie-like state. A sort of comatose state descends on you and takes over, and you can scarcely feel or think anything at all. It is an exhaustion of the spirit as well as of the body.

Scannell was eventually picked up in Tripoli and court-martialled.¹³⁴ An illustration of the second type of psychiatric casualty was a soldier in John Horsfall's 'D' Company, 1st Royal Irish Fusiliers, who unexpectedly jumped out of his trench one day and went berserk. 'He ran completely amok,' Horsfall wrote, 'and started screaming and waving his rifle like a follower of the Prophet about to slaughter an infidel'. The solution to this problem, although comic, left a great deal to be desired in terms of compassionate forward psychiatry. The CSM walked over to the man, eyed him for a moment, and then smashed him to the ground with a punch that could have 'flattened a bullock'. He then dragged the man over and dumped him into the nearest slit-trench like 'a bag of rotting potatoes'.¹³⁵

There were a variety of other symptoms of course. Some victims broke down and sobbed like small children. During a night attack on the Mareth Line, a soldier in Neill McCallum's company lay down

¹³⁴ Holden, *Shell Shock*, 100-101.

¹³⁵ Horsfall, *Wild Geese*, 145.

on his stomach in the midst of the shelling and began to sob.¹³⁶ Eric Codling recalled one elderly sergeant he encountered in the cellar of a building near his platoon area, sitting on a box with a lighted candle in his hand quietly sobbing. 'His nerve had completely gone,' noted Codling. 'He was soon on his way back to safety and, hopefully, complete recovery'.¹³⁷ Such cases were rarely caused by one single factor; rather it was a build up of many over a long period of time. We have heard that there were countless sources of stress working on front line infantrymen – such as combat intensity, initial and prolonged exposure to combat, static warfare, lack of sleep, lack of water and food, and home-front stressors. Taken together they were an enormous and unrelenting drain on the soldier's capacity to endure, such that, in the long run, any man would breakdown. This is a crucial point to bear in mind. As a proportion of the total number of fighting troops who served overseas the rate of psychiatric casualties is low, but many men were killed or wounded before they had a chance to breakdown, while most who were intact at the end of the war were recent arrivals and had not been at the front long enough to break. Soldiers and psychiatrists alike stressed this point. A lance-corporal in 'B' Company, 16th DLI, maintained that:

Every man has a different breaking point and some go before others. So you could never point the finger at anyone because another half hour and it might be you. You tend to be on the brink and it takes all your striving to prevent yourself from going to pieces. I've been on the point of it a few times and I suppose everybody else had. When you feel like letting everything go - gabbling and screaming, gibbering away - just letting go. I just managed not to - till next time.¹³⁸

As the quotation above demonstrates, even if a man did not actually breakdown, he was nonetheless often in a state of extreme psychological distress, which steadily worsened as his exposure to combat increased. Most soldiers were afraid in the line, except for the few fortunate people who did not know fear. Everyone else fought a constant struggle to cope with fear, to control it and keep going. But gradually one became more and more affected by the conditions till

¹³⁶ McCallum, *Journey with a Pistol*, 94.

¹³⁷ IWM 88/4/1, Codling, 111.

¹³⁸ IWM Sound Archive, 17621, William Virr.

eventually one would cease to function altogether.¹³⁹ Consider the following account by Stan Whitehouse, who, by the end of November 1944, had been in the line almost continuously for six months:

as week succeeded week I was having to dig deeper and deeper into those innermost resources of resolution, endurance and zeal to combat the gnawing, nagging fearfulness that filled my waking and often sleeping, hours. As the campaign progressed I came to realize that for all the enemy's skill and doggedness he was more easily overcome than my troubled, tortured mind. I had long since forsaken that spirit of adventure, that devil-may-care attitude that had sustained me in the early days.¹⁴⁰

This psychological strain was constant for most soldiers, meaning that, irrespective of rank, morale or personal courage, they would almost certainly breakdown given time.

So far we have dealt with men who broke down due to the shock of prolonged, heavy shelling or the accumulated stress of life at the front. Another category to consider were those men who were physically wounded and then returned to the trenches only to become a psychiatric casualty shortly thereafter. Improvements in medicine meant that a man with a flesh wound was out of hospital within a fortnight from the date of wounding, while after a week or two at a convalescent depot he was ready to return to duty. Although this led to considerable savings in hospitalisation and manpower, the reduction in the period of ineffectiveness following wounding was not without its disadvantages. Indeed, to speak of a flesh wound is, to some extent flawed, for it is not just the flesh that suffers, but the whole man. Time was required for the wound and also for the mind to heal - less for the wound than for the mind in most cases. As surgical methods improved and the time interval shortened between wounding and return to the line, many men whose flesh wounds had healed, but who had returned to duty before they were mentally ready, succumbed to psychiatric

¹³⁹ Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, 35.

¹⁴⁰ Whitehouse and Bennett, *Fear is the Foe*, 125.

breakdown.¹⁴¹ When John Nelson was treated for an injury caused by a mortar bomb, the splinters were quickly extracted and the wounds healed with remarkable speed. 'In fact,' he confided in his memoirs, 'I believe men's wounds healed long before some of them had recovered from the shock of the blow and they needed a longer period of convalescence than they sometimes took'.¹⁴²

Men who had been wounded – even years previously – were more likely to suffer from battle exhaustion. Following the push into Germany in the Reichswald-Cleve-Goch sector (Operation VERITABLE, 8 February to 10 March 1945), XXX Corps' psychiatrist, Major John Wishart, noted the large proportion of psychiatric casualties among men who had been previously wounded - no less than 50 per cent of the total, and in one afternoon ten out of twelve examined fell into this category. In general their story was the same – wounded in Normandy, evacuated to the UK, three to six weeks in hospital, a month in convalescent depot, leave, a month's training and then back to the front; largely it was the first major battle since their return.¹⁴³ Wishart took the opportunity of asking many of them what their attitude had been towards being killed or wounded prior to their injury, the answer was nearly always the same: 'Never thought about it'. When he asked them what their attitude was now, in light of their recent experience, the general reply was: 'I know what it's like now – I know what can happen'. Having lived through the pain and the shock of being wounded, they were thus more likely to breakdown when faced with the likelihood of it happening again.

Static warfare had a distinct effect on the rate of psychiatric casualties.¹⁴⁴ The psychiatrist Peter Bourne noted that 'Neuropsychiatric casualties in combat occur predominantly when the lines of battle are static and diminish sharply when the troops are on the move, even though they may be in full retreat'.¹⁴⁵ In Tunisia, after the initial rapid advance by First Army, heavy rains and substantial German reinforcements caused operations to grind to a halt. The newly arrived Anglo-American troops were left thinly stretched over the bleak, rocky *djebels*, fending off determined

¹⁴¹ Crew, *Campaigns*, iv, 563-564.

¹⁴² LHCMA, Nelson, 'Always a Grenadier', 46.

¹⁴³ Crew, *Campaigns*, iv, 555; Copp, 'First Canadian Army', 155.

¹⁴⁴ See for instance Helmus and Glenn, *Steeling the Mind*, xvi, 34-35.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

counterattacks by the Afrika Korps and Luftwaffe. As a result, the neurosis rate rose considerably. John Wishart witnessed a mass breakdown of troops new to this kind of fighting - particularly the German mortars - at the battle of Two Tree Hill on 17 January 1943, in which sixty-six of 450-500 casualties were psychiatric.¹⁴⁶ In the 3rd Grenadier Guards there had been a generalised panic, which was attributed to fatigue, inadequate rations, poor selection of personnel, heavy losses, and the fact that many men were inexperienced.¹⁴⁷ Eighth Army incurred a significant rise in psychological casualties when it pushed into Tunisia. During the Battle of Alamein and the pursuit that followed, morale had been high and psychiatric cases were low. But as the campaign progressed and the troops got into the rocky, wooded and more built over areas of Tunisia, the neurosis rate began to soar, due to the mounting strain of incessant combat, static warfare, harsher terrain and severe weather.¹⁴⁸ The staff of the British 95th General Hospital in Algiers struggled to cope with the sudden influx of psychological casualties. The ward, Wishart recalled, was 'like a cage of monkeys'. He had never seen 'so many hysterical gaits, hysterical aphonias [loss of voice] and all sorts of things' and remembered thinking, 'Thank God, I'm not in charge here'. Another psychiatrist described the cases here in more technical terms: 'It was as if the ego defences to anxiety were overwhelmed in greater or lesser degree, producing clinical pictures of stupor, confusional states, uncontrolled primitive behaviour, psychotic pictures often of a bizarre character, childishness, apparent idiocy, and, in some exceptional cases, simian behaviour'.¹⁴⁹ Many of the symptoms described above, such as loss of voice and hysterical gaits, were the classic symptoms of shell-shock displayed by victims of the Western Front.

The claustrophobic struggle at Anzio produced an exceptionally high rate of psychiatric disorders – as much as 50% of the total casualties in the early stages of the landing.¹⁵⁰ According to official figures, of the original 15,979 men of 1st Division that landed on 22 January, no less than 550 cases

¹⁴⁶ Harrison, *Medicine and Victory*, 173; Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, 211.

¹⁴⁷ Harrison, *Medicine and Victory*, 173

¹⁴⁸ Crew, *Campaigns*, ii, 480.

¹⁴⁹ Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, 211.

¹⁵⁰ NA WO32/11550, Executive Committee of the Army Council, Psychiatric Treatment in Operational Theatres, Status of Psychiatrists, Memorandum by AG for consideration by the ECAC, June 1945.

of exhaustion (some 3.4% of the total strength) were evacuated out by sea.¹⁵¹ When one takes into account the fact that many more cases were treated in the beachhead without evacuation, or were not recorded officially, the figure becomes even higher. At any rate, the incidence of battle exhaustion was significantly higher than in previous campaigns; in Sicily less than 1% of the total strength of 50th (Northumbrian) Division was similarly afflicted. Being trapped in a small beachhead suffering steady attrition, under the watchful eyes of the enemy and living in a state of near hysteria obviously took its toll on the men. Those most susceptible were green reinforcements thrown into battle before they had time to properly bed into their new unit or old hands who had already seen too much fighting. Raleigh Trevelyan's platoon sergeant was relatively unusual in that unlike most other NCOs who had been with the Battalion since Catania, he was 'not the least bit bomb-happy'.¹⁵² Later on in the Fortress, a particularly dangerous stretch of the Anzio trench system, Trevelyan described one lance-corporal who had fought in Sicily as 'one of the few Catania Plainites to have kept a sound nerve'.¹⁵³

It was the campaign in Normandy that proved what had up till then only been suspected. That soldiers trapped in gruelling beachhead and bridgehead attritional battles suffered a far higher incidence of psychiatric breakdown than those involved in mobile fighting (even the retreat of a defeated army seemed to produce fewer cases). As at the Somme and Gallipoli the initial assault resulted in a small number of psychiatric casualties. A few weeks later and the numbers began to sky-rocket. Before we examine this in detail, we should first take a moment to set the scene. The combatants in Normandy - despite a massive overall superiority in terms of aircraft, tanks and artillery for the Allies - were evenly matched when it came to infantry. In some types of weaponry - tanks, anti-tank guns and mortars - the Germans held a qualitative advantage. Moreover, the terrain favoured the defenders, and added to the quality of some of the German troops and Montgomery's strategy, which drew the enemy on to the eastern flank, the inevitable consequence was a bloody

¹⁵¹ Bielecki, *British Infantry Morale*, 81.

¹⁵² Trevelyan, *Fortress*, 41.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 90.

stalemate.¹⁵⁴ In practical terms, this meant that British infantrymen were required to attack, occupy and hold small parcels of ground under circumstances which strongly mirrored the horrors of the fighting on the Western Front a generation earlier.¹⁵⁵ Major D. J. Watterson, adviser in psychiatry to the Second Army, wrote in his monthly report:

The high optimism of the troops who landed in the assault and early build-up phases inevitably dwindled when the campaign for a few weeks appeared to have slowed down. The gradual realization that the 'walk over' to Berlin had developed into an infantry slogging match caused an unspoken but clearly recognizable fall of morale. One sign of this was the increase in the incidence of psychiatric casualties arriving in a steady stream at Exhaustion centres and reinforced by waves of beaten, exhausted men from each of the major battles.¹⁵⁶

Lieutenant-Colonel Tom Main, adviser in psychiatry to 21st Army Group, summarised the main causal factors: 'Mortar fire, high physical casualties rate, shortage of sleep, unrelieved periods of tension, static warfare, and accidental attack by our own aircraft or guns were big stresses which produced psychiatric breakdown'.¹⁵⁷

While casualties had been manageable in June, the duration as well as the intensity of the fighting led to a rapid increase. On 24 June Montgomery launched the first of a series of major operations intended to take the city of Caen and break out into open country to the south. By mid-July the small infantry element of 21st Army Group - a mere 14 per cent of the total manpower - had sustained massive casualties¹⁵⁸; roughly one quarter due to exhaustion, which, as Copp and McAndrew have argued, precipitated a battle exhaustion crisis in the formation.¹⁵⁹ A report written by Brigadier Hargest noted that by 10 July, 'The number of "bomb-happy" casualties [was] very high. In the attack by 2 S[outh] W[ales] B[orderers] on 9 July the casualties were nearly 50 per cent – shell shock

¹⁵⁴ Jary, *18 Platoon*, 6.

¹⁵⁵ Sheffield, 'Dead Cows and Tigers', 120; Copp, 'First Canadian Army', 148.

¹⁵⁶ Holden, *Shell Shock*, 117.

¹⁵⁷ CMAC GC/135/B.1/4, Lt-Col T F Main, Quarterly report by the Adviser in Psychiatry - 21 Army Group BLA, 1944, 5.

¹⁵⁸ Of the British forces in Normandy by August 1944, 56% were classified as fighting troops rather than service elements. A mere 14% were infantrymen, against 18% gunners, 13% engineers, 6% tank crews, and 5% signallers. Max Hastings, *Overlord: D-Day and the battle for Normandy 1944* (London 1999), 249.

¹⁵⁹ Hastings, *Overlord*, 249; Copp and McAndrew, *Battle Exhaustion*.

(50 of 100)'.¹⁶⁰ Martin Lindsay was certainly concerned about the morale of his battalion at Caen, incessant shelling having made a number of men bomb happy.¹⁶¹ When the Highland Division attacked near the city on 23 June and was subsequently counterattacked by 21st Panzer Division, approximately one-third of the casualties were 'exhausted' rather than wounded.¹⁶² The Highlanders had been engaged in unspectacular but intense contact with the enemy for two weeks and Regimental War Diaries for this period record a steady stream of casualties, mainly from mortaring.¹⁶³

In 3rd Division, a green formation that had fought enthusiastically in the initial phase of the campaign, the rate of exhaustion also peaked at one in three.¹⁶⁴ The battle that marked the turning point was Operation Mitten, 27 to 29 June, an engagement that the press described as the 'Grimmest Mile in France'. Here the 192 Panzer Grenadiers, the HQ Company of 22 Panzer Regiment, backed by scores of tanks, were determined to hold the salient of Le Landel, La Londe, Chateau de La Londe and La Bijude. The GOC 3rd Division was just as determined to eliminate this unwelcome appendage. Consequently, the division wrestled for control of this two-square-mile area until most of the infantry officers and NCOs had been lost and the rifle companies were utterly shattered (advances here were measured in yards). Lieutenant Eddie Jones, OC 8 Platoon, 1st South Lancashire Regiment, remembered this battle as the most harrowing of the war.

Most of the original Bn officers, many of the longer serving men were lost there and the Bn was never the same again. Shelling and mortaring of Le Landel area was intensified with little respite.

We had been trained in tactics of right and left flanking movements but here there were no

¹⁶⁰ NA CAB 106/1060, Reports on the Normandy campaign, 1944. June 6-July 10, by Brigadier James Hargest, New Zealand Army Observer with XXX Corps.

¹⁶¹ Lindsay, *So Few Got Through*, 52.

¹⁶² Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, 252.

¹⁶³ Copp and McAndrew, *Battle Exhaustion*, 114-115.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 115.

flanks and the enemy had to be reached by direct approach across open cornfields. Some of the older officers prophesied a stalemate, [a] repeat of [the] trench warfare of First World War.¹⁶⁵

The huge cost in bringing Mitten to an end – the ousting of a battalion with thirty dug-in tanks at the Chateau de La Londe position – caused the follow up plan, Aberlour, involving two 3rd Division brigades, to be cancelled. The older officers who had predicted a stalemate like the Western Front, turned out to be right. An officer with the 1st Suffolks wrote:

After the capture of the Chateau, shelling was continuous until 7 July. First World War conditions prevailed in my view for more than one month . . . the whole battalion in slit-trenches, 100 per cent dawn and dusk stand-tos, rations brought up under great difficulty, daily losses of officers and men by active patrolling and enemy gunfire.¹⁶⁶

After 29 June the rate of exhaustion soared and during July more than one in every three casualties was of this type. By the end of the month, the division had treated almost a thousand neuropsychiatric casualties.¹⁶⁷

Other divisions fared little better, reporting equally high rates of exhaustion; one such was 49th (West Riding) Division, an inexperienced territorial unit. In its first clash with the Germans – the crack 12th SS Hitler Youth and Panzer Lehr Divisions – one of its battalions ran away, leaving the MO to gather discarded rifles and ammunition on his bicycle. Efforts to restore the unit's morale had to be abandoned as some junior officers' nerves had completely gone to pieces. Throughout June, 49th Division had a very high incidence of exhaustion, peaking in July at one-quarter of all non-fatal casualties; the CO 6th DWR, which endured an exceptionally torrid time following its unsuccessful attack on Le Parc de Boislande on 17 June, felt it necessary to warn his superiors that morale and

¹⁶⁵ Delaforce, *Monty's Iron Sides*, 66-67.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁶⁷ Copp and McAndrew, *Battle Exhaustion*, 115.

efficiency in his battalion were in tatters.¹⁶⁸ In a report written on 30 June, Lieutenant-Colonel A. J. D. Turner described the situation:

75% of the men react adversely to enemy shelling and are 'jumpy'. 5 cases in 3 days of self-inflicted wounds – more possible cases. Each time men are killed or wounded a number of men become casualties through shell shock or hysteria. In addition to genuine hysteria a large number of men have left their positions after shelling on one pretext or another and gone to the rear until sent back by the MO or myself. The new drafts have been affected, and 3 young soldiers became casualties with hysteria after hearing our own guns. The situation has got worse each day as more key personnel have become casualties. . . . 6 DWR is not fit to take its place in the line.¹⁶⁹

The report, via brigade, division and corps, quickly reached Montgomery, who was predictably livid. He summarily withdrew 6th DWR from 49th Division and replaced it with the 1st Leicesters. By 12 August the former were back in the United Kingdom, where they were disbanded and used to reinforce the 7th Battalion.

Arguably the formation most affected by battle exhaustion was 43rd (Wessex) Division, commanded by Major-General Ivor 'Butcher' Thomas, which had been involved in the battles for Maltot and Hill 112.¹⁷⁰ The latter, according to a corporal in the 7th Somersets, had been like a second Verdun:

We attacked at 0400hrs and reached our objective at 2000hrs covering about 1,500 yards that day and by that time I was the senior rank in the Company which had just 23 men left. We were then counter-attacked and reduced to just 18 men but we held the hill.¹⁷¹

The troops on Hill 112 were caught up in a static war of attrition for several weeks, and were subjected to devastating bombardments day and night. 'We had many direct hits on slit-trenches,' remembered Corporal William Gould, 1st Worcesters, 'and my own slit-trench was torn around the

¹⁶⁸ Copp and McAndrew, *Battle Exhaustion*, 115; Delaforce, *Polar Bears*, 84-87; Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, 252.

¹⁶⁹ NA WO 205/5G, Lt.-Col. A. J. D. Turner, 'Report on the State of 6th Bn DWR (49 Div) as on 30 Jun', Commander-in-Chief's operational reports and directives to army commanders.

¹⁷⁰ Beevor, *D-Day*, 280.

¹⁷¹ Neillands, *Battle of Normandy*, 176.

edges leaving two shocked and deafened inmates. My companion was withdrawn for several days recovering from a bad attack of nerves'.¹⁷² At another point in the fighting a signaller in the Division was found hiding under a scout car, crying and trembling uncontrollably. The latter had been subjected to mortaring and artillery fire for seven weeks.¹⁷³ Over half the British exhaustion cases in the week proceeding 17 July 1944 came from this Division. The psychiatrist to VIII Corps complained that the morale seen in this formation was low and that it was apparent, from the number of cases arriving in groups, often accompanied by NCOs or officers, that not only had individual morale gone, but group morale as well.¹⁷⁴

Battle exhaustion was a serious problem throughout the campaign in north-west Europe - albeit not on the same scale as Normandy. It had come to be accepted that roughly ten per cent of casualties would be psychological and whenever there was slow-moving attritional fighting, the rate of exhaustion would shoot up.¹⁷⁵ VERITABLE, for instance, cost the British some 15,000 casualties, many of which were psychiatric: the result of a bitter and long-drawn-out struggle with the 1st German Parachute Army, which veterans compared to the horrors of Hill 112 and the Scottish Corridor in Normandy. In anticipation of heavy losses, XXX Corps had set aside No. 35 Field Dressing Station to deal solely with cases of battle exhaustion, but the Corps psychiatrist, John Wishart, was nonetheless quickly overwhelmed. In a 1990 interview Wishart read his reports for 1945 and relived his memories of dealing with '1,000 odd psychiatric casualties' in the space of two weeks.¹⁷⁶ There were 485 in 53rd (Welsh) Division alone, the largest single cause of losses after wounds inflicted by high explosive shells (1,047) and sickness (952).¹⁷⁷ An indication of the severity of the fighting was that most of those evacuated with battle exhaustion were too far gone to be returned to their unit; Wishart sent less than 20% back.¹⁷⁸ Robert Barer, serving with No. 128 Field Ambulance, recalled

¹⁷² Delaforce, *Wessex Wyverns*, 84.

¹⁷³ Stan Proctor, *A Quiet Little Boy Goes to War* (Tadworth 1997), 72.

¹⁷⁴ Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, 253.

¹⁷⁵ Copp and McAndrew, *Battle Exhaustion*, 141-148.

¹⁷⁶ Copp, 'First Canadian Army', 154.

¹⁷⁷ Harrison, *Medicine and Victory*, 263.

¹⁷⁸ Copp, 'First Canadian Army', 157.

one such case where the man was so terrified that he tried to climb up the chimney of a farm house – ‘like a hysterical dog’.¹⁷⁹

One of the most frequently cited contributing causes of breakdown was the impact of having to inertly endure heavy bombing or shelling. A report by the Directorate of Army Psychiatry, published in 1942, stressed that ‘Passive bearing of emotional stress during attack or bombardment leads to an internal tension which seeks an outlet in some form of activity. Since flight is impossible the urge to activity may become almost unbearable. In consequence if some aggressive action is not arranged the inner tensions may rise to dangerous levels’.¹⁸⁰ We have discussed at length the profound effect of artillery and mortars on the mental wellbeing of the men in the trenches. What of other weapons? During the early days of 1940 and 1941, the most common agent cited in relation to breakdown was aerial bombing, either high-level or dive-bombing. Nearly all men who experienced it complained bitterly of the effect upon their morale, especially when it was unopposed by the RAF and when they had no way of retaliating. ‘We had been warned that Stukas were specially designed to spread more fear than destruction,’ recalled an officer who served with 2nd Buffs in France in 1939–40, ‘but it was hard to remember this when they began the ever mounting shindy of their dive, brilliantly instilling conviction into everyone beneath it that the bomb sight was deliberately aimed at him’.¹⁸¹ The uninterrupted dive-bombing in the Desert, Greece and Crete and in the Eastern Mediterranean during 1940 and 1941 left an indelible mark on those men who experienced it right up to the end of the African campaign. A doctor on Crete described the paralysing psychological effects:

The feeling was seldom that of animal fear. Rather did it go beyond reason, the sensation of an animal, trapped and helpless, sufficient to numb the stoutest heart. Men felt it whose courage

¹⁷⁹ Robert Barer, *One Young Man and Total War: from Normandy to concentration camp, a doctor's letters home* (Edinburgh 1998), 123.

¹⁸⁰ NA CAB 21/914, Directorate of Army Psychiatry Technical Memorandum No. 2 (June 1942): “‘Suppose you were a Nazi agent’ or ‘fifth column work for amateurs’”, Committee on the work of Psychologists and Psychiatrists in the Services.

¹⁸¹ IWM 83/46/1, Blaxland, ‘Unready for War’, 126; see also LHCMA, Nelson, ‘Always a Grenadier’, 9; NA WO222/124, Moral effect of weapons, investigation into reactions of group of 300 wounded men in N. Africa, 1943; Mark Connelly and Walter Miller, ‘The BEF and the Issue of Surrender on the Western Front in 1940’, *War in History*, 11:4 (2004), 435.

was never in question, men who continued to give orders and to fight with no thought of surrender or withdrawal. What had changed in them was their spontaneity and their power of decision. A lethargy gripped them. They spoke in low monotones, and replied to questions in sudden feeble irritation. They became unrecognisable to their friends. . . . It was as though the enemy had enlisted in his support the powers of the supernatural.¹⁸²

Such dive-bombing undoubtedly hastened the onset of the 'nervous bankruptcy' which was the trademark of the 'burnt out' soldier. A study of the collapse of a British battalion in the Sudan during 1940 found that one of the principal causes was heavy bombing from the air - in this case the obsolete RAF aircraft had been driven off and no AA guns were available. After the action there were twenty-six cases of either panic reaction or anxiety states. Among them were some conversion symptoms such as deaf mutism or hysterical paraplegia; there were two suicides.¹⁸³ In the war's later years (by which time the Allies had established overwhelming air superiority) front line infantrymen suffered most from the effects of German mortar and *Nebelwerfer* batteries firing concentrated salvoes at unexpected moments. A near miss sent many men over the edge into shock. At 129th Infantry Brigade HQ, during the battle for Normandy, three men, including a sergeant-major, fell victim to battle shock as a result of a *Nebelwerfer* barrage. 'Two of them during an attack did not stay in their slit-trenches, but just ran around wildly screaming "Get me out of here!"'.¹⁸⁴

In truth, the fighting did not have to be that severe to cause psychiatric breakdown. When one was stuck at the bottom of a trench for long periods of time amid dreary surroundings, it required a high level of morale and firm internal discipline to withstand the boredom and inactivity. According to one army psychiatrist, the acute cases seen in these relatively quiet periods of everyday line holding were a mixed bag. Some of them were chronic neurotics, but many were men with persistent symptoms from earlier battles, particularly of guilt and depression about the loss of a comrade or with anxiety which had not been resolved after rest. Men had time to consider their home worries,

¹⁸² Ian McDougall Guthrie Stewart, *The struggle for Crete, 20 May-1 June 1941: a story of lost opportunity* (London 1966), 329.

¹⁸³ Crew, *Campaigns*, ii, 462-463, 492-493, 510; Ahrenfeldt, *Psychiatry in the British Army*, 182.

¹⁸⁴ Beevor, *D-Day*, 280-281.

too, which often mounted as a campaign progressed and increasingly became a source of military inefficiency (the time that static fighting permitted soldiers to dwell on their troubles was obviously a major factor in such cases). The prognosis of those who suffered psychiatric breakdown in these periods was not as good as with battle shock cases, and usually hospital treatment and reallocation were needed.¹⁸⁵ During the war's passive early stages, for example, of the cases admitted to the psychiatric wards at Dieppe during a period of six months, some 50% were psychoneurotics, 30% psychotics, 10% mental defectives, 7% alcoholics and 3% epileptics; approximately 60% were evacuated to the UK and 40% were returned to duty. During the active phase, on the other hand, the great majority of cases admitted were acute psychiatric disorders brought on by the experience of bombing and shelling, many of whom had no previous history of mental problems, and their prognosis was consequently far better than that of the cases seen during the passive phase.¹⁸⁶

Above all, the most important single factor leading to psychiatric breakdown was the immobilisation of combat, something which required men to passively endure the ravages of heavy shelling. It was the feeling of utter powerlessness that soldiers found most difficult to bear, especially when one could do little in reply but cower in a trench. 'The acid test of a man in the trenches was high explosive,' wrote Lord Moran, 'it told each one of us things about ourselves we had not known till then. . . . [It] put fear in a new frame. But the essence of it lay in this: that it happened to passive men'.¹⁸⁷ The underlying cause was the psychological impact of prolonged danger in a static position, where the soldier was unable to get away from it.

Experience has shown that a high degree of nervous tension is commonest among men who have . . . to remain inactive while being shelled. For the man with ordinary self-control this soon becomes a matter of listening with strained attention for each approaching shell, and speculating how near it will explode; and behind this thought looms another, namely, how many

¹⁸⁵ Ahrenfeldt, *Psychiatry in the British Army*, 167.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 175.

¹⁸⁷ Moran, *Anatomy of Courage*, 67, 75.

seconds before he will be blown to pieces. An hour or two of this strain is more than most men can stand.¹⁸⁸

This unbearable strain was never ending at the front and infantrymen were frequently in situations that involved extreme threat to life, without hope of defending themselves by moving out of harm's way. 'All we could do was cower in our "slitters",' wrote Stan Whitehouse, 'and keep our fingers crossed'.¹⁸⁹ What made matters even worse for soldiers like Whitehouse was the fact that, unlike officers or specialists (signallers, mortar-men, machine-gunners), there were few distractions to help ease the stress. Officers could be engrossed in planning an attack or issuing orders, specialists in manning their particular weapon, but, as John Nelson pointed out 'The man with only a rifle to carry, when it comes to a direct confrontation with the bullets and shells, has little or nothing to take his mind off the all too obvious dangers'.¹⁹⁰ In addition, trench life itself was a constant assault on soldiers' mental and physical endurance, leaving them trapped between two grave threats, the one continuous (the trenches) and the other sporadic (bombardments).

In conclusion, it should be obvious by now that physical and mental casualties in the Second World War had a great deal in common with those of the Western Front (among infantry officers, in fact, the losses were proportionately higher in the later conflict). The high rate of casualties meant that many battalions were completely wiped out, often several times over; the prime cause being the explosive missile, which also produced horrendous wounds. The sight of such injuries had a hugely detrimental effect on morale, as they reminded men of their own vulnerability. We also heard that not all wounds were unwelcome. Like the last war, many men dreamed of receiving a blighty wound that would allow them to escape the trenches and end their suffering. Such was the appalling nature of life at the front that having a foot or a hand blown off was considered the pinnacle of good luck (as a comrade remarked to Vernon Scannell: 'Cheer up! We might get a blighty').¹⁹¹ Physical wounds

¹⁸⁸ Leed, *No Man's Land*, 181.

¹⁸⁹ Whitehouse and Bennett, *Fear is the Foe*, 39.

¹⁹⁰ LHCMA, Nelson, 'Always a Grenadier', 20.

¹⁹¹ Scannell, *Argument of Kings*, 168.

were only half of the story. Another way men escaped the front, albeit unconsciously, was psychiatric breakdown. Most writers described two variations of going 'bomb happy': the man who thrashed around violently, out of control and the somnambulant zombie-like victim. The crucial point was that, even when one had not broken down entirely, one was in a state of constant turmoil, often teetering on the brink. The continual stress ensured that any man, irrespective of rank, personal valour or morale, would eventually break. More so, when the fighting degenerated into brutal attritional slogging matches, when the rate of psychiatric casualties soared in comparison to mobile operations. Finally, the strain of passively enduring shelling or bombing in a slit-trench, with no way of retaliating, seems to have been the main precipitating factor in psychiatric breakdown, and sudden heavy barrages often proved to be the final straw.

Chapter Six: Discipline and Morale

Periods of waiting in positions of static defence are dangerous to both morale and discipline.

*ATM No. 33, 1940.*¹

Here we are in the 20th century of civilisation with nothing better to do than sit in a wet ditch and sling iron at Germans sitting in an almost similar ditch some few hundred yards away . . . The only consolation is that he must dislike it as much as we do.

*The Wadi Gazette, Issue No. 2, 1944.*²

Each time we had dug in lately I wondered morbidly whether I was digging my own grave.

Sergeant Stanley Whitehouse, *Fear is the Foe*, 1995.³

If the last chapter painted a gloomy picture of inexorable psychiatric disintegration, due in no small part to the rigours of trench fighting, we would do well to recognise that, on the whole, discipline and morale actually held together very well during the war, especially among frontline infantry.⁴ Although the stress of static warfare often produced a rate of psychiatric casualties and desertion that had senior commanders gravely concerned, there was no widespread breakdown in discipline among the troops such as beset the French Army in the spring of 1917. Nevertheless, there were numerous instances of men, both individually and as a group, who were momentarily unable or unwilling to cope with the strain of battle and trench life. Collectively these unhappy soldiers panicked or came close to mutiny, whilst individually they deserted or broke down emotionally. In

¹ *ATM No. 33* (London 1940), 15-16.

² LHCMA, Penney Papers 11/14: 'The Wadi Gazette' Issue No. 2, 14 April 1944.

³ Whitehouse and Bennett, *Fear is the Foe*, 155.

⁴ See French, *Raising Churchill's Army*; French, "'Tommy is no soldier'", 154-178; Stephen Hart, *Montgomery and "colossal cracks": the 21st Army Group in northwest Europe, 1944-45* (London 2000).

fact, even though morale never collapsed entirely, there were times when it was dangerously low and, more often than not, the main precipitating factor was static warfare. Take, for example, this account of a stretch in the line in the winter of 1944-45: 'The boys in the forward trenches were getting worn out, for they had kept a constant watch on the enemy, dodging shells, bullets, and continuously sitting in a trench was no good for morale. Some men had to be evacuated with battle exhaustion, and many went sick with colds and trench feet'.⁵ The CO of the 2nd Lancashire Fusiliers was just as worried about the effect of prolonged static fighting, writing that 'It was agonising to see a fine fighting team wasting away'.⁶ It is the intention of this chapter to explore this relationship further and to shed light on the way in which static warfare affected discipline and morale. To this end, we will look at how influential authors have used these terms in the past and will offer a consensus definition; the individual and organisational determinants of morale; an analysis of how static warfare disrupted these critical elements; gauging the scale of the problem by looking at traditional indicators of low morale and poor discipline; and, in the final section, offer a reappraisal of the measurement of morale in light of the foregoing. It is to the first of these themes that we now turn our attention, the concept of morale itself.

Morale is an amorphous and highly complex phenomenon, one which numerous writers have attempted to illuminate over the years with varying degrees of success. In a short, unpublished study of the British Army during the Second World War, John Sparrow provided a long list of factors which had some impact on the spirits of fighting men, but gave a bland interpretation of the subject in question, stating that it was 'the attitude of the soldier towards his employment as a soldier'.⁷ In his groundbreaking study of the 2nd Scottish Rifles at the Battle of Neuve Chapelle, John Baynes dedicated no less than sixteen pages to a definition, concluding that it was the most important single factor in war, a quality of mind and spirit which merged bravery, self-discipline and fortitude, and whose hallmarks were unflagging cheerfulness and unselfishness. 'In time of war,' he wrote:

⁵ IWM 90/20/1, Caines, 'A Brief Account of the 4th Battalion the Dorsetshire Regiment', 68.

⁶ John Mackenzie, *CO 2LF 78 Division: the battle experiences of an infantry commander* (Maulden 1997), 34.

⁷ NA WO277/16, Lt.-Col. J. H. Sparrow, *Morale of the Army 1939-1945* (London 1949), 1.

It manifests itself in the soldier's absolute determination to do his duty to the best of his ability in any circumstances. At its highest peak it is seen as an individual's readiness to accept his fate willingly even to the point of death, and to refuse all roads that lead to safety at the price of conscience.⁸

Others were more succinct. In *Men Under Stress*, Roy Grinker and John Spiegel defined morale simply as 'the psychological forces within a combat group which impel its members to get into the fight'.⁹ Alexander H. Leighton maintained that it was the capacity of a group of people to pull together consistently in pursuit of a common purpose.¹⁰ Lord Moran described morale as 'the ability to do a job under any circumstances to the limit of one's capacity'.¹¹ Tamotsu Shibutani outlined the attributes of a military unit with high morale in his sociological study of demoralisation:

An organized group is characterised as having high morale when it performs consistently at a high level of efficiency, when the tasks assigned to it are carried out promptly and effectively. In such units each member is likely to contribute his share willingly doing what he believes to be worthwhile and assuming that his associates will do their part. When necessary, the men help one another without even being asked. Mutual encouragement is commonplace, and those whose zeal is exemplary are singled out for praise. The few who do not share the prevailing orientation feel pressures to comply: those who fail repeatedly to live up to expectations are scorned as 'slackers', and efforts may be made to expel them from the group. The successful completion of each transaction occasions no surprise; it is the expected thing. Members of such groups usually place a high evaluation on themselves. They often develop a strong sense of identification with each other; they develop pride in their unit, become conscious of its reputation, and take pleasure in displaying emblems of belonging to it.¹²

⁸ Baynes, *Morale*, 108.

⁹ Roy R. Grinker and John P. Spiegel, *Men Under Stress* (London 1945), 37.

¹⁰ Referenced in Frederick J. Manning, 'Morale and Cohesion in Military Psychiatry', in Franklin D. Jones, *et al*, (eds.), *Military Psychiatry: Preparing in Peace for War* (Washington DC 1994), 3.

¹¹ Moran, *Anatomy of Courage*, 95.

¹² Tamotsu Shibutani, *The Derelicts of Company K: a sociological study of demoralization* (Berkeley c.1978), 4.

The final word on the subject goes to one of the most distinguished soldiers of his generation, Field Marshal William Slim, who fought at Gallipoli (where he was badly wounded) and who would later command the Fourteenth Army in Burma. Like the others, he saw morale as a state of mind, an 'intangible force which will move a whole group of men to give their last ounce to achieve something, without counting the cost to themselves; that makes them feel they are part of something greater than themselves'.¹³ Thus we have arrived at a working definition: in short, morale is the eagerness and determination with which a member of a group carries out the activities of that group. So defined, we can proceed to the second of our principal areas of investigation: an examination of the determinants of morale.

This is, of course, an extremely large area in which to work. One US manual on army leadership claimed that 'Every physical thing entering into the environment of the soldier, and the expressed state of mind of every person with whom he comes in contact, affects his morale'.¹⁴ On top of this, it is often difficult to explain the latter's ebb and flow. A rifle company commander who served in Italy recalled that despair often gave way to euphoria in an instant, 'sometimes for a good reason - the end of an attack, the breaking of dawn, a shot of rum - sometimes for no reason at all'.¹⁵ The foregoing is said not to discourage the reader, but to recognise the essential truth of the matter - that some things exert a greater or lesser influence on morale and some are easier to change than others. To this we might add that some aspects of war are more detrimental than others. In this section, therefore, we will outline the key determinants of morale, organise them into a logical framework and attempt to illustrate their action with appropriate examples.

Individual factors encompass both biological and psychological needs. Of the former, good health, good food, sufficient rest and sleep, clean dry clothes, washing facilities and protection from the elements are regularly cited as producing good morale.¹⁶ Yet the fulfilment of even these basic

¹³ Field Marshal Viscount Slim of Burma quoted in Tsouras, *The Book of Military Quotations*, 288.

¹⁴ *Field Manual on Leadership* referenced in Manning, 'Morale and Cohesion in Military Psychiatry', 6.

¹⁵ Forman, *To Reason Why*, 84.

¹⁶ See Baynes, *Morale*, 101; French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, 143; Richardson, *Fighting Spirit*, 171.

requirements would prove to be the exception rather than the rule for most men at the front. E. Grey Turner provided a fairly representative description of soldiering during the Second World War:

The principal hardship, abject misery and stark terror which are endured by the infantryman are, in my opinion, worse than anything which is undergone by any other branch of the army, by any other service or by any civilians. The sailor may do his tour of duty in great danger or physical hardship, but afterwards he goes below to quarters which are warm and dry. The airman, after his operational flight, returns to a warm and dry base, many miles distant from the enemy. The wretched infantryman, after fighting his battle or doing his tour on sentry, has no alternative but to remain in his waterlogged, shelterless trench, within reach of the enemy's guns. For days, or even weeks on end, the infantryman's skin may literally never be dry or warm for a moment. Long and exhausting marches, carrying a back-breaking weight of equipment in all weathers, often under enemy fire, and sometimes with the prospect of going into action at the end, are another feature of the infantryman's lot which is quite unknown to the navy or RAF, or, for that matter, to any other branch of the Army.¹⁷

Simply put, living conditions in the trenches were usually dreadful and infantrymen were rarely able to satisfy even the most straightforward physical needs.

Food and rations were a habitual cause of complaint. 'I would say without hesitation,' opined Brigadier Bernard Fergusson that 'lack of food constitutes the single biggest assault upon morale . . . Apart from its purely chemical effects upon the body, it has woeful effects upon the mind. One is in the dismal condition of having nothing to look forward to'.¹⁸ Before late 1942, the basic battle ration was made up of bully beef, hard biscuits, tea, sugar, tinned milk, jam and margarine. It was only intended for a week's use, but soldiers were often forced to exist on little else for much longer intervals, although some efforts were made to enhance it with limited quantities of tinned vegetables, tinned herrings and rice.¹⁹ 'Compo rations', on the other hand, first introduced in late

¹⁷ CMAC GC/96/1, E. Grey Turner, *Diary of RAMC Service in World War II, 1942-5*, entry of 20 January 1943, 26.

¹⁸ Bernard Fergusson, *The Wild Green Earth* (London 1946), 99.

¹⁹ McCallum, *Journey with a Pistol*, 75; French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, 143.

1942, were generally well received because they contained a much greater variety.²⁰ It was not merely the quantity and quality that was important to morale, the preparation and consumption of food also bonded men together and offered a fleeting diversion from the grim business of war. Cooking and eating took up much of the slack time in the trenches, breaking up the monotony into endurable spans and giving soldiers something to look forward to in an otherwise bleak existence. Thus a hot meal in the company of comrades could work wonders for morale and it is no coincidence that it has been a central tenet in the treatment of psychiatric battle casualties ever since doctors recognised the psychological nature of shell shock in the Great War.²¹ Cigarettes, alcohol and tea were equally important in this respect and when any of these were in short supply, morale invariably declined.²²

Bugs and dirt were staples of frontline service in all but the coldest of climates; consequently a bath and clean clothes numbered amongst the most effective short-term morale raisers. In July 1944, the 4th Dorsets organised a bath house for each company using a few old tubs and the entire battalion was ordered to take a bath. Wally Caines wrote: 'I must say how grand it felt after having washed down and a change of clean clothes, as before this I really felt lousy and was literally stinking after having spent days and nights in filthy trenches without a proper wash'.²³ Another soldier described a visit to his division's mobile bath unit near Nijmegen as 'one of the joys of life'.²⁴ Even in the forward trenches there were ways to maintain one's personal appearance. After breakfast most sections would boil a biscuit tin full of water in order to wash and shave, a routine which could last much of

²⁰ IWM Sound Archive, 12239, Gerald Kendrick Barnett; IWM 82/37/1, Danger, 'Diary of a Guardsman', i; IWM 84/2/1, Fenner, 3; Horsfall, *Wild Geese*, 35

²¹ Manning, 'Morale and Cohesion in Military Psychiatry', 7; see also CMAC GC/135/B.2/1, Army Psychiatry Memo, Notes for regimental officers on psychiatric casualties, Oct 1944, 3-4.

²² For the importance of cigarettes see IWM Department of Documents, 07/29/1, Col. J. H. Coldwell-Horsfall, Diary entry for 16 January 1940, 3; IWM 85/18/1, Framp, 'The Littlest Victory', 54; IWM Department of Documents, PP/MCR/328, Maj. G. Tilly, letter to his wife dated 8 July 1944; Crimp, *Diary of a Desert Rat*, 39, 179; for the importance of alcohol see IWM 90/20/1, Caines, 'A Brief Account of the 4th Battalion the Dorsetshire Regiment', 24; Lt. Jim Trousdell, 78th Division, quoted in Doherty, *Clear the way!*, 211; Forman, *To Reason Why*, 84; Wingfield, *Only Way Out*, 45; for the importance of tea see IWM 83/36/1, Day, 'We Landed at Nightfall', 35; IWM 85/18/1, Framp, 'The Littlest Victory', 72; Cochrane, *Charlie Company*, 8; Crimp, *Diary of a Desert Rat*, 39.

²³ IWM 90/20/1, Caines, 'A Brief Account of the 4th Battalion the Dorsetshire Regiment', 11.

²⁴ IWM 87/23/1, Amsden, 'Cuidich 'N Righ', 17.



Figure 13: Seaforth Highlanders receiving cigarette ration in the Mareth area (IWM Photo Archive NA1493)

the morning, while the more adventurous would attempt a biscuit tin bath.²⁵ All writers agreed on the remarkable properties of shaving: Rex Wingfield claimed shaving was no ordinary thing to an infantryman, for with the stubble went all the weariness, filth and fear of the frontline, and compared it to being born anew each day²⁶; Eric Codling felt that a good shave was the equivalent of an extra hour's sleep.²⁷ The act of shaving every day, no matter the circumstances, was seen as a sign of healthy morale²⁸, while failure to do so was often taken as a symptom of the initial stages of psychiatric breakdown.²⁹ In the words Sergeant John Longstaff, 2nd Rifle Brigade, 'If you feel clean, you feel your morale is good. It's when you're mucky that your morale is down'.³⁰

If most soldiers were nearly always filthy, exhausted and hungry, one must question the importance of rest, food and clean dry clothes in maintaining their spirits, beyond a minimum level at least, since morale was not unvaryingly low in every theatre. Samuel A. Stouffer and colleagues answered this paradox with the sociological concept of relative deprivation, which, roughly stated, is the idea that one determines his status based on comparison with others.³¹ It was, they argued, not so much the absolute level of physical discomfort and suffering that governed morale, rather it was the correlation of a soldier's discomfort to those around him and, more generally, to the level he has been led to expect. A notable example of this was the well-documented friction between 'tooth' (frontline combat) and 'tail' (rear echelon support). 'Nothing undermines the morale of the fighting soldier so much as gross inequality of sacrifice', wrote one officer who served in Tunisia and Italy. 'It is very unsettling to the infantryman in his waterlogged trench to know that there are huge numbers of soldiers living in comfort and security in Base areas, who often get more pay and quicker promotion than himself'.³² These sentiments were encouraged by the not entirely unfounded belief

²⁵ Bryan, *Wool, War and Westminster*, 76; Captain Lewis Keeble, 1/4th KOYLI, quoted in Delaforce, *Polar Bears*, 89; Horsfall, *Wild Geese*, 33.

²⁶ Wingfield, *Only Way Out*, 93.

²⁷ IWM 88/4/1, Codling, *Memoir*, 50.

²⁸ McGregor, *Spirit of Angus*, 68-69.

²⁹ Trevelyan, *Fortress*, 25, 27.

³⁰ Quoted in Max Arthur, *Forgotten Voices of the Second World War* (London 2005), 124.

³¹ Stouffer, *American Soldier*.

³² CMAC GC/96/1, Turner, *Diary* - answer to post-war War Office questionnaire about various aspects of military medical service, 192

that food and equipment frequently disappeared along the lines of communication. John Ellis noted that when the Second Army in north-west Europe launched a special campaign to give all fighting men two suits of battle-dress and three blankets, many of these failed to reach the front, while most men at base had three suits of battle dress and at least five blankets.³³

Another way soldiers sustained morale was by embellishing and improving their trenches. The means by which footsloggers achieved this displayed a remarkable degree of ingenuity and invention. At Anzio, in January and February, the waterlogged ground had made it impossible for soldiers to dig deep, but this changed as soon as the ground began to dry out. At this stage dugouts became more elaborate and were constructed out of doors from ruined farms, piles of broken ammunition boxes and even, in some instances, from huge wine vats left in the cellars of the city and the nearby town of Nettuno. Parked vehicles left unattended lost alternators, dynamos, batteries and seats, pilfered in the name of making one's dugout a comfortable home-from-home. Empty petrol cans were converted into stoves and spent shell cases made effective chimneys. Almost everything had a use. Gunners did a brisk trade in the heavy cardboard wrapping for shells, which made excellent insulation for dugout walls; furniture, curtains, crockery and cutlery were removed from Italian holiday villas along the seafront to add a touch of opulence.³⁴ In one 'B' Echelon rest area the troops were able to excavate comfortable sleeping holes, each containing a real bed. Most of these subterranean dwellings were given names such as 'Seaview Hotel', 'The Nook', 'Sunny Side Up' and 'Hawkers and Shells Not Welcome'.³⁵ Even in the Fortress, soldiers attempted to feather their nest. Raleigh Trevelyan wrote:

Squash and Sergeant Chesterton have been busy reorganizing the décor of the foxhole, and have made shelves out of Yankee ration boxes. Polished mess-tins and some chipped china cups hang

³³ Ellis, *Sharp End*, 332; see also Crimp, *Diary of a Desert Rat*, 93.

³⁴ Eric Morris, *Circles of Hell: the war in Italy, 1943-1945* (London 1993), 301.

³⁵ Trevelyan, *Rome '44*, 237.

in rows on bent nails, and the sergeant has made paraffin lamps out of cigarette tins with pieces of four-by-two as wicks.³⁶

Soldiers were just as keen to embellish and improve their living spaces in other theatres.³⁷ 'Almost every day some domestic improvement was carried out,' wrote a soldier with the 2nd Monmouths in north-west Europe. 'A little scraped out here to fit a "knees-up" sleep position, a piece of head-cover against flying metal, a recess pried out for a cigarette tin or Sten gun magazine'.³⁸ It was not just the obvious benefits of improved comfort and safety that soldiers were after. Equally important was the feeling of control, of creating a small piece of civilisation in a dirty, chaotic world, which undoubtedly helped to bolster morale. The Monmouth soldier cited above, for example, expressed pride in his work: 'I would lean on the edge of [the trench] at stand-to . . . like any suburbanite leaning on his gateway after an evening of improving his garden'.³⁹

Beyond these relatively simple physical factors, but still largely in the individual sphere, were a host of psychological needs, the satisfaction of which played a major role in determining the state of morale. Mail was especially important in this respect - soldiers did not cast off their responsibilities as sons, lovers and fathers when they donned the uniform and they were always anxious to receive reassuring news from home. Everyone looked forward to a letter, especially those with wives and girlfriends, and spirits would soar when a fresh batch reached the men at the front. 'Those who have not fought abroad will never be able to understand what a letter from home means to a soldier's morale,' wrote Geoffrey Picot. 'All those devoted wives who daily wrote to their man did more good than they could have imagined'.⁴⁰ On the other hand, morale sunk if the mail was delayed and

³⁶ Trevelyan, *Fortress*, 40.

³⁷ The first improvement was usually head cover, primarily to provide protection against air burst shells, but also for a little shelter from the elements. See Major Bob Moberley, 2nd Middlesex Regiment, quoted in Delaforce, *Marching to the Sound of Gunfire*, 67; Jary, *18 Platoon*, 65; West, *An' It's Called a Tam-O'-Shanter*, 76.

³⁸ Quoted in How, *Hill 112*, 151.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 151; see also NA WO170/1350, 5th Grenadier Guards, War Diary for February 1944.

⁴⁰ Picot, *Accidental Warrior*, 83.

complaints about the slow arrival of post, especially in the Middle East and Italy, were routine.⁴¹ Naturally, these links with home were something of a double-edged sword - letters that brought good news raised morale, just as mail that brought bad news lowered it.⁴² If an unlucky soldier received a 'Dear John' letter, it destroyed their morale. 'It was as if the world had fallen in,' wrote a sergeant with the 1st Hampshires,

to say a man was devastated would be to put it mildly. Some cried and ranted, others just cried.

If you had to push forward in an attack the next day the poor man who had received a 'Dear John' went forward with his Company, still in shock and not caring what happened to him. I often wondered how many were killed after receiving one of those letters.⁴³

Another soldier described his ambivalence towards the mail, claiming that

Every soldier will carry with him something of the agony and ecstasy brought about by the arrival of those little thin rectangular missives . . . Agony if there was nothing for him at all or if there was and it contained news of a love that was lost, of an infidelity, or perhaps of a bereavement. Ecstasy simply because there was a letter for him, and he knew he had not been forgotten.⁴⁴

Despite this, letters were treasured by the troops. Over and above their primary role in conveying news from families and friends, mail played another critical role in bolstering morale as the very act of writing and receiving letters established a tangible link with home, an incredibly emotive idea. Bad news was never welcome, but it was better than no news at all. Moreover, soldiers serving abroad could easily become disconnected from normal life.⁴⁵ Letters from home gave the troops some small measure of normality and provided them with a comforting link to their former lives. Even the act of writing offered a temporary escape from the grim reality of the line, which helped overcome the

⁴¹ NA WO163/52/AC/G(43)17, WO Committee on Morale in the Army, Fifth Quarterly Report, 3 July 1943; NA WO214/62, Message from Montgomery to Alexander, 23 September 1943; NA 204/6701, AFHQ Morale Report for the Quarter Ending 28 February 1945.

⁴² Bellows, *"When in Doubt, Brew Up"*, 155-156; Cochrane, *Charlie Company*, 128; Crimp, *Diary of a Desert Rat*, 27; Picot, *Accidental Warrior*, 83; Wingfield, *Only Way Out*, 174.

⁴³ Bellows, *"When in Doubt, Brew Up"*, 155-156.

⁴⁴ Harpur, *Impossible Victory*, 105; see also Wingfield, *Only Way Out*, 174.

⁴⁵ Wingfield, *Only Way Out*, 174.

profound sense of boredom, isolation and fear that most fighting men experienced in between battles.

Local and national newspapers were prized, too, as they allowed soldiers to preserve some connection, no matter how tenuous, with their families and pre-war habits; while forces newspapers were similarly sought after as they kept men informed about the progress of the war. Most frontline infantryman showed a keen interest in this, particularly news concerning the Russian Front which was seen by many as the key factor in the war's duration. These papers multiplied as the war dragged on, ranging from relatively sophisticated productions such as *Eighth Army News* and *Union Jack*, to tiny cyclostyled newssheets and regimental magazines (see page 216). The latter - which kept soldiers informed about the war and more specific matters of interest to the individual unit - were especially popular. The 2nd Wiltshires, in its Notes on Recent Operations issued after Anzio, reported that 'the issue of a daily B[attalion] newssheet for each Pl[atoon] . . . paid hands down in addition to normal Div[ision] and B[riga]de Intelligence Summaries and Newsheets. In battle . . . soldiers are constantly thirsting for news'.⁴⁶ Such newspapers offered a useful way to vent criticism and to keep in touch with battalion members who were in hospital or who had been posted elsewhere. More importantly, during prolonged periods of static fighting, writing pieces for inclusion offered an important way to alleviate the boredom. From January 1944, for instance, the 5th Buffs in 78th Division released a lavish monthly production called *The Dragonette*, which ran to over thirty pages and contained information on each company; a locations column detailing where various members of the unit were currently to be found; letters to the editor; a personal column; poems; features of topical interest; cartoons and competitions.⁴⁷

There were other psychological needs that were equally crucial in determining individual morale. What made these so important was the fact that, unlike the physical factors we have considered so

⁴⁶ NA WO170/1489, 2nd Wiltshire Regiment, War Diary for June 1944.

⁴⁷ NA WO170/1368, 5th The Buffs, War Diaries for April to June 1944.



W N Bury

No. 1

THE MOONRAKER

Friday 16 Jun 44.

WILTSHIRE REGIMENT IN EIGHTH ARMY.

From
"The Westminster Journal"

A Battalion of the Wiltshire Regiment took part in the Sicilian fighting. Since it fought on the French-Belgian frontier in 1940 this battalion has travelled far. Before knocking at Europe's back door, the unit had called at Madagascar where it received the surrender of the Antsirano airport in May 1942. A brief visit to India was followed by a passing acquaintance with the furnace like heat of the Southern Iraqi desert and the snows of the Persian Uplands.

Disappointed in their attempt to meet the Japanese on the Burma frontier and the Germans in the Caucasian Passes, these Wiltshire 'Moonrakers' have travelled more than 15,000 miles by boat, truck and landing craft to get to grips with the enemy.

When they queued up for embarkation on the eve of the Sicilian landing, an observer reported that the troops' universal comment was "It's come at last".

The Wiltshires are a typical English County Regiment. The men come from the quiet towns and villages of the Vale of the White Horse, the hamlets of the Downs and the farming country in the south of the county. With these quiet fair-haired men who smile tolerantly when they are nicknamed 'Swede' are a number of workers from London and Birmingham as well as the individual Irishman, Scot and Welshman.

Neither in manner or dress do the Wiltshires indulge in any eccentricity.

This particular battalion started its existence in 1824 as a Lowland Scottish Regiment and became part of the Wiltshire Regiment on the introduction of the "Cardwell System" of linking battalions to form Regular Regiments of two or more battalions.

Continued in next column.

EDITORIAL.

Now that our future appears to hold out a more settled and orderly existence, the circumstances warrant the production of a Regimental News-sheet, which, (exigencies of the Service permitting), we hope to make a weekly issue.

In collecting material for this, our first copy, the editorial staff have been subjected to a mental strain which cannot be maintained and we therefore most urgently ask for contributions from our readers.

Our policy is to publish news and items of interest affecting ourselves and the Regiment in general and in no way endeavour to compete with such daily papers as Union Jack or Stars and Stripes.

In addition to the contributions already asked for we invite readers to write to the editor letters on such subjects as suggested improvements, topics of interest or opinions on debatable matters. These letters will be published at the discretion of the editor with due regard to available space, also, although we ask for the true names of correspondents, letters will be published under a non de plume.

The Editor.

Continued from previous column.

For about twenty years the officers continued to wear a red and white disc boarding round their head dress similar to that worn by the Scots Guards.

This custom was dropped at the beginning of the present century and at the present time the only reminder of its Scottish origin still maintained by the battalion is that on ceremonial occasions it marches past to the tune of "Blue Bonnets over the Border".

Figure 14: 2nd Wiltshire's newsheet, 'The Moonraker' (NA WO170/1489)

far, mere equality of sacrifice was not enough; good morale necessitated that each soldier had what Frederick J. Manning referred to as a goal, a role and reasons for self-confidence.⁴⁸ If we take the first of these requirements, it has been long held that, in the words of John Baynes, 'the writer or speaker about war has more faith in causes than those who actually fight'.⁴⁹ To place this in historical context, the pre-1914 view assumed that patriotism, or a similarly noble and glorious cause, was the essential component of effective military performance. In the Great War's aftermath, a stream of disillusioned novels and memoirs chipped away at this view⁵⁰, before it was finally killed off by the psychiatrists and social scientists of 1939-45. Certainly there is little empirical evidence to support the pre-1914 view and acknowledged military experts have tended to discount it entirely when dealing with survival in combat. One such was S. L. A. Marshall, who rejected the idea that effective military performance was associated with identification by the individual with the goals of the nation. This was, he argued, not the nature of man in battle:

his thoughts are as local as is his view of the nearest ground cover, and unless he feels a solidarity with the people immediately around him and is carried forward by their momentum, neither thoughts about the ideals of his country nor reflections on his love for his wife will keep him from diving toward the nearest protection.⁵¹

Even John Dollard, in his study of probably the most ideologically motivated troops of the twentieth century, the International Brigades who fought in defence of the Second Spanish Republic in the Spanish Civil War, concluded that 'the soldier in battle is too busy to be constantly whispering, "My cause, my cause"'.⁵²

But does the foregoing also apply to British soldiers in World War Two? Although there are some excellent studies on this, they focus on the Army at home and tell us little about what combat

⁴⁸ Manning, 'Morale and Cohesion in Military Psychiatry', 7.

⁴⁹ Baynes, *Morale*, 99.

⁵⁰ See, Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of a Fox Hunting Man*; Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That*; and Richard Aldington, *Death of a Hero*.

⁵¹ Marshall, 'Combat Leadership', 303-307.

⁵² John Dollard, *Fear in Battle*, referenced in Manning, 'Morale and Cohesion in Military Psychiatry', 7.

soldiers thought they were fighting for when they were actually under fire.⁵³ If anecdotal evidence is anything to go by, the answer to the question posed at the start of the paragraph is a resounding yes. There is very little evidence to suggest that ideology played a meaningful role in sustaining morale: in *Charlie Company* Peter Cochrane observed that the cause gave soldiers the basic reason for putting on, or being put into, uniform, but it would not make them actively fight for it.⁵⁴ Another infantryman noted that the fierce, patriotic fervour of the last war was visibly absent in 1939-45, confessing he was there, quite simply, because he was there.⁵⁵ Fred Majdalany claimed it was foolish to imagine that the average British soldier went into battle thinking he was helping to save democracy; he stuck it out, he contended, purely because combat had become 'the whole of his life, his job'.⁵⁶ Thus we can largely discount the importance of a goal when it comes to fighting morale.

Another key determinant of individual morale was one's role in combat - something which could be formally assigned or assumed during the chaos of battle. Richard Holmes quotes Sir Henry Lawrence, the distinguished soldier and statesman of British India, to the effect that 'many a man behaves as a hero or coward, according as he considers he is expected to behave'.⁵⁷ The essential truth of this is supported by comparatively recent research by Reuven Gal, a former combat infantry officer and later Chief Psychologist to the Israeli Defence Forces, who established that an assigned role, especially one involving some form of mission-oriented task, provided soldiers with a feeling of mastery and control as well as a distraction from the negative impact of impending danger. Gal argued that taking action under stressful conditions, *as opposed to remaining passive*, is a powerful coping tool.⁵⁸ This line of reasoning is certainly borne out by the experiences of British troops during the war. In reference to a night attack on the village of Touffréville, Normandy, one infantryman

⁵³ See J. A. Crang, 'Politics on Parade: Army Education and the 1945 General Election', *History*, 81-262 (1997), 215-27; Crang, 'The British Soldier on the Home Front', 60-74; S. P. Mackenzie, *Politics and Military Morale: Current Affairs and Citizenship Education in the British Army 1914-1950* (Oxford 1992).

⁵⁴ Cochrane, *Charlie Company*, 171-172.

⁵⁵ IWM 85/18/1, Framp, 'The Littlest Victory', 3.

⁵⁶ Majdalany, *Cassino*, 232.

⁵⁷ Holmes, *Acts of War*, 314.

⁵⁸ R. Gal and R. S. Lazarus, 'The Role of Activity in Anticipating and Confronting Stressful Situations', *Journal of Human Stress*, 1:4 (1975), 4-20; see also R. Gal, 'Courage Under Stress', in S. Breitznitz (ed.), *Stress in Israel* (New York, NY 1983), 65-91; Gal, 'Unit Morale', 549-564.

wrote: 'While lying still you had nothing to do except be frightened. You became possessed by, drenched in, terror. Even the act of walking and keeping your balance on the rough ground you were covering provided some small distraction'.⁵⁹ In this respect, the leadership role was vitally important and scholarly work indicates that it was less stressful precisely because officers and NCOs were occupied with a host of tasks and had more control over the military situation.⁶⁰ According to Captain Fraser Burrows of the 5th Camerons, 'During an attack a Platoon or Coy Commander had plenty of things to concern them. The private soldier had nothing to think about except where the next hostile shell or bullet was coming from'.⁶¹

Closely related to the previous two, was a sense of progress towards the ultimate goal (or at least the feeling that it was achievable) and that the role was one that could be carried out.⁶² If either was lacking, morale invariably suffered. Soldiers who lacked confidence in their military ability and/or weapons often suffered from low morale and were at considerable risk from psychiatric breakdown. Todd Helmus and Russell Glenn cite a survey of heavy weapons companies in four separate US divisions prior to D-Day, in which their eagerness for battle, their confidence in their combat stamina, and confidence in their military skills were rated. In the companies with the lowest levels of confidence, the rate of disease and non-battle injuries (including psychiatric breakdown) was nearly double that of companies reporting high levels of self-confidence.⁶³ In fact, because of the critical importance of confidence, a key way to build morale was to build skill.⁶⁴ Training, therefore, played a central role in the promotion of good morale, a point made by Marshall in *Men Against Fire*; in short, the more realistic the training, the better prepared soldiers would be.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ Scannell, *Argument of Kings*, 153.

⁶⁰ See Reuven Gal and Franklin D. Jones, 'A Psychological Model of Combat Stress', in Franklin D. Jones [et al], *War Psychiatry* (Washington, D.C. 1995), 138; R. G. Miller, 'Secretion of 17-OHCS in Military Aviators as an Index of Responses to Stress: a review', *Aerospace Med*, Vol. 39, No. 5 (May 1968), 498; R. G. Miller [et al], 'The Stress of Aircraft Carrier Landings: I. Corticosteroid Responses in Naval Aviators', *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 32:6 (November-December 1970), 581-588.

⁶¹ Quoted in Delaforce, *Monty's Highlanders*, 143.

⁶² Manning, 'Morale and Cohesion in Military Psychiatry', 8.

⁶³ Stouffer, *American Soldier*, referenced in Helmus and Glenn, *Steeling the Mind*, 27.

⁶⁴ D. M. Malone, *Small Unit Leadership* (Novato, CA 1983).

⁶⁵ Marshall, *Men Against Fire*; see also Strachan, 'Training, Morale and Modern War', 211-227.

As suggested in the opening sections, group factors played a hugely important role in determining morale. The frontline infantryman's ability to endure the twin stresses of combat and life in the trenches was influenced less by the actions of the enemy and more by his relationships with those around him. Much has been written on this topic and we need say little more, save to stress the fact that, in the words of David French, 'primary group cohesion was a major factor in convincing troops to remain on the battlefield, by persuading the individual soldier that he was not facing mortal danger alone and by exploiting his masculine pride'.⁶⁶ Samuel A. Stouffer also saw the development of effective primary cohesion as a vital ingredient in the prevention of psychiatric breakdown, writing that 'the group in its informal character . . . supported and sustained the individual in stressors he would otherwise not been able to withstand'.⁶⁷ New arrivals very quickly realised that the small band of men around them were critical to their survival - for many this was the first time in their lives that they had felt such a powerful bond.⁶⁸ One corporal with the 1/6th Queen's gave a group of reinforcements the following advice:

The first thing you've got to do is to forget a lesson you learnt in Blighty. The policy of '—— you, Jack, I'm all right' doesn't apply here. Everybody looks after everybody else. Your life and our lives depend on that. The platoon is one unit, one family.⁶⁹

Raleigh Trevelyan, who was commissioned into the Rifle Brigade, had it drummed into him during training that he belonged to a crack regiment. As soon as he arrived in Italy he was posted to a battalion of the Green Howards. After three weeks of shared suffering in the Anzio beachhead, his loyalty to and identification with his original unit began to dissolve. He recorded in his diary that 'I'm not sure if my ties with the blokes in this platoon don't outweigh any nebulous loyalty I may have felt towards the traditions of the regiment'.⁷⁰ Most men continued to fight for the simple reason that they did not want to let their mates down. David Cole for one felt that God, King and Country

⁶⁶ French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, 123; see also Morris Janowitz and Edward Shills, 'Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II', 177-220.

⁶⁷ Stouffer, *American Soldier*, 130.

⁶⁸ Bowlby, *Recollections*, 4.

⁶⁹ Wingfield, *Only Way Out*, 55.

⁷⁰ Trevelyan, *Fortress*, 48.

were fine concepts, but rather remote. More important to him were his comrades in the next trench and to 'desert or fail them was an offence that did not bear contemplation'.⁷¹ This comradeship was an extremely powerful sentiment. Rex Wingfield described it as 'the most wonderful thing in the world' and felt that man was at his best in the line.⁷² Consequently soldiers felt a profound sense of loss when they were removed from their primary groups. Bob Day, who was wounded in Italy and sent to England to recover, found that:

I began to miss the comradeship of men in danger, a comradeship I have never quite found since. I missed simple pleasures such as brewing tea in the shelter of a slit-trench or deserted farmhouse which can mean so much more than luxurious living.⁷³

The idea of a 'trench mate' was especially important as infantrymen usually dug two-man slit-trenches which fostered what Norman Craig, a platoon commander in the 5th Royal Sussex Regiment, called 'the inseparability of mates. They would live, eat, work and sleep together and could not bear to be parted. If one of them was killed or wounded the other was quite lost'.⁷⁴ According to Tom Gore, who spent just under two months in the line in early 1945, 'You couldn't help getting to know each other well after standing in a trench twice a night for each night of the seven weeks. If it had gone on much longer we would have become related. Like one happy family'.⁷⁵ The importance of such relationships was confirmed in North Africa in the summer of 1942, when army morale reached its nadir. Doctors reported that one reason for the marked deterioration was the hurried formation of composite units in which officers and men did not have the chance to get to know one another before they went into battle.⁷⁶ Whatever the case may have been, sitting in a hole by one's self was a profoundly dispiriting affair, as Major Robert Woollcombe, OC 'A' Company, 6th KOSB, remembered: 'Everyone was sharing a slit-trench with someone else, as usual, except me, by some chance. Which was not so good. . . . Nobody to share a laboured joke, no

⁷¹ Cole, *Rough Road to Rome*, 212-213.

⁷² Wingfield, *Only Way Out*, 124.

⁷³ IWM 83/36/1, Day, 'We Landed at Nightfall', 35.

⁷⁴ Norman Craig, *The Broken Plume: a platoon commander's story, 1940-45* (London 1982), 81.

⁷⁵ IWM 99/85/1, Gore, 'Reluctant Hero, Reluctant Coward', 19.

⁷⁶ NA WO177/324, DDMS 8 Army, Report by Brig. G. W. B. James, 28 July 1942.

solid body drawing at a cigarette in the corner opposite'.⁷⁷ Of course, when primary groups were shattered by heavy casualties, morale suffered accordingly (more on this later).

Perhaps the most important determinant of morale was unit cohesion, defined by one US general as 'the bonding together of soldiers in such a way as to sustain their will and commitment to each other, the unit, and mission accomplishment, despite combat or mission stress'.⁷⁸ Central to this concept was the individual's confidence that in times of difficulty one had someone who was able and willing to provide help and that one had a reciprocal obligation to do the same for them. S. L. A. Marshall felt that 'the unit was the primary defender against or expediter of breakdown in battle'.⁷⁹ Grinker and Spiegel maintained that 'the ability to identify with a group and the past history of such identification are probably the most important . . . components of good motivation for combat'.⁸⁰ Unit cohesion was, by most accounts, *the* most important determinant of morale and it played a key role in supporting battlefield performance and preventing psychiatric breakdown.⁸¹ Recent studies based on Israeli experiences during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, have lent credence to this idea.⁸² Shabtai Noy found that 40% of one group of psychiatric casualties reported mistrust in their commanders and felt socially isolated in their units.⁸³ Social isolation was also the best single predictor of psychiatric breakdown in a retrospective study of Israeli stress casualties from the Lebanon War.⁸⁴ To cut a long story short, weak bonds with comrades and leaders produced low morale, which in turn heightened the stress of trench life and combat, which ultimately resulted in psychiatric breakdown. This certainly happened in units with low cohesion *and* low morale. In

⁷⁷ Woolcombe, *Lion Rampant*, 155.

⁷⁸ Edward C. Meyer, referenced in R. Little, 'Buddy Relations and Combat Performance', in M. Janowitz (ed.), *The New Military* (New York, NY 1964), 195-224.

⁷⁹ S. L. A. Marshall referenced in Helmus and Glenn, *Steeling the Mind*, 27.

⁸⁰ Grinker and Spiegel, *Men Under Stress*, 41.

⁸¹ Stouffer, *American Soldier*.

⁸² S. Noy, 'Stress and Personality as Factors in the Causation and Prognosis of Combat Reaction', in G. Belenky (ed.), *Contemporary Studies in Combat Psychiatry* (Westport, Conn 1987), 21-29; Steiner and Neumann, 'Traumatic Neurosis and Social Support', 866-8.

⁸³ S. Noy, 'Stress and Personality'.

⁸⁴ Z. Solomon (*et al.*), 'Effects of Social Support and Battle Intensity on Loneliness and Breakdown During Combat', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 51:6 (1986), 1269-1276.

contrast, elite units, which displayed a high degree of both of these qualities, generally reported low psychiatric casualty rates despite frequent exposure to combat.⁸⁵

Of course, soldiers did not just bond with their peers, but also with their leaders. Accordingly, officers were critical for the maintenance of unit cohesion and fighting spirit, a fact acknowledged by the 1922 Southborough Committee on shell-shock, which described officer-other rank relations as the most important factor in maintaining morale.⁸⁶ In his landmark book, *Leadership in the Trenches*, Gary Sheffield concluded that 'the ethos of the pre-war officer corps, which stressed the need for the officer to exercise paternal care for his men, was a major factor in the maintenance of wartime morale'.⁸⁷ Official doctrine reiterated over and over again the importance of strong leadership and good officer-man relations. *Comrades in Arms* (1942), a series of talks to junior officers and officer cadets that supplied guidance on the handling of their men, emphasised that the single most important component of good unit morale was the relationship between officers and other ranks. The men wanted, 'like most of us, the stimulus of a personal leader – someone whom they know and like to look up to and admire'.⁸⁸ This was stressed in the forward to a pamphlet entitled *Morale and the Officer*, drafted in 1944, in which officers were told that they had no duty more important than that of sustaining and raising the morale of their men.⁸⁹ In this respect, there were obvious parallels between the First and Second Wars; indeed, the importance of paternal officer-other rank relations in shoring up the fighting spirit of the men in the trenches proved just as relevant in 1939-45 as it had been on the Western Front decades earlier.

⁸⁵ Gal and Jones, 'A Psychological Model of Combat Stress', 139; Helmus and Glenn, 'Steeling the Mind', 30; A. L. Hessin, 'Neuropsychiatry in Airborne Divisions,' in W. S. Mullins and A. J. Glass (eds.), *Medical Department, United States Army Neuropsychiatry in World War II*, Vol. 2, Overseas Theaters (Washington, D.C. 1973), 375–398.

⁸⁶ Quoted in Bielecki, *British Infantry Morale*, 31.

⁸⁷ Gary Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches: officer-man relations, morale and discipline in the British Army in the era of the First World War* (Basingstoke 2000), 178.

⁸⁸ *Comrades in Arms: three talks to junior officers or officer cadets to assist them in the handling of their men*, prepared under the direction of the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (London 1942), 1-2.

⁸⁹ NA WO 204/6702, 'Morale and the Officer', draft pamphlet (Aug-Sep, 1944).

Professional competence on the part of officers was essential in promoting a good relationship.⁹⁰ Technical and tactical proficiency was crucial, not only because it was the difference between certain death and the rush of victory, but also because it was important for soldiers to see and know their officer's talents, to reassure them that his leadership guaranteed safety and control. If they had doubts about his skill, they would hesitate to put their lives in his hands and would thus not act as a cohesive unit.⁹¹ The widespread recognition that the fighting was necessary meant that the majority of other ranks went into combat willingly, but once there, none wished their lives to be squandered unnecessarily to ignorance. For that reason, officers who lacked military skill or experience were distrusted and disliked by their men⁹²; as were those who were too keen and who seemed intent on seeking out action purely for the benefit of their careers, thus endangering their men's lives.⁹³

Yet militarily proficiency was not always enough. Just as in the Great War, officers had to get to know and gain the respect of their men, a process which was 'the root of British discipline and leadership'.⁹⁴ There were many ways in which an officer could do this. In battle, outward displays of coolness under fire proved particularly effective.⁹⁵ Such behaviour provided a comforting sense of control for subordinates, thus reducing the personal impact of danger. 'Only in this way could [the officer] ease the tension,' wrote Norman Craig, 'quell any panic and convince his men that everything would come out right in the end'⁹⁶; and just the proximity of a good officer could be an incredibly steadying influence.⁹⁷ Above all one had to be ready to lead by example and many did so in a very literal sense. One subaltern who fought with the 16th DLI in Italy, acknowledged that, 'Unless someone tells you to get out of your hole and go somewhere, you won't go. So I had to therefore show the way to my juniors and get up and go and tell them to come with me'.⁹⁸ Such

⁹⁰ Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, 111.

⁹¹ Manning, 'Morale and Cohesion', 10.

⁹² IWM 99/85/1, Drury, 'One Man's Memories Fifty Years on', part one, 7; IWM Sound Archive, 13251, K. C. Lovell.

⁹³ Crimp, *Diary of a Desert Rat*, 93-94; Trevelyan, *Fortress*, 43.

⁹⁴ General Sir Henry Rawlinson quoted in Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches*, 79.

⁹⁵ Hillier, *Long Long Road to Victory*, 99.

⁹⁶ Craig, *Broken Plume*, 75.

⁹⁷ C. Northcote Parkinson, *Always a Fusilier: the war history of the Royal Fusiliers (City of London Regiment) 1939-1945* (London 1949), 197.

⁹⁸ IWM 12239, Barnett.

displays had a profound effect on the men. Private Harris of the 1st Suffolks recalled the savage battle at Chateau de la Londe on 28 June 1944, where his unit had been cruelly thinned by German fire, but 'the Major was still in front, bellowing words of encouragement to those remaining, a leader of men if there ever was one; I followed like a dog at his master's heel'.⁹⁹ In contrast, leaders who failed to provide their men with a reassuring example were unpopular and seen as liabilities.¹⁰⁰

To inspire confidence and foster unit cohesion, leaders also had to establish a level of mutual trust and liking with other ranks. One way an officer could achieve this was by demonstrating paternalistic affection, facilitated by the frequent periods of inactivity so characteristic of static fighting. Official doctrine stressed the importance of the standard paternal model, largely unchanged since 1914. The first lecture in *Comrades in Arms*, for instance, explained:

A right relationship between you and your men is most important for the morale of your unit. . . . Between you and many of your men a real friendship is bound to grow, and sometimes there will be a little more than that. There is nothing sloppy or sentimental about such a relationship, nor should it be in any way bad for discipline. If you are a youngster, some of the older men will feel kind of paternal towards you and will want to look after you – and you, in turn, will feel the same way towards some of your young soldiers. All perfectly natural and human, and excellent for morale.¹⁰¹

However, as *The Soldier's Welfare* (1943) noted, there could be no good leadership without good welfare.¹⁰² Thus the care of his men was an officer's duty and should be put before his own comfort and convenience.¹⁰³ The aim of tending to the welfare of one's subordinates was to link officers and other ranks together in a bond of 'mutual friendship and respect, which will not only stand the hardest tests of war, but will be strengthened by them'.¹⁰⁴ If officers were to inspire confidence,

⁹⁹ Neillands, *Battle of Normandy*, 192.

¹⁰⁰ Jary, *18 Platoon*, 12-14; LHCMA, Allfrey Papers 2/6: Text of an address by Allfrey to officers concerning morale, giving a brief survey of the causes of demoralisation amongst troops and methods of combating it (1941), 3.

¹⁰¹ *Comrades in Arms*, 3.

¹⁰² *The Soldier's Welfare: notes for officers*, 2nd Edition (London 1943), 6.

¹⁰³ *Soldier's Welfare*, 6.

¹⁰⁴ *Soldier's Welfare*, Foreword, 5.

their subordinates had to see that not only would they not squander their lives through incompetence, but also that they would not waste them through indifference¹⁰⁵; thus leaders who displeased their men through poor treatment were less likely to be followed or respected, no matter their personal bravery or military skill.

Another significant group determinant of morale is what is known as *esprit de corps*. In brief, effective battlefield performance necessitated not only cohesive primary groups, but also that these were articulated with the larger military organisation. Officers provided the link by which these smaller entities were integrated into the larger, secondary group, and by which the values and instructions of that larger group and the parent organisation were impressed on the primary group. By establishing relatively demanding expectations of combat behaviour and by welding soldiers' sense of worth to the reputation of their unit, the secondary group provided extra motivation for enthusiastic involvement in battle by its members. A regiment (sometimes a brigade or a division) which managed this successfully was said to have *esprit*. The latter is a higher order notion, mirroring cohesion at primary group level, entailing above all pride in and loyalty to a formal organisation over and above the primary group, and which, in addition to cohesion, was indispensable for lasting combat effectiveness and the maintenance of morale.¹⁰⁶ 'This was the way to risk one's life', wrote a soldier who fought through the Italian campaign with the 2nd Rifle Brigade. 'There was no King or Country about it - it was the regiment. And I wouldn't have changed places with anyone'.¹⁰⁷

Now that we have furnished ourselves with some idea of the determinants of morale, we will go on to consider some of the specific problems that static warfare generated. To this end, the next part of this chapter will examine what effect trench fighting had on each of the previously listed determinants. If we start with individual factors, there can be little doubt that trench warfare greatly

¹⁰⁵ See Gal, 'Unit Morale'; Z. Solomon, M. Mikulincer, S. E. Hobfoll, 'Effects of Social Support and Battle Intensity on Loneliness and Breakdown During Combat', *Journal Of Personality And Social Psychology*, 51 (1986), 1269-1276.

¹⁰⁶ Manning, 'Morale and Cohesion', 5.

¹⁰⁷ Bowlby, *Recollections*, 114.

multiplied the physical hardships experienced on active service and although we largely discounted hunger, thirst, sleep deprivation and extremes of weather as *critically* important determinants of morale, there is a great deal of anecdotal evidence to suggest that harsh environmental conditions such as rain, mud and frigid temperatures, along with sleep loss and a lack of nutritious food, could nevertheless lower morale and precipitate combat stress reactions.¹⁰⁸ For many soldiers, the weather was *the* single most important factor governing morale. This was hardly surprising given that most soldiers spent the bulk of their time at the front outside; one officer, who served with the Argylls in Italy, estimated that 90% of the men in his battalion spent their days continuously in the open.¹⁰⁹ By way of illustration, one officer recalled spending four nights and two days in the line at Wanssum Wood, Holland, during the winter of 1944-45, in an open dugout and with only one blanket in addition to his clothing and equipment. No fires were allowed and the temperature was consistently low – at one point registering -1° Fahrenheit or 33° of frost. This was, he later wrote, the ‘greatest degree of coldness from which I have ever suffered’.¹¹⁰ Of all the unpleasant conditions that men endured in the line, rain and mud were undoubtedly the most dispiriting. ‘The rain sometimes drove us to despair,’ wrote one Guards officer of the campaign in Tunisia. ‘In the space of a few minutes, it would turn the dry earth into slithering, slimy, bottomless mud, rendering the roads almost impassable, and waterlogging the trenches’.¹¹¹ Soldiers in exposed trenches were permanently wet to the skin and weapons were often rendered useless by mud.¹¹² If trenches began to fill up, the weary infantrymen were forced to repeatedly bale out and cover up, a tremendously exhausting process.¹¹³ In many cases they were utterly powerless to prevent flooding:

Nothing that human ingenuity could devise would keep the tide at bay. We baled. We made roofs with gas-capes. We piled compo boxes into the mud and lay on them, only to be awakened

¹⁰⁸ See E. W. Mericle, ‘The Psychiatric and Tactical Situations in an Armored Division’, *United States Army Medical Department Bulletin*, 6:3 (1946), 325-334; E. C. Ritchie, ‘Psychiatry in the Korean War: Perils, PIES and Prisoners of War’, *Military Medicine*, 67:11 (November 2002), 898-903.

¹⁰⁹ Malcolm, *History of the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders*, 226.

¹¹⁰ Lieutenant G. D. H. Dicks, 1st Royal Norfolks, quoted in Lincoln, *Thank God and the Infantry*, 145.

¹¹¹ CMAC GC/96/1, Diary of E. Grey Turner, 7 October 1944, 170.

¹¹² LHCMA, Nelson, ‘Always a Grenadier’, 50; Lieutenant Russell Collins, 16th Durham Light Infantry, quoted in Hart, *The Heat of Battle*, 96.

¹¹³ Hillier, *Long Long Road to Victory*, 117-118.

as the water lapped over the top. By morning all our trenches had three feet of water in them and we were driven into the open, soaking and without hope, with the rain still falling.¹¹⁴

Worst of all was the mud. Not only did it turn even the shortest journey into a physically exhausting, morale sapping struggle, but it permeated everything - clothes, hair, weapons, food.¹¹⁵

One example will perhaps demonstrate the terrible effect harsh environmental conditions had on the men. During one twenty hour period in October 1944, icy rain fell continuously on the positions of the 1st Kensingtons in the Apennines. By dawn on the 26th, 4 Platoon was inundated and by ten o'clock the slit-trenches had filled in; one of the mortar base plates was underwater; the men's kit was swamped; and soil was falling down the sides of the gully. By eleven o'clock one mortar had only one inch of muzzle showing above the water; the torrent had risen three feet; and the whole position was being swamped by water and landslides. On the following day things were even worse for 11 Platoon. There was no shelter available whatsoever; if the men tried to dig a slit-trench it instantly filled with water and there was nowhere to sit except on a muddy slope at an angle of 45 degrees. Consequently ten of their number collapsed with exposure or trench foot and had to be evacuated as sick. When they were eventually relieved by an exhausted 12 Platoon, the only place for them to go was a filthy, cramped, partially demolished house in full view of the enemy. It was a mere half mile from their gun positions but the men were so totally drained, their feet so painful, and the mud was so bad that it took some of them four hours to walk it. On taking stock of the platoon it was found that fifteen men had trench foot or 'flu. Both platoons were now fatigued to the 'limit of endurance'. One officer in the battalion later wrote: 'They all knew that no relief was possible and that they [had] to stick it out somehow. The whole thing was a nightmare'.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Borthwick, *Sans Peur*, 180.

¹¹⁵ See Brutton, *Ensign in Italy*, 117; Sergeant J. Tuvey, quoted in Harpur, *Impossible Victory*, 86; IWM Department of Documents, 90/29/1, J. B. Tomlinson, TS account, 210.

¹¹⁶ Byrne Foxwell quoted in Harpur, *Impossible Victory*, 95.



Figure 15: Holland in the winter of 1944-45 (Ellis, *Sharp End*)

Leaving the grim physical conditions behind, in terms of goal, role and sense of progress, we have already established that the trenches of 1939-45 were not, for the most part, a particularly radicalising experience (see chapter two) and that few men were motivated by ideology or commitment to a particular cause. 'Reared on the cynicism following the First World War we would not allow ourselves any patriotic fervour', as one soldier wrote.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, there is a great deal of evidence to indicate that one's role in combat was profoundly influenced by the type of battle one was involved in. We know that soldiers engaged in a mission-orientated task were better off than those inactive; they felt more in control of the general situation and were simultaneously distracted from impending danger. In the trenches, however, one was typically an unwitting receptacle for sustained artillery or air attack, with no sense of control or preoccupation to dissipate the fear. This inert role was, as we heard in the preceding chapter, the ultimate root of psychiatric collapse and it seems reasonable to assume that it also played a major part in lowering morale. E. Grey Turner witnessed this during his battalion's stay on Monte Battaglia. 'We are having a very miserable time,' he confided in his diary on 7 October 1944. 'Rain awful, tracks almost impassable and worst of all persistent mortaring and shelling. The men's morale is being hard hit, the chief reason being that they just have to sit in their holes and wait for the shells and can do nothing about it'.¹¹⁸ The stalemate in Normandy produced equally abundant testimony on the enervating consequences of shelling in static positions. Geoffrey Picot remembered the fighting in the *bocage* as an immensely trying period for his men, as they spent most of their time sitting in trenches with nothing to do except think about the next shell, which played havoc on the nerves.¹¹⁹ Similarly an officer with the 2nd Lincolns in 3rd Division described it as 'one of the most trying periods in this, or any, war'. It was a hugely draining experience for his men, who were compelled to sit and hold, and

¹¹⁷ Peter Roach, *The 8.15 to War: memoirs of a Desert Rat: El Alamein, Wadi Halfa, Tunis, Salerno, Garigliano, Normandy, and Holland* (London 1982), 57.

¹¹⁸ CMAC GC/96/1, E. Grey Turner, *Diary of RAMC Service in World War II, 1942-5*, entry of 7 October 1944, 170.

¹¹⁹ Picot, *Accidental Warrior*, 83-84.

wait for 'those brief but devastating periods of intense mortar and shellfire which we knew would inevitably come'.¹²⁰

It was not just artillery fire that reduced one's role in trench fighting to that of helpless victim. In many places the opposing sides were separated by a matter of yards, which made it easy for the enemy to attack suddenly and without warning.¹²¹ In the forward trenches at Anzio one company of the 2nd Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers was separated from the rest of the battalion by 200 yards of open bullet-swept grassland and its position could only be approached by night and even then at considerable danger. The wadi which the company occupied was relatively shallow and bare and its forward platoons had to be deeply entrenched on the open ground above, only some seventy yards or less from the Germans. Both sides were constantly engaged in sapping forward to obtain better OPs and fields of fire and so the distance between the opposing lines was in constant flux. 'The company was in fact awesomely vulnerable,' wrote David Cole, the signals officer, 'being almost surrounded by the enemy and continually engaged in digging, sniping and patrolling'.¹²² The ease of attack added to soldiers' fear and insecurity, particularly at night, when raids and patrols were carried out and when feelings of isolation were accentuated by the darkness.¹²³ Relentless tension such as this had a noticeable effect. In April 1944, Raleigh Trevelyan noted that his older soldiers were getting shaken. 'It is our helplessness that breaks down their nerves: this inability to hit back, and also the fact that a Jerry attack can be almost on top of us before we are aware of it'.¹²⁴ The fact that the enemy was almost entirely unseen, despite his close proximity, further increased this sense of helplessness.¹²⁵

Perhaps most damaging of all was the lack of progress or a foreseeable end to hostilities – both key determinants of morale. The former was particularly disheartening. By the summer of 1944,

¹²⁰ Jack Harrod, 2nd Lincolns, quoted in Delaforce, *Monty's Iron Sides*, 63.

¹²¹ Cole, *Rough Road to Rome*, 200-201; Coutts, *One Blue Bonnet*, 75; Hillier, *Long Long Road*, 134; Trevelyan, *Fortress*, 16.

¹²² Cole, *Rough Road to Rome*, 216.

¹²³ Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, 31; Gal and Jones, 'A Psychological Model of Combat Stress', 141.

¹²⁴ Trevelyan, *Fortress*, 66.

¹²⁵ Delaforce, *Polar Bears*, 35, 89.

according to one Cassino veteran, most soldiers in Italy had become utterly brownd-off and felt increasingly imprisoned by trench life, which was 'so apt to get you down'. He wrote:

This unorderedly [sic] life, with all its chaos, its dirt, its misery, is beginning to tell on our minds. It's all so shoddy, meaningless, often so petty, and lives upon lives are being consumed by the insatiable demands of war. Oh for a gentle home, with furniture, curtains and books, a fire and a wife for company. But it goes on and we have to go on with it.¹²⁶

Nor was he the only soldier who despairingly submitted to the long duration of his ordeal. In the early months of the Normandy campaign, the grindingly slow pace of operations led many troops to believe it would take decades to reach Berlin - one infantryman complained that, 'you fight a battle and nothing happens, except you fight another one later on, and nothing happens then either'.¹²⁷ In other cases, the lack of progress caused soldiers to question the value of their sacrifices and the point of the bloodshed. Lieutenant Eddie Hastings of the 1st Royal Norfolks could not understand how his platoon fitted into the 'grand design' during the winter stalemate in Holland. Nor could he explain to his men exactly why they were there, doing what they were doing, in the cold and miserable conditions.¹²⁸ Such opinions were undoubtedly exacerbated by the apparent futility of much of the combat and the random nature of death; this translated itself (again) into resentment at the perceived disparity of suffering between those at the front and those at the rear. 'We are all terribly depressed and frightened these days,' one officer confessed in his diary. 'This campaign is so bloody. It gives us all a feeling that, sooner or later, we are bound to be killed here; and it makes us wonder why we should be reaped by the scythe of death, while so many are sitting on their arses in comfort in the back areas and England'.¹²⁹

To recap, static warfare greatly aggravated soldiers' physical suffering and simultaneously weakened many of the factors important in sustaining morale – goal, role and progress. The next section will

¹²⁶ Parkhurst, *Diary of a Soldier*, 113.

¹²⁷ Picot, *Accidental Warrior*, 116.

¹²⁸ Quoted in Lincoln, *Thank God and the Infantry*, 142; see also Wingfield, *Only Way Out*, 138-139.

¹²⁹ CMAC GC/96/1, Diary of E. Grey Turner, 18 April 1944, 127.

consider to what extent the same could be said of group factors, arguably the most vital elements of effective combat performance. Before we examine this in detail, we need to make some general remarks about some of the preceding constituents of morale. We noted that post-1945 theories on combat motivation (especially those advanced by American authors) tended to stress the role of primary group loyalty – that is to say, men fought for their comrades.¹³⁰ In the interest of balance, we should acknowledge the problems with this theory which has led it to be challenged from a number of angles. First, primary group loyalty did not always produce effective combat performance. There is evidence to suggest that some primary groups placed their own survival over and above the collective goals of the parent organisation, which caused their members to refuse to fight, to disobey orders and even to mutiny. David French cites two examples that took place in Normandy in August 1944 to illustrate this. In one instance, a section of the 2/6th South Staffordshire Regiment collectively disobeyed an order given by their company commander to advance. Not long after this, a section of the 1st Gordons deserted as *en masse* after seeing their company bled white since D-Day.¹³¹ Comparatively recent studies lend further credence to this theory.¹³²

The second challenge is closely linked to the ravages of static, trench fighting. For at some points during the war, casualty rates amongst infantry battalions were so high that primary groups were quickly destroyed and were unable to reform before they were again shattered. By way of illustration, seven infantry divisions took part in the fighting in Normandy.¹³³ Each division contained some 7,200 all-ranks in its nine battalions. In the period between 6 June and 28 August 1944 (eighty-three days), each lost on average 341 infantry officers and 5,115 infantry other-ranks, no less than

¹³⁰ See Marshall, *Men Against Fire*; Janowitz and Shills, 'Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II'; Stouffer, *American Soldier*; for a British proponent see Richardson, *Fighting Spirit*.

¹³¹ French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, 146-147.

¹³² See Tony Ashworth, *Trench Warfare, 1914-1918: the live and let live system* (London 2000); Anthony Kellett, *Combat Motivation: The Behaviour of Soldiers in Battle* (Boston, MA 1982); Sam C. Sarkesian (ed.), *Combat Effectiveness: cohesion, stress, and the volunteer military* (Beverly Hills, CA 1980).

¹³³ 3rd, 15th (Scottish), 43rd (Wessex), 50th (Northumbrian), 51st (Highland), 53rd (Welsh) and 59th (Staffordshire) Divisions.

three-quarters of its infantry strength.¹³⁴ In just five-and-a-half weeks in the Anzio beachhead, the twelve infantry battalions of 1st Division lost an average 25 officers and 513 other ranks – essentially a complete turnover in the rifle companies.¹³⁵ The ability of small-group loyalty to persuade men to remain on the battlefield was dependent on the primary group remaining intact long enough to accumulate a significant body of common experience and build strong relationships between officers and men. Losses of this magnitude, especially when they were suffered in a short space of time, made this next to impossible (as did the constant dribble of casualties in the trenches). This also weakened unit cohesion, as without a solid core of experienced veterans who had trained and fought together, and who knew each other well, most battalions lost their spark and no amount of fresh blood in the form of reinforcements could replace it. In sum, the combination of First World War-style battles and the steady gnawing away of strength in static positions often meant that an essential precondition for cohesion – opportunities for interaction – was missing.

Of the two types of fighting mentioned above, it was the slow eating away of units during prolonged defensive fighting that was particularly demoralising, as one of the most difficult things to do on a battlefield was to take punishment without giving any in return.¹³⁶ At least when soldiers pushed forward in an attack – no matter how scared they may have been – they felt like they were achieving something and could rely on adrenalin to help sustain them; when they sat inactive in a trench, on the other hand, losses accrued for no tangible purpose or particular military objective. Consider this justification offered by an infantry officer (7th Argylls) for the poor performance of the Highland Division in Normandy:

Not a day passed without the battalion area being subjected to heavy shelling and mortaring, and although our casualties were not heavy, there was a continual drain on personnel. In addition, in former campaigns the 51st Division had always been used aggressively, and

¹³⁴ NA WO285/13, Casualties and Ammunition, 2 Army, 1944-45.

¹³⁵ LHCMA, Penney Papers 8/32: typescript notes by Penney, with details of infantry casualties and reinforcements to 1 Infantry Div in Italian campaign, April 1944.

¹³⁶ Borthwick, *Sans Peur*, 77.

wherever there was an attack the Division always took part in it. This was the first time that the battalion had to sit for lengthy periods in a defensive position without launching an attack, and this became very monotonous.¹³⁷

The 1st KOSB experienced something similar when they held the line for a period near the River Maas in the autumn of 1944. The Germans opposite them had relatively comfortable positions with excellent observation and proceeded to shell and mortar the battalion in their damp, sandy trenches with ‘annoying persistency and effect’. According to the chaplain: ‘We lost many valuable men in this way . . . [and] we were thoroughly bad tempered’.¹³⁸

If we examine statistics gathered for defensive operations in Italy, we begin to understand how difficult it must have been to maintain small-group and unit cohesion. One infantry battalion at Anzio, which was never overrun, suffered some 422 casualties (a complete turnover of the rifle companies) between 22 January and 16 March 1944. It had been in continuous action since landing but never took part in an attack, save for one successful immediate counter-attack by a single company.¹³⁹ Over a period of 20 days in the beachhead, the average losses in 1st Division were calculated at 30 men per day, with one especially bad twenty-four hour period producing 68 casualties with no special activity on the division’s part.¹⁴⁰ Elsewhere in the theatre, the 1st East Surreys recorded the loss of 52 men in 28 days in March 1944.¹⁴¹ In the same period the 2nd Lancashire Fusiliers suffered 70 casualties in four and a half weeks of routine line holding in the mountains. Fred Majdalany wrote that, ‘In any other arm of the service it would be considered a lot for a period of “doing nothing”’.¹⁴² In the next month (26 March to 27 April) the same battalion, in yet another precipitous defensive position, lost a further 56 men. The 5th Buffs, holding the line at Cassino station in March, lost 47 officers and men in just eight days.¹⁴³ Sometimes battalions

¹³⁷ Cameron, *History of the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders*, 133.

¹³⁸ Padre Iain Wilson, quoted in Delaforce, *Monty's Iron Sides*, 144.

¹³⁹ LHCMA, Penney Papers 13/2: 1 (Br) Division, Notes on questionnaire by 5 Corps, 2.

¹⁴⁰ LHCMA, Penney Papers 8/33: Notes by Comd 1 Div, 21 April 44, 2.

¹⁴¹ NA WO170/1482, 1st East Surrey Regiment, War Diary for March 1944.

¹⁴² Majdalany, *Monastery*, 96.

¹⁴³ NA WO170/1368, 5th Buffs (Royal East Kent Regiment), War Diary for March 1944.

suffered these losses in a far shorter period of time. During ten minutes' shelling on the Castle position at Cassino, the 6th Royal West Kents lost some 16 killed and 17 wounded. One soldier wrote:

The time we had spent so far in Cassino had, all of it, been in one of the 'quiet periods', in one of the 'lulls' between battles. Even so, we had lost quite a high proportion of our Company strength, a sobering thought for later days.¹⁴⁴

On Monte Battaglia (September to October 1944) the Guards Brigade lost somewhere in the order of 10 men a day from shelling, even when no attack was being made. 'In the opinion of the Grenadiers,' claimed one author, 'the misery of holding Monte Battaglia exceeded that endured even at Cassino'.¹⁴⁵

By the second half of the war, casualties were increasingly difficult to replace as there was a marked shortage of infantrymen. Added to this, the quality of many reinforcements was distinctly below par.¹⁴⁶ Ordinarily the injection of fresh blood into a battalion improved morale no end, as existing experience (perhaps war weariness) was supplemented with raw courage and enthusiasm. Veteran soldiers, in turn, would school the newcomers in the reality of the frontline. In high intensity static fighting – such as Anzio, Cassino or Normandy – this did not always prove to be the case, as many experienced men were lost in a small space of time and were replaced by green troops. In many cases, the sudden shock of combat and the trenches was too much. An Army Psychiatry Memorandum from October 1944 warned regimental officers that many young reinforcements tended to break down in their first action. 'Much depends on the care taken to assimilate them into the unit,' it declared. 'It is essential that they be made to feel . . . that they belong to the unit and are truly part of it'.¹⁴⁷ According to the Deputy Assistant Director of Army Psychiatry, Anzio was not

¹⁴⁴ IWM 85/18/1, Framp, 'The Littlest Victory', 97.

¹⁴⁵ Gregory Blaxland, *Alexander's Generals: the Italian campaign, 1944-45* (London 1979), 216.

¹⁴⁶ NA WO204/6627, Reinforcements Policy Memo from Commander X Corps to GI (Br) AFHQ, 10 November 1943; LHCMA, General Sir Sidney Kirkman, letter dated 23 December 1944; LHCMA, Penney Papers 8/32: typescript notes by Penney, with details of infantry casualties and reinforcements to 1 Infantry Div in Italian campaign, April 1944.

¹⁴⁷ CMAC GC/135/B.2/1, Army Psychiatry Memo, Notes for regimental officers on psychiatric casualties, Oct 1944.

suitable for raw recruits and the mismanagement of reinforcements had a damaging effect on individual and group morale.¹⁴⁸ In the beachhead, and the other great static battles of 1944-45, there were few opportunities for men to get to know one another or train together. Not only did this have a negative effect on the growth of *esprit de corps*, but in many cases it also precluded the development of small-group cohesion, so important for morale. A corporal with the 1st KSLI at Anzio recorded the arrival of a group of reinforcements: 'They are all of them youngsters direct from Blighty. Poor devils, they do not realise what is ahead of them but will soon learn'.¹⁴⁹ Sadly, many of them never got the chance. Often the new drafts were sent straight to the front as soon as they arrived, as was the case with several recruits from the Black Watch who were sent to the Sherwood Foresters. 'The officers arrived in the dark, we had to send them out on patrol that night because we had no one else to go out, and they were all killed in the night, and none of us saw them in daylight. It was tragic'.¹⁵⁰ Raleigh Trevelyan recalled another incident at the Fortress, where a group of young, raw recruits arrived with no battle experience. 'Less than a day after their arrival they had to be flung straight into the attack, with disastrous consequences'.¹⁵¹

If a battalion suffered light casualties, it was relatively easy to absorb replacements; morale, cohesion and team spirit could be maintained. But heavy casualties, particularly among officers and NCOs, meant it was much more difficult to maintain these qualities.¹⁵² Without a solid backbone of seasoned men who had trained and fought together, and who knew each other, battalions invariably lost their fighting spirit and no amount of fresh blood could replace it. The crucial factor in this was officer casualty rates, as effective leadership was probably the most important single factor that sustained men in battle. Leadership at unit and sub-unit level was critical in convincing men to remain on the battlefield; those units which lacked adequate numbers of effective leaders were

¹⁴⁸ Ahrenfeldt, *Psychiatry*, 214.

¹⁴⁹ IWM Department of Documents, PP/MCR/51, R. H. Turner, Diary.

¹⁵⁰ Trevelyan, *Rome '44*, 77; see also NA WO170/1434, 1st London Scottish, War Diary for February 1944.

¹⁵¹ Trevelyan, *Fortress*, 153.

¹⁵² Picot, *Accidental Warrior*, 75-76.

always liable to fail.¹⁵³ A notable example was the collapse of the 6th DWR (see previous chapter). The battalion entered the line in Normandy on 14 June, with a war establishment of 861 all ranks. By the end of the month it had lost 350 ORs and only 12 of the original 38 officers remained. In that time its original CO had been dismissed, a temporary replacement had come and gone, and by the end of the month it was commanded by its third CO. The near total annihilation of the battalion's leadership in such a short space of time was the key factor in the consequent deterioration in morale. Although other infantry battalions suffered similar officer casualty rates in Normandy, they were spread out over the course of the whole campaign. This meant they could continue to function effectively because officer replacements were absorbed gradually and had at least some time to get to know their men. This was not the case in 6th DWR where, by the end of June, half of the battalion were strangers and almost two-thirds of the officers did not know their men.¹⁵⁴

In the trenches, where they had to work even harder to bolster morale, officers suffered a particularly high rate of casualties – perhaps due to the fact that the onus was on them to set an example. As an illustration of this point, during the Anzio fighting the 6th Gordons lost 80% of its officers, the 2nd Sherwood Foresters 114%, the 1st Loyals 115%, the 1st DWR 126%, 1st KSLI 150% and the 2nd North Staffs a staggering 159%; altogether, 1st Division lost some 90% of its officer strength.¹⁵⁵ Thus the men with the highest morale, the greatest willingness to fight, were usually the ones who died first and junior officers, who were obliged to lead their men by example, paid a heavy price for their bravery. If a good leader was killed, especially if he served as a father-figure and had gained the trust of his men, morale suffered. In Holland, when a popular officer from 'A' Company, 4th Somersets, was killed in front of his men, morale hit rock bottom. 'The men respected Harry,' remembered Sydney Jary, 'with their idol shot down in front of them, they were very jumpy'.¹⁵⁶ Likewise, when the CO of the 2nd Royal Fusiliers was killed in May 1944, 'the news of his death

¹⁵³ Lindsay, *So Few Got Through*, 132; French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, 148.

¹⁵⁴ French, "Tommy is no soldier", 156.

¹⁵⁵ NA WO204/8235, British Infantry Divisions: daily returns of fighting strengths and battle casualties, March to June 1944.

¹⁵⁶ Jary, *18 Platoon*, 51.

seemed to dampen the spirits of everyone'.¹⁵⁷ There is even evidence to suggest that such losses could even affect the rate of desertion. During September 1944, the 2/7th Queen's recorded a particularly high rate of absentees, with just 16 cases in one day (18 September). Eight days earlier, the battalion had sustained high casualties, including three officers killed and three wounded, one of whom later died of his wounds. On 13 September, two companies tried to advance in the face of heavy small arms fire and again suffered heavy losses: 'A' Company lost all its officers to wounds, while 'C' Company lost one officer and a Sergeant in charge of a platoon killed.¹⁵⁸ In addition, psychiatrists regularly observed a sudden influx of cases following the death or wounding of a unit's CO. One example should suffice. We have already heard that, in the week prior to 17 Jul 1944, the 43rd (Wessex) Division accounted for more than half of all exhaustion cases in Normandy. The greatest percentage of these originated in a single unit, the 7th Hampshires, who had been involved in four days of vicious fighting in and around the village of Maltot. The battalion had lost its CO (twice), plus its second-in-command, MO, forward observation officer and numerous other officers.¹⁵⁹

Another way in which bloody attritional battles and manning the trenches weakened morale, was the crumbling of the regimental system (long held to be one of the foundations of high morale by British doctrine) and the undermining of *esprit de corps*. By the second half of the war, the problems associated with disbanding units to reinforce others and cross-posting men to different regiments had become increasingly common and by March 1942, the Adjutant-General admitted that the drafting of infantry by regiments had completely broken down.¹⁶⁰ The War Diary of the 5th Camerons for May 1942 reflects this, recording the arrival of a draft made up of men from the Royal Scots Fusiliers, the Royal Warwicks, the Green Howards, the Royal Berkshires, the Leicesters, the

¹⁵⁷ NA WO170/1389, 2nd Royal Fusiliers, War Diary for May 1944.

¹⁵⁸ NA WO171/467, 2/7th Queen's Royal Regiment, War Diary for September 1944.

¹⁵⁹ NA WO171/1306, 7th Hampshire Regiment, War Diary for July 1944. [check on NA website]

¹⁶⁰ NA WO205/1C, Minutes of the C-in-C's conference held at GHQ, 17 March 1942.

South Staffs and the Liverpool Scots (ten different battalions in total).¹⁶¹ The situation continued to deteriorate as the war went on. By 1943 units overseas were allocated only twenty men per month from their own regiments and any deficiencies had to be offset with men from wherever they could be scrounged.¹⁶² This makeshift policy was never popular, nonetheless it was decided in March 1944 that all infantry drafts from the UK would be available to reinforce any battalion. A survey of February 1945 showed that only just over half (53%) of recruits were posted to the regiment to which they were most closely connected.¹⁶³ The implications for morale are displayed in the following, taken from the history of the Irish Guards, which noted that when the 1st Battalion was relieved by the DWR at Anzio:

A slow file of men plodded up the track. They were introduced as the Dukes, but the first six men denied it and gave the names of six different regiments, till a sergeant said, 'you're Dukes now,' and then, apologetically, 'They're new, Sir, we only got them this morning'.¹⁶⁴

The incidence of desertion offers further evidence – unhappy reinforcements, especially cross-posted men, were more likely to desert than men returning to their own battalion.¹⁶⁵

In addition, the expedient of disbandment, which we touched upon earlier in the chapter, was extremely hard on morale. When in March 1944 the 6th Grenadier Guards was disbanded and its men used to reinforce the 5th Battalion, a significant proportion of the new men went AWOL.¹⁶⁶ Soldiers in such units had fought together and developed their own traditions and cohesion; both of these were now destroyed, not by the enemy but by their own side, a hugely dispiriting end. The effect this had on morale can be gauged by the reaction of a battalion that believed it was in danger of being reduced to cadre in 1944, but which eventually survived. 'The possibility of the Bn being

¹⁶¹ NA WO166/8630, 5th Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders, War Diary for May 1942; see also IWM Department of Documents, 80/2/1, Major R. C. Taylor, Part IV, Sicily, Italy, Rome, 32.

¹⁶² NA WO163/92/ECAC/P(43)109, Adjutant-General, Infantry of the Line, Regimental System of Drafting to Units Overseas, 4 October 1943.

¹⁶³ Crang, *British Army*, 17.

¹⁶⁴ Quoted in Verney, *Anzio 1944*, 195.

¹⁶⁵ Bielecki, *British Infantry Morale*, 199-200.

¹⁶⁶ IWM 82/37/1, *Danger*, 'Diary of a Guardsman', ii.

split up is removed, for the time being at least . . . on receipt of information that Bn still exists as such, spirits of troops 100% higher'.¹⁶⁷

What effect did all of this have? The next section will attempt to quantify the problem of low morale in static positions by analysing some of the traditional indicators, such as statistics gathered in relation to men who deserted or who went AWOL and statistics for SIWs (another one, which we have already dealt with, was men diagnosed as suffering from exhaustion). The first and most obvious point to make is that, it is no coincidence that the occasions which gave senior commanders most cause for concern – the Italian mountains during the winters of 1943-44 and 1944-45, the Anzio beachhead in early 1944, and Normandy in the summer of 1944 – were bitter, trench stalemates.

The rate of desertion and absence is customarily seen as the most potent expression of discontent and poor morale.¹⁶⁸ Much has been written on this and we need say little more, save to emphasise the fact that the rate of such offences increased sharply during periods of positional warfare.¹⁶⁹ This was hardly surprising given that in the trenches one had to endure 'the interminable round of standing to, cleaning weapons, administration, feeding under difficulties, digging better defences and observing the Bosche all too near for our comfort'. We should also add filthy living conditions, physical and mental exhaustion and a steady trickle of casualties caused by artillery and mortar fire.¹⁷⁰ The problem was particularly bad in Italy, where the desertion rate peaked towards the end of the Cassino/Anzio operations and then again in the winter of 1944-45. During heavy German shelling in the Sabine Hills south of Rome in May 1944, Alex Bowlby noticed out of the corner of his eye that Corporal Baker, one of the NCOs in his rifle company, was arguing with another soldier, Private Coke. "No one's going to fuck off from my section!" he shouted. "Get that into your napper". But when the company attacked a village on the subsequent day, Coke (and another man)

¹⁶⁷ NA WO170/1426, 11th Lancashire Fusiliers, War Diary for June 1944.

¹⁶⁸ CMAC GC/192/18, J. D. W. Pearce, 'Psychiatric Battle Casualties', 16 October 1944.

¹⁶⁹ French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, 138.

¹⁷⁰ IWM Department of Documents, 87/31/1, H. T. Bone, MS letter dated 23 July 1944.

had disappeared. A few days later, when the attack was over, both men came back, looking sheepish, having been 'let off with a warning, along with some other part-time deserters'. Despite this, Coke was soon caught attempting to desert again and was threatened with a court martial. In the meantime, he was returned to his unit and boasted to them that he had told the CO 'I 'ad a feeling I shouldn't go up no more hills.'

We tittered. Baker was furious. 'You'll get three years!' he roared.

Coke grinned. 'And I'll be 'ere when you're pushing up the daisies.'

Baker grabbed him by the throat. 'Say that again and I'll shoot you me fucking self!'

Coke went white. 'I got me rights as a prisoner,' he muttered.¹⁷¹

This was not an isolated incident. The number of cases of AWOL and desertion reported to 2nd Echelon in Italy between October 1943 and August 1944 was 5,380; while between 1 January 1944 and 10 January 1945, 2,237 men were tried in Italy for desertion and another 840 for being AWOL.¹⁷² Undoubtedly officially recorded cases represented just the tip of the iceberg. The true scale of the problem was such that British generals called for the reintroduction of the death penalty.¹⁷³ The most worrying aspect for them was not the incidence among men like Private Coke, rather it was the occurrence among frontline soldiers of previously excellent military character.¹⁷⁴

It was perhaps inevitable that Italy in summer, with its friendly population and reasonably abundant quantities of food and wine, seemed more appealing to some infantrymen than taking part in yet another bloody assault on a German-held mountain. Even in the harsh Italian winter, desertion still held its attractions, as the end of the war loomed and the futility of the campaign grew ever more obvious. 'They were lads who'd been right up Italy,' one sergeant remembered. 'They'd had a

¹⁷¹ Quoted in Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, 239-240.

¹⁷² Bielecki, *British Infantry Morale*, 175; LHCMA, Papers of General Sir Ronald Forbes Adam 3/6/4: Report by the Adjutant-General on his tour overseas, January-February 1945, 1 March 1945.

¹⁷³ NA WO214/62. Alexander Papers. Maitland Wilson to Adam and Note by Alexander, 25 February 1944.

¹⁷⁴ NA CAB101/224, Butler, *The British Soldier in Italy*, 35.

bellyful . . . and at the first real thump a lot of them would disappear'.¹⁷⁵ In fact, 70% of all desertions in Italy took place in the winter of 1944-45 according to official figures; deserters and absentees were then running at approximately 1,000 a month.¹⁷⁶ By this time, the anticipated speedy breakthrough of the Gothic Line (the Germans most formidable defence system yet) had been exposed as a chimera and the prospect of holding a static line high up in the Northern Apennines was too much for many men. For nearly six months from the autumn of 1944 to February 1945, the troops were again locked in a bitter stalemate, with some of the most severe fighting of the war and in 'certainly the most appalling terrain'.¹⁷⁷ One soldier spoke for many when he confided the following in his diary on 2 November 1944:

I am going to try and describe the appalling depression which has suddenly overtaken everyone.

Until a fortnight ago, there seemed every prospect that the bright hopes of the late summer would be fulfilled. It seems certain that we would burst into the Plain, and that by Christmas, Italy would be cleared . . .

We evidently based our hopes on uncertain foundations. The weather here has now completely broke, and the Fifth and Eighth Armies are hopelessly bogged down in mud and torrential rain.

The ghastly fact appears that we shall have to spend the winter in the Apennine snows.¹⁷⁸

Faced with this, many soldiers chose to desert.

The Army recognised three types of deserter: men who were never fit to be in the army at all; good soldiers who had been through it all and could not take any more; and the 'Whole Skinner', the deliberate deserter who would rather do periods of imprisonment than go into battle.¹⁷⁹ John Nelson encountered one of the latter when a Guardsman who had been at large for three months returned to his battalion at the end of the fighting in Tunisia. Nelson complimented the man on his

¹⁷⁵ Quoted in Hart, *Heat of Battle*, 142.

¹⁷⁶ Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, 240.

¹⁷⁷ Harpur, *Impossible Victory*, 79.

¹⁷⁸ CMAC GC/96/1, Diary of E. Grey Turner, 2 November 1944, 174.

¹⁷⁹ Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, 240; David French, 'Discipline and the Death Penalty in the British Army in the War against Germany during the Second World War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 33:4 (1998), 536-537.

courage (jumping from a moving train during his escape) and on his subsequent resourcefulness in avoiding capture, but suggested that these qualities would have been better applied in a more orthodox way, such as fighting for his country. The deserter replied that nothing would ever induce him to do this and he would go to any lengths to avoid it.¹⁸⁰ According to the general view, men such as this – of which Private Coke was another classic example – were useful, in that they should be shot *pour encourager les autres*.¹⁸¹ In contrast, John Sparrow argued that most desertion was involuntary and could be prevented by prompt treatment at exhaustion centres.¹⁸² During Operation VERITABLE there were some 400 recorded desertions in Second Army. When Sparrow discussed this with the regimental officers, all of them agreed that desertion was rarely, if ever, preceded by a conscious weighing-up of alternatives and that very few men were likely at the crucial moment to take into account the prospect of an increased period of imprisonment or of military service.¹⁸³ In many cases, desertion was a spur of the moment thing, sometimes as the result of a particularly traumatic incident, such as witnessing the wounding of a comrade or enduring a near miss.¹⁸⁴

The majority of deserters fell into the second category and were not unwilling to fight, quite the opposite. They had seen too much fighting, too much stress, and most needed a break from the remorseless pressure of life in the trenches - the weather, the living conditions, static warfare, the noise, exhaustion and continuous tension. In May 1944, Major-General Penney insisted that there were men 'with a good record, who through shock, inexperience, previous wounds and many actions have become temporarily unnerved. Such men must be recognized, watched and treated by regimental and medical officers with skill and sympathy, sense and firmness'.¹⁸⁵ As we have heard, it was these cases (soldiers with good records who eventually succumbed to the strain of prolonged action), not the deliberate deserters, that most worried senior officers. The latter were, in all

¹⁸⁰ LHCMA, Nelson, 'Always a Grenadier', 37.

¹⁸¹ LHCMA, Papers of Major-General James Scott-Elliot: Scott-Elliot to GOC 56 Division, 10 April 1944.

¹⁸² NA WO277/16, Sparrow, *Morale*.

¹⁸³ NA WO193/452, Morale Committee: agenda and minutes. Report on Visit to 21 Army Group and tour of Second Army 30 Mar - 5 May 1945, compiled by Lt. Col. Sparrow.

¹⁸⁴ Rifleman Henry Taylor, 7th Rifle Brigade, quoted in Lee, *Up Close and Personal*, 184-185; Bowlby, *Recollections*, 183.

¹⁸⁵ LHCMA, Penny Papers 13/13: 1 Division May-Day manifesto. Points for Officers for their talks to their men, 1 May 1944.

probability, more trouble than they were worth and no great loss; the former, in contrast, were seasoned veterans, who played an important role in their unit. We must make the point that the bulk of infantrymen did not desert. Faced with the same risks and the same hardships as those who deserted, most chose to grin and bear it. They did so for a number of reasons, which included the paternalism of good officers, personal and regimental pride, but more often than not because they did not want to let their comrades down. Many paid the price for their devotion and loyalty.

But desertion or absence was not the only response. Others chose to give themselves the much sought after blighty wound, usually shooting off a finger or putting a bullet through their foot, or by holding their arms above their slit-trenches when they were being bombarded.¹⁸⁶ Many personal accounts make reference to individuals having done this, but it is very difficult to accurately measure how widespread a practice it was. Official figures are sketchy at best and almost certainly underestimate the extent of the problem - until 1944-45 no more than 20 soldiers serving overseas were found guilty of this offence by FGCM. However, in 1944-45, 208 soldiers were convicted of injuring themselves to avoid duty, a figure which seems to imply some deterioration in morale.¹⁸⁷ According to statistics for Second Army, between 6 June and 30 September 1944, there were 29,860 casualties through battle and injury. Of these a mere 179 (0.6%) were *known* to be self-inflicted. The gives an average rate of 1.77 per 10,000 men per week admitted to hospital, compared to 7.71 per 10,000 per week who were admitted to hospital after having been wounded in battle.¹⁸⁸ We should qualify the official statistics by acknowledging that many such wounds went undetected and that officers sometimes covered up in what they knew to be aggravated cases, or because a prosecution might reflect poorly on their unit.¹⁸⁹ The officers of 8th Middlesex hushed up one case – attributing the wound to an unknown, ‘trigger-happy Yank’ - because the man involved was the lone survivor of three brothers who had served in the regiment and who had just received a letter from his mother

¹⁸⁶ Whitehouse and Bennett, *Fear is the Foe*, 156.

¹⁸⁷ French, “Tommy is No Soldier”, 160.

¹⁸⁸ Ellis, *Sharp End*, 242; *Ibid.*, 160.

¹⁸⁹ French, “Tommy is No Soldier”, 160-161.

telling him of her fears for her only remaining son.¹⁹⁰ Eric Codling, who served in the same battalion, recalled that *all* such incidents were covered up.¹⁹¹

It is hard to know the exact number of cases with any degree of accuracy, but such incidents increased during static fighting. At Anzio, getting away from the beachhead was so important that some men were driven to shooting themselves; Raleigh Trevelyan recalled how his wireless operator had deliberately shot himself through the foot.¹⁹² Other men would shoot off their trigger finger – a sign that they had been stretched too far.¹⁹³ Elsewhere, one officer with the Northamptonshire Regiment recalled how, on the way to Italy, ‘one man died unaccountably on board from a bullet from his own rifle and another had shot himself in the foot’.¹⁹⁴ The same soldier recalled another SIW following a visit of a mobile canteen (always seen as a bad sign by the troops as it often meant they would shortly be going into battle), where the soldier shot himself in the mouth with his sten gun.¹⁹⁵ Such men were probably diagnosed as bomb happy and seen by a psychiatrist.¹⁹⁶ Not all cases of SIWs were the result of psychoneurosis. Consider this account from a soldier who served with the 2nd Royal Scots Fusiliers at Anzio:

A chap I shared a dug-out with said to me “It shall not be long before I’m in Blighty”. . . . Within forty eight hours he had shot himself in the foot. . . . As I was the only witness I had to describe what happened. I said that he had his rifle cocked ready for action, the trigger caught in a twig and caused the rifle to shoot him. My story was accepted and the people at the enquiry expressed their sympathy to the “unfortunate” soldier who was dispatched to Blighty.¹⁹⁷

In the early months of the Normandy invasion the problem was sufficiently serious for the Assistant Adjutant-General to appoint an experienced officer, Major A. T. A. Browne, to investigate with a

¹⁹⁰ Julian Thompson, *The Imperial War Museum Book of Victory in Europe: the North-West European campaign 1944-45* (London 1994), 200-201.

¹⁹¹ IWM 88/4/1, Codling, 52.

¹⁹² Trevelyan, *Fortress*, 120.

¹⁹³ Verney, *Anzio 1944*, 215.

¹⁹⁴ IWM Department of Documents, 81/5/1, N. J. Friskney, TS memoir, Chapter One, 8.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, Chapter Three, 3.

¹⁹⁶ Bielecki, *British Infantry Morale*, 126.

¹⁹⁷ IWM 88/48/1, Helm, 68.

view to bringing those guilty before a court martial. Not unexpectedly, Browne discovered that the problem was mainly confined to infantry battalions; 279 cases were from the latter, compared to only 109 from all other arms of the service (in addition, the overwhelming majority of cases involved ORs - of the 35 cases treated by medical units in VIII Corps between 16 June and 18 August 1944, not one involved an officer).¹⁹⁸ Most battalions had only a small number of *recorded* cases, 89 having three or fewer, and only 25 reporting more than four. Those units with the highest number of reported cases were the 11th Royal Scots Fusiliers in 49th Division (11 cases), and 2/5th Lancashire Fusiliers in 59th (Staffordshire) Division, 5th Wiltshires in 43rd (Wessex) Division, and 1/4th KOYLI in 49th Division, each of whom had eight cases.¹⁹⁹ Presumably included in the latter were the two members of 'B' Company, 1/4th KOYLI, who, according to the company second-in-command, shot themselves in the foot in quick succession during the attack on Tessel Wood because they 'couldn't stand it'.²⁰⁰ The CO of the 6th DWR, in his candid report on the state of the unit, noted that there had been five cases – possibly more - of SIWs in three days.²⁰¹ The impact of static warfare was reflected in the fact that, as soon as the Allies managed to push out of the bridgehead and resume mobile operations, there was a considerable reduction in the number of such wounds.²⁰²

There were other more subtle indicators of deteriorating discipline and morale in periods of trench fighting. One concerned individuals who went sick unnecessarily or feigned illness: what the army termed malingering. When Rex Wingfield was admitted to hospital he found himself in a ward full of soldiers who were faking illnesses in order to avoid being sent back to the line. They initiated the bemused rifleman in the use of toothpaste, cordite and cotton-wool to simulate sickness. One of them explained:

¹⁹⁸ NA WO177/434, DMS VIII Corps, Medical War Diary for 18 August 1944.

¹⁹⁹ French, "Tommy is No Soldier", 160.

²⁰⁰ Captain Lewis Keeble quoted in Delaforce, *Polar Bears*, 68.

²⁰¹ NA WO 205/5G, Lt.-Col. A. J. D. Turner, 'Report on the State of 6th Bn DWR (49 Div) as on 30 Jun', Commander-in-Chief's operational reports and directives to army commanders.

²⁰² A. T. A. Browne, 'A Study of the Anatomy of Fear and Courage in War', *The Army Quarterly Review*, 106 (1976), 298.

'It's like this, mate. You feels fed up, so you goes sick. They're temperature happy here. They'd take the temperature of a bloody stiff before they'd accept it as genuine – You ain't got a temperature. You want one. Easy! As soon as you comes in 'ere, you take your toothbrush, squeezes a nice dose on the 'andle and you shoves the paste as far back under your tongue as you can. . . . Well, this little lot under your tongue froths like hell. When the thermometer goes under your tongue, Bob's your uncle! . . . The medics know what's going on, but they can't prove a damned thing. It ain't an offence in the Army to clean your teeth. The MO's doing his nut'.²⁰³

Others told Wingfield how they had chewed bits of cordite from shells, which 'makes the old ticker bang like a belt-fed 88. *Nearly blew the MO's head off!*' Some trying to get their 'ticket' preferred swallowing cotton balls. These were allowed to work their way through the body for a few days until they showed up as duodenal ulcers on the X-rays.²⁰⁴

The detrimental effect of continual action, coupled with the discomfort and horror of the line, also prompted soldiers to feign psychiatric illness in an attempt to escape. These malingerers were aided by the fact that many MOs found it difficult to gauge the validity of their symptoms. It was less easy to fool a psychiatrist, however. Major H. A. Palmer, wrote that he viewed all cases of amnesia with suspicion, especially when he scrutinised the periods of alleged memory loss. Palmer estimated that of the 33% of cases in which patients claimed to be suffering from amnesia only 13% proved to be genuine.²⁰⁵ Nor were all RMOs an easy touch for men presenting feigned symptoms of psychiatric breakdown. One officer, who served in North Africa and Italy, recorded how he dealt with such cases in his diary:

Again a big Medical Inspection room with lots or nerve cases. Spent quite a while going over the doubtful ones with platoon officers and sergeants in order to have a better assessment as to whether certain men were triers or habitual shirkers. Some of the shirkers are among the first to go sick with nerves and it is very difficult to decide who should be pushed back on to M & D

²⁰³ Wingfield, *Only Way Out*, 114.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 114-116.

²⁰⁵ CMAC GC/135/B.1/2, Major H. A. Palmer, 'The problem of the P & N [Psychotic and Neurotic] casualty - a study of 12,000 cases'.

[medicine and duties] and who are entirely exhausted and must have rest. I feel that this work . . . is extremely important keeping the unit up to strength and in preserving the 'nerve' strength of the men.²⁰⁶

The problem was particularly bad during the stalemate in Normandy, where senior commanders began to suspect that the incidence of psychiatric casualties was excessive and evacuation across the Channel constituted an easy means of escape for those of poor morale.²⁰⁷ By July 1944, signs of declining morale within the battle weary 50th (Northumbrian) Division were plain to see.²⁰⁸ The high rate within the division of what the authorities suspected were feigned cases of battle exhaustion led its chief medic to launch an investigation on 31 July.²⁰⁹ Undoubtedly some soldiers lingered, but their numbers are debatable; in reality, many battalion officers and RMOs found it extremely difficult to distinguish between psychological casualties and men who were simply scared.²¹⁰ Lieutenant-General Richard O'Connor, the commander of VIII Corps, believed that there were genuine cases of breakdown, but that the great majority were 'merely frightened of shelling and wanted an excuse to get out of it'.²¹¹ Certainly the number of men who lingered paled in comparison to those who were away from their units due to legitimate illnesses.

Another subtle indication of the state of discipline and morale in the trenches was the frequency of 'live and let live' truces. If the impression given by primary accounts is correct, these took place a great deal more frequently in 1939-45 than previously thought (although still not as much as on the Western Front). We have already considered the occasional local truces dictated by the need to bury the dead or recover wounded; we will now turn our attention to those tacit ceasefires which occurred when soldiers on both sides took the view that aggressive action was not in their best

²⁰⁶ Captain Julius Lipetz, 5th Buffs, diary entry dated 4 November 1943, quoted in Ford, *Battleaxe Division*, 114.

²⁰⁷ NA WO177/316, Medical War Diary DMS 21st Army Group. Notes on visit to beachhead by Col. R. F. Walker, DMS HQ 21st Army Group, 4 July 1944.

²⁰⁸ During July the 50th Division also experienced a high number of cases of soldiers deserting or going absent. In August, no less than 150 soldiers from this division were convicted by FGCM for these two offences; this figure almost matched the number of soldiers convicted of these two charges during August for the rest of the entire Second Army (Hart, *Montgomery and "colossal cracks"*, 31).

²⁰⁹ Hart, *Montgomery and "colossal cracks"*, 31.

²¹⁰ French, "Tommy is no soldier", 164.

²¹¹ LHCMA, Papers of General Sir Richard O'Connor 1/5: O'Connor to Major Nairne, n.d. but c. 1970-72.

interests. When the 1st Gordons were stationed on 'The Island' in Holland during November 1944, the battalion's policy was to live and let live, so that they could get a good rest. 'We do not shoot at the enemy unless they shoot at us'.²¹² A major factor in promoting such truces was the need to feed and resupply the troops. On Monte Battaglia, according to the CO of the 3rd Grenadier Guards, 'as if by arrangement' both sides reduced their artillery fire during the first three hours of darkness in order to facilitate issuing supplies.²¹³ One sergeant with the 7th Rifle Brigade recalled how the incessant shelling, mortaring and machine-gun fire at Borgo Tossignano, which was 'as close to World War I trench warfare as one could get', would stop magically at seven o'clock every night. The reason being that the mule trains that carried the soldiers' rations up the mountain arrived at that time, together with the post and, as the German supplies also arrived at the same time, it was 'mutually accepted that war was bad enough with rations, but without them it would be bloomin' horrible!'.²¹⁴ One writer even described a German supply depot in Holland where, as neither side had the strength to hold it entirely, an unofficial truce existed whereby each side loaded rations from the opposite end.²¹⁵ It should be noted that there is no evidence that such phenomena ever seriously undermined the army's fighting potential. Rather it was a pragmatic attempt to marginally improve one's lot amid the already extremely difficult and dreary conditions in the frontline.

Combat intensity is seen as one of the most accurate predictors of low morale and psychiatric breakdown. By and large, as the number of physical casualties increased, so did the number of combat stress reactions; the same is also true of disease and non-battle injuries.²¹⁶ Interestingly, though, different levels of combat intensity could produce different types of stress reactions. Prolonged exposure to intense combat produces a high number of psychiatric casualties (Normandy and VERITABLE for instance), while low intensity intermittent combat (such as the long periods of

²¹² Lindsay, *So Few Got Through*, 138.

²¹³ LHCMA, Nelson, 'Always a Grenadier', 50.

²¹⁴ Sergeant A. R. Minkoff, quoted in Lee, *Up Close and Personal*, 190.

²¹⁵ IWM 88/4/1, Codling, TS memoir, 81.

²¹⁶ Helmus and Glenn, 'Steeling the Mind', 32; see also NA WO222/218, Morale, discipline and mental fitness, circular to Medical Officers from AMD11; A. J. Glass, 'Lessons Learned', in A. J. Glass (ed.), *Overseas Theatres*, Vol. 2, in *Neuropsychiatry in World War II* (Washington, DC 1973); Glass, 'Observations Upon the Epidemiology of Mental Illness in Troops During Wartime'; Z. Solomon, *Combat Stress Reactions: The Enduring Toll of War* (New York, NY 1993).

line holding in Italy), produces more disciplinary cases who remain out of action for significant periods of time.²¹⁷ There is, then, an interesting distinction between large-scale, set-piece battles and less intense periods of routine line holding. The former produced acute cases of psychiatric breakdown, while the latter was apt to generate disciplinary cases such as desertion or absence and cumulative stress reactions such as battle exhaustion.

There are problems with measuring morale solely in relation to desertion, absence or even casualties. In terms of the latter, morale could remain sound, even when infantry battalions were decimated by battle casualties. For example, by the end of January 1944, 1st Division had endured 2,100 casualties in the Anzio beachhead.²¹⁸ A large percentage of these came from the 2nd Sherwood Foresters, which had been reduced to just 258 all ranks.²¹⁹ An American general wrote of his visit to the battalion:

I had never seen so many dead men in one place. They lay so close together that I had to step with care. I shouted for the commanding officer. From a foxhole there arose a mud-covered sergeant with a handle-bar moustache. He was the highest ranking officer still alive. He stood stiffly to attention. 'How's it going?' I asked. The answer was all round me. 'Well, sir,' the sergeant said, 'there were a hundred and sixteen of us when we first came up, and there are sixteen of us left. We're ordered to hold out till sundown, and I think, with a little good fortune, we can manage to do so.'²²⁰

On 4 February the 1st KSLI recorded that 'confidence pervaded the Bn' and that following orders to hold their position at all costs, 'the fighting went on all day and in no phase did the K.S.L.I. give ground'.²²¹ It would also seem that combat effectiveness in these much depleted units remained sound - all German formations referred to tough Allied resistance during their February offensive.²²²

²¹⁷ S. Noy, 'Battle intensity and the length of stay on the battlefield as determinants of the type of evacuation', *Military Medicine*, 152:12 (December 1987), 601-607.

²¹⁸ Molony, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, Vol. V, 676-677.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Trevelyan, *Rome '44*, 77.

²²¹ NA WO170/1416, 1st King's Shropshire Light Infantry, War Diary for February 1944.

²²² Molony, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, Vol. V, 746.

One author recalled an officer in the 5th Grenadier Guards who visited his men just before they were overrun in this vicious counterattack:

After telling one of the few old soldiers still left, a lance-corporal, that artillery support was coming and that a counter-attack was expected at any moment, the latter looked quizzically at his platoon commander. 'Well, it's very nice of you to say that, Sir, but there ain't no ----- artillery, is there?' 'No, I don't think there is, really,' came the reply. 'And there ain't no ----- counter-attack, is there, Sir?' 'Well, probably not actually just yet,' the platoon commander answered. 'Oh . . . well, Sir, it's very nice of you to speak to us. Don't worry, we'll go on sitting here,' patting his bren gun as he spoke.²²³

One reason for such behaviour, especially at Anzio, was the hemmed in nature of the beachhead where the troops had no escape route and the misery was shared equally by all.

The correlation between the rate of absence and low combat morale was not always as clear cut as one might suppose. Numerous men who were known to be effective fighting soldiers habitually absented themselves during quiet periods of line holding purely through boredom.²²⁴ A key example is the case of 78th Division which, as its commander Major General Keightley fairly claimed, had a series of victories that made its tradition and *esprit de corps* as high as those of any Division in the British Army. The morale of the Division was, he stated, 'first class. Nevertheless . . . after the battle of the Sangro when at the peak of those victories this Division was taken out of the line by the Army commander on account of the large numbers of men absenting themselves.'²²⁵ Between the beginning of October 1944 and the end of January 1945, 78th Division recorded 600 cases of desertion, more than half (52%) the total for XIII Corps. The formation had fought with distinction in Tunisia, Sicily and Italy, and had been considerably reinforced and refitted in the Middle East. On its return to Italy it went straight into the line and remained there throughout the winter. 'This division was not engaged in any major operation for four months,' wrote the British Historical Section,

²²³ Verney, *Anzio 1944*, 145-146.

²²⁴ IWM 82/37/1, Danger, 'Diary of a Guardsman', ii.

²²⁵ NA CAB101/224, Butler, *The British Soldier in Italy*, 12.

Central Mediterranean, 'but was subjected to the strain and tedium of holding the line in arduous conditions without substantial relief'.²²⁶ Most deserters were not cowards, often they came from battalions with good reputations and high morale; it was their readiness to engage the enemy that caused them to be over-fought and led to them absenting themselves. When the physical conditions and continual action got too much, they withdrew from the battlefield, often to return later, refreshed after a short period away from the frontline.

A far more persuasive argument than a direct link between desertion and casualty rates and low morale is the correlation of the length of time soldiers spent in the line and the type of fighting they were involved in. Long exposure to risk in static fighting proved especially demoralising; many experts have highlighted the association between the length of exposure to combat and cumulative stress (while the intensity of the fighting was more related to acute stress).²²⁷ To summarise what is known about this relationship (see chapter five), it would appear that some minimum amount of exposure to combat was vital to build confidence and decrease vulnerability to psychiatric breakdown. However, when one went beyond that threshold, continued exposure to combat (and the grim living conditions) steadily ground down morale and fatally weakened the mechanisms to cope with stress. John Nelson witnessed this in the 3rd Grenadier Guards in Italy:

It had become increasingly clear at this stage of the war that there came a moment when a regiment which had been fighting continuously for several months or even years ceased to be as effective as a comparatively untried one. Whereas experience counted for a great deal and undoubtedly saved casualties a saturation point was ultimately reached when too much knowledge resulted in over caution and an extinguishing of that indefinable spark which is so essential to a battalion's success in battle.²²⁸

²²⁶ NA CAB106/453, Operations of British, Indian and Dominion forces in Italy, 3 September 1943 – 2 May 1945, Part V, Monograph 5, The Problem of Desertion, 7.

²²⁷ See G. W. Beebe and J. W. Appel, *Variation in Psychological Tolerance to Ground Combat in World War II* (Washington, DC 1958); Glass, 'Observations Upon the Epidemiology of Mental Illness in Troops During Wartime', 185-198; Moran, *Anatomy of Courage*.

²²⁸ LHCMA, Nelson, 'Always a Grenadier', 46-47.

The key point to bear in mind was that Nelson's men had been in almost continuous contact with the enemy for a gruelling 20 months and would remain so for a further 7 months. Another case in point is the 16th DLI, who by February 1944 had been fighting since the previous September and were totally sick and fed up according to one NCO. 'Normally in a war you are fed up, but you could see the difference in the men', he remarked.

They were tired, they'd been up in those hills for three weeks, so they hadn't really had a rest.

None of us had had a real rest . . . just a couple of days when you knew straight away you were going back in the line. So it wasn't a rest, your mind didn't register it as a rest at all. The men were just weary, battle fatigued and war weary. Just fed up, they'd had enough, they'd been there too long.²²⁹

Equally, when the fighting in North Africa came to an end and the longed for return to blighty failed to materialise, one old sweat, who had served with the 2nd Scots Guards since early 1941 (and who had been wounded twice), summed up the feelings of many in a conversation with his platoon commander: 'The older boys like me, Sir, can't go on. It's someone else's turn.'²³⁰ Given the length of time many infantrymen were on active service overseas - coupled with frequent extended tours of duty in the line - it is not surprising that some men eventually succumbed to battle fatigue and low morale.

A major factor in this was the army's manpower shortage, which meant that men who were evacuated for wounds or exhaustion were continually returned to the line due to lack of reinforcements. Even if they rejoined their own battalion (which was not always the case), it lowered morale considerably. Such men felt that they would keep being sent back until they were eventually killed, maimed by wounds, broken psychologically or forced to desert. C. T. Framp was of the opinion that:

²²⁹ CSM Les Thornton quoted in Hart, *Heat of Battle*, 99-100.

²³⁰ Elliott, *Esprit de Corps*, 16.

Prolonged combat drains all men, that is all except for a few supermen I've heard of but never met, of their reserves of courage and resolve. Some completely, some only partially, some sooner, some later but the process, once begun, progresses with each fresh exposure to fire. Thus does the man eventually have to fight two wars, one without and one within. And as frightful as may be the first, it is almost as nothing, compared to the frightfulness of the second, for that one he fights alone, therein lays true bravery.²³¹

The acute shortage of infantry reinforcements meant that units were unable to balance losses sustained through illness or battle casualties, something which had a further negative impact on the fighting spirit of the troops. Divisions were disbanded – most notably the 59th (Staffordshire) Division in August 1944 – and used to bolster other formations; many battalions were forced to reduce the number of rifle companies from four to three, with fewer men having to shoulder an ever increasing burden of responsibility. 'Of course we got used to this diminution of strength,' one soldier remembered, 'but over time it had its effect even when in a static position; wider frontages, more frequent patrol and sentry duty, and less sleep (particularly during the long nights of winter). All this contributed to an added sense of strain and lower morale'.²³² Thus those who remained became more and more exhausted and more liable to suffer from war weariness and psychiatric breakdown.

The foremost contributing factor in most cases of desertion was the amount of time soldiers spent in the line.²³³ Put simply, the longer a unit remained in the trenches without relief, the more tired the soldiers became, and so the rate of desertion and absence rose. One soldier, who served with the 16th DLI in North Africa, Italy and Greece, recalled:

They'd had enough. I mean, British infantry was in the line ten times longer than the Yanks, the French, the Poles, any bugger else, the lads had had enough. . . . You'd get ready to go into the

²³¹ IWM 85/18/1, Framp, 'The Littlest Victory', 128.

²³² Anon, 'The Desertion Crisis in Italy: Some Views from an Eighth Army Infantry Platoon Commander', *The RUSI Journal*, 147:5 (October 2002), 86.

²³³ NA WO214/62, Alexander Papers. Letters from Adam to CAO, 25 February 1944.

line, and then so-and-so would be missing. You knew they'd be back after three months, maybe they'd had enough.

He added:

The lads that ran away would have a fit of remorse and hand themselves in once they had had a rest and a couple of good feeds. Everyone understood that. I would never call a man a coward. I was very, very near to it myself. It was only better men than me that kept me in the line.²³⁴

John Sparrow, too, stressed the impact of prolonged frontline service and concluded that the principal factor in most cases was continuous action in close contact with the enemy – two of the main elements of static, trench fighting.²³⁵ In early 1945, Alexander wrote to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff to reiterate that he was seriously worried about the effects long periods in the line was having on British formations at that stage of the war and repeated the information which he had been given by the GOC 78th Division, that for every man killed or wounded in the division, one went absent.²³⁶

FGCM statistics for August and September 1943 illustrate this trend: the veteran Eighth Army divisions, 50th (Northumbrian) and 51st (Highland), recorded 47 and 63 sentences respectively in this period; 78th Division, which had fought through Tunisia and Sicily, had 27; 5th Division, a relatively fresh formation which had seen some action in Sicily, had no FGCM sentences at all.²³⁷

Statistics for individual battalions that fought at Anzio, although imprecise, indicate a similar experience. In the period April to June 1944, 1st Division, which came to the beachhead fresh, had relatively few men found guilty of desertion (36) compared to the battle weary 5th and 56th (London) Divisions (123 and 75 respectively). The offences in 1st Division occurred in the 2nd North Staffs (8), 1st DWR (16), and 2nd Sherwood Foresters (12); in contrast, 56th Division, which took part

²³⁴ IWM 16719, Grey.

²³⁵ NA WO204/6701, AFHQ Morale Committee Meetings and Reports, December 1943 – March 1945. Notes of Tour of Italy: June-July 1944, compiled by Lt. Col. Sparrow; see also NA WO214/62, Alexander Papers. Letters from Sir Ronald Adam to CAO, 25 February 1944.

²³⁶ NA WO214/62, Alexander Papers. Letters to CIGS, 4 January 1945.

²³⁷ NA WO213/51, Field General Courts Martial (Abroad only), 12 July – 16 November 1943; NA WO213/53, Field General Courts Martial (Abroad only), 17 November 1943 – 9 April 1944.

in the closing stages of the North African campaign, the landings at Salerno and the Battle of Monte Cassino, reported 19 cases in the 8th Royal Fusiliers, 25 in the 9th Royal Fusiliers and 31 in the 7th Ox and Bucks; while 5th Division, which was involved in the landings in Sicily, the Battles of the Sangro and the crossing of the Garigliano, recorded 37 cases in the 1st York and Lancasters, 41 in the 1st KOYLI and 65 in the 6th Seaforths.²³⁸

In terms of the type of battle, data from a number of 20th century conflicts suggest that mobile operations, whether in attack or retreat, were better for a soldier's morale, and indeed sanity, than static fighting. In September 1944, a gasoline shortage in the US 4th Armoured Division prevented further aggressive action, which allowed the Germans to seize the initiative and mount a counter-attack. A psychiatrist with the division observed that by 16 September the rate of psychiatric casualties had begun to increase and by 27 September had reached an alarming number. On that date 71 men in the division succumbed to exhaustion, including a high proportion of non-commissioned officers. Between 15 September and 30 September there were 355 cases of exhaustion, more than had occurred in the previous two months.²³⁹ The reason for this sharp increase was simple, to quote Gal and Jones:

In defensive operations, especially with impending danger but without active engagement to break the tension, the soldier is subjected to an enforced passivity and experiences a feeling of helplessness. By contrast, in offensive operations, even though the risk may be greater, the soldier is active, has a vicarious sense of control over the situation, and is distracted from personal concerns. Similarly, during static situations such as being pinned down for long periods . . . stress casualties are higher than in mobile situations such as advancing or even retreating.²⁴⁰

Oddly enough, then, active engagement with the enemy, with the beneficial release of anger and therapeutic sense of distraction and control, is less stressful than passive, defensive fighting.

²³⁸ NA WO213/58, Field General Courts Martial (Abroad only), 2 October – 14 November 1944; NA WO213/60, Field General Courts Martial (Abroad only), 14 November 1944 – February 1945.

²³⁹ Helmus and Glenn, 'Steeling the Mind', 34-35.

²⁴⁰ Gal and Jones, 'A Psychological Model of Combat Stress', 141; see also Gal and Lazarus, 'The Role of Activity in Anticipating and Confronting Stressful Situations', 4-20; Glass, 'Observations', 185-198.

Although the trenches shielded men from the lethal effects of shellfire, they also heightened the psychological impact of artillery and mortars. In other words, infantrymen found holding out against shellfire psychologically draining, even when it was seen to be relatively ineffective, as they were utterly helpless against it.

Most British veterans agreed that trench fighting, irrespective of whether it took place in Tunisia, Italy or north-west Europe, was particularly destructive for morale, both individually and as a group. Neil McCallum, who fought with the Highland Division in North Africa and Sicily, wrote of the growing weariness of spirit that had overtaken his platoon following a month in the line at Mareth.

Day follows day in the small trench. It is sometimes a new trench, but all trenches are the same.

There is an attack, a patrol, a change of position, and always the shallow grave, occupied by the living. . . . Here we live, a prickly carapace of the ability to endure, an inner softness of dull emotion shot by fear, and a kernel of - nothing. Our bodies surround the hollow of querying emptiness inside the uniform.²⁴¹

Peter Cochrane feared for his men's morale during the stalemate at Cassino. Their position was static and largely inactive, and the company's section posts were isolated during the day, putting a heavy strain on his inexperienced section commanders. Cochrane tried to put himself in the mind of his 'Jocks', pinned down in their wretched positions day after day, unable to retaliate, looking to a young lance-corporal or corporal for leadership, and concluded that he would feel 'very forlorn'. After a couple of weeks of this, with nothing to show for the steady dribble of casualties, 'the company was down in the mouth and it wasn't easy to jolly the men along as one stumped round the positions at night'.²⁴² In Normandy, the morale sapping results of prolonged static fighting was listed as one of the main precipitating causes of breakdown by the Adviser in Psychiatry to 21st Army Group²⁴³; while the historian of the Black Watch, writing of the grim defensive battle in the

²⁴¹ McCallum, *Journey with a pistol*, 92-93.

²⁴² Cochrane, *Charlie Company*, 118-119 & 121.

²⁴³ CMAC GC/135/B.1/4, Lt-Col T F Main, Quarterly report by the Adviser in Psychiatry - 21 Army Group BLA, 1944, 5.

Bois de Bavent, complained that all one could do was endure the heavy artillery fire and try to maintain morale in these 'most difficult of all conditions'.²⁴⁴

In conclusion, it is plain that certain features of warfare have a particularly draining effect, which necessitates a greater effort to sustain morale. We can say with a degree of confidence that static warfare was one. Soldiers suffered from intense strain as a direct result of the extremely disempowering style of fighting they were engaged in. Like their predecessors on the Western Front, heavy shellfire and the spatial restrictions of the trenches severely hindered the fight of flight instinct, resulting in a profound feeling of loss of control, which in turn produced emotional strain, such as fear, anger and depression. The effects of poor living conditions, the style of fighting, lack of progress, the weather, exhaustion and incessant danger were greatly exacerbated by the apparent purposelessness of the fighting. It is little wonder that a significant minority of men proved unequal to the task, and sought escape through desertion/absence, SIWs or feigning sickness (both mental and physical); or that, those who stayed, sometimes tried to improve conditions slightly by tacit 'live and let live' truces. It is telling that such offences were always higher during prolonged periods of static fighting. The best way to measure morale, however, is not in relation to such offences, or the physical casualty rate, but by looking at the type of battle soldiers were involved in, particularly defensive operations characterised by enforced passivity, and the length of time they spent in the line, with all its hardships. To end with the words of Brigadier Hargest, referring to the lack of progress in Normandy, 'The English (UK) soldier will accept losses without losing morale provided he sees some results - but this niggling is hard on him'.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁴ Bernard Fergusson, *The Black Watch and the King's Enemies* (London 1950), 270.

²⁴⁵ NA CAB106/1060, Brigadier James Hargest, 'Reports on the Normandy campaign 1944 June 6-July 10', 25.

Conclusion

The construction of field works is as old as the existence of armies.

George Ripley, *The New American Cyclopaedia*, 1859.¹

This thesis set out to answer three main questions: what effect did the return to the trenches have on the Army's discipline and morale? Was there a clear link between periods of static fighting and the rate of psychiatric breakdown? And, finally, what does the experience of 1939-45 tell us about the nature of twentieth century warfare? In terms of the first of these questions, we have established that, like the last war, the return to trench fighting (in particular, the conditions in which men operated, the disempowering nature of the fighting and the immobilisation of combat) had a profound effect on discipline and morale. This was exacerbated by the lack of training soldiers received before being sent overseas. Few men expected to encounter trench warfare when they reached the front and even less had any idea of the best way to dig in under fire. All too often they had to learn the famous maxim 'dig or die' the hard way. In addition, the physical conditions they endured were every bit as gruelling, uncomfortable and physically demanding as those of the Western Front, if not more so; compared to the elaborate trenches of 1914-18, those of the present war were distinctly more transitory and rudimentary. This meant the troops frequently missed out on the benefits that static, trench fighting offered – such as adequate protection from enemy fire, shelter from the elements, the proximity of medical care and amenities and the comforting nearness

¹ G. Ripley and C.A. Dana (eds.), *The New American Cyclopaedia: A Popular Dictionary of General Knowledge*, Vol. VII (New York 1859), 622.



Figure 16: a typical two man slit-trench, the Odon valley, 16 July 1944 (Ellis, *Sharp End*).

of comrades. Not only this, but the punishing daily routine subjected them to horrendous levels of stress and physical exhaustion.

Overall, though, it was the disempowering style of combat that proved to be the biggest challenge to infantry discipline and morale. We have heard that the infantryman's greatest fear was artillery fire, and that when it was coupled with enforced immobility, it critically impaired their 'fight or flight' instinct, producing a strong sense of helplessness, which in turn engendered emotional responses such as fear, anger and depression. For many this constant threat was too much and they sought a means of escape; soldiers who could no longer withstand the pressure of life in the trenches could report sick, desert or, at the extreme end of the spectrum, mutiny. Some chose to feign illnesses or psychiatric disorders, some even gave themselves a 'blighty wound'. For others the exit came not from a conscious choice, but due to genuine psychiatric breakdown, which, just as in 1914-18, was the inevitable by-product of modern industrial warfare. We have seen that breakdown in combat could be the result of a sudden, sharp shock – a near miss or the death of a friend - or a long-wearing out process, brought upon by prolonged frontline service. The key point to remember is that, even if they had not broken down entirely, soldiers were in a state of near constant tension in forward areas and were often very close to collapse. This constant gnawing away of courage and resilience meant that even the bravest would succumb to psychiatric breakdown.

One of the most commonly cited factors in precipitating breakdown was static fighting and we have demonstrated a clear link between the two – quite simply, when the fighting bogged down, the rate of psychiatric casualties soared, especially in comparison to mobile operations. Why was this? The answer undoubtedly lies in the peculiar style of fighting. We have established that the hallmark of trench warfare is incessant tension and the inability to alleviate this tension by activity; this meant that soldiers were, for the most part, merely passive receptacles of indirect artillery fire, which produced in them an overwhelming feeling of helplessness. By contrast, in offensive operations, even though the risk may have been greater, soldiers were actively engaged and felt like the masters

of their own destiny, something which could not be said when trembling at the bottom of a slit-trench. Besides the type of battle, the length of exposure to combat was another crucial factor in breakdown – prolonged contact with the enemy has been linked with cumulative stress while the intensity of combat is more related to acute stress. The best way to measure morale, therefore, is not simply in relation to offences such as desertion, absence or mutiny, nor the physical casualty rate, but by looking at the type of battle soldiers were involved in and the length of time they spent in the line with all its associated hardships.

To address the last of our three questions, it should be obvious that the overriding feature of combat in 1939-45 was not mobility; it was, instead, infantry slogging matches (more *sitzkrieg* than *blitzkrieg*), highly reminiscent of the fighting on the Western Front thirty years earlier. This was not just true of the fighting in North Africa and Europe - all theatres witnessed their fair share of full blown trench stalemate. In Burma, the terrain ensured that the fighting descended into little more than a series of bloody sieges - the epic battles of Kohima and Imphal in mid-1944 were both terrible positional engagements in which the Japanese vainly tried to squeeze out the Allied garrisons. An officer with the Royal Welch Fusiliers recalled his first spell in the line at Kohima where he and his men had to crawl

through the shallow, muddy communication trenches to take over the forward dugouts and foxholes . . . The most lasting impression of all was caused by the stench of decaying bodies, half-buried or lying in the open between the lines. In some of the slit-trenches, rotting bodies of Japanese were used to form the protective parapet . . . Space was so limited that dugouts, latrines, cookhouses and graves were all close together. It was almost impossible to dig anywhere without uncovering a grave or a latrine.²

Elsewhere in Burma there is constant mention of a term more closely associated with the Western Desert, the 'box', and this form of static perimeter became widespread in the fighting here, such as the so-called Admin. Box held by 7th Division in Arakan (5 February to 23 February 1944).

² Quoted in Ellis, *Sharp End*, 49.

The vast open distances of the Eastern Front – ideal tank country - seemed to preclude positional trench fighting. Yet even here, there were exceptions to the rule. At the Battle of Sevastopol (30 October 1941 to 4 July 1942), Red Army forces successfully held trench systems on the narrow peninsula for several months against intense German bombardment. At Stalingrad, the ‘Verdun on the Volga’, a few square miles of ruined city came to mirror the worst excesses of the fighting on the Western Front a generation before.³ In the rubble armour was often redundant; in its place engineers with charges and flamethrowers dominated, and sniping became an art form.⁴ One German general recalled how

For every house, workshop, water-tower, railway embankment, wall, cellar and every pile of ruins, a bitter battle was waged, without equal even in the First World War with its vast expenditure of munitions. The distance between the enemy’s army and ours was as small as it could possibly be. Despite the concentrated activity of aircraft and artillery, it was impossible to break out of the area of close fighting.⁵

The siege of Leningrad, which lasted for 900 days until finally broken by the Red Army offensive of January 1944, was another prominent example. Even the Battle of Kursk, the biggest armoured clash in history, featured elaborate trench systems. Further east, the Pacific provided some exceptionally harsh instances of trench warfare, such as the island battles of Iwo Jima and Okinawa, characterised by elaborately dug in Japanese defenders who clung doggedly to log bunkers, trenches and caves.

Despite the dawning of the nuclear age, trench warfare remained a central feature of many post-1945 conflicts. This was certainly the case in Korea, where digging in continued to have as much significance to infantrymen as it had in 1914-18. It was especially common where hilly terrain prevented the use of armour, or when hand-held anti-tank weapons made tank commanders cautious. Moreover, human wave attacks met with as little success as they had during the early years of the Great War, and the machine gun played a comparably important role. In the same

³ Alan Clark, *Barbarossa: the Russian-German Conflict 1941-1945* (London 2005).

⁴ See Antony Beevor, *Stalingrad* (London 2007).

⁵ General Doerr, quoted in Clark, *Barbarossa*, 221.

region, France endured another bout of trench warfare during the 57 day long siege of Dien Bien Phu in 1954. Here the French garrison occupied trenches, bunkers and drainage ditches; while the Viet Minh launched repeated massed attacks which would not have been out of place on the Somme. Heavy bombardments were followed by wave after wave of infantry, which were sometimes victorious despite suffering grievous casualties. Just as the Germans had done in 1916, the French hit back with immediate local counter attacks to regain lost ground: but unlike the Western Front, there was no opportunity to fallback or withdraw. When the mass attacks failed, the Viet Minh resorted to sapping forward yard by yard in an attempt to take the position and the French replied with trench raids. As one account put it, Dien Bien Phu was 'Hell in a very small place'.⁶

Contrary to popular perception, even some engagements in the Vietnam War featured examples of trench warfare. At Nam Dong on 6 July 1964 a South Vietnamese armed camp was attacked resulting in a successful defence; at A Shau in 1966 a Special Forces camp held by less than 400 men was assaulted by 3,000 North Vietnamese regulars, leading to a 30 hour battle and the evacuation by helicopter of half the defenders. One US soldier remembered Khe Sanh simply as a 'network of rat holes'.⁷ Overwhelmingly, though, it was the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese who resorted to tunnelling (undoubtedly as a response to US heavy bombing, napalm and 'search and destroy' patrols) and headquarters, hospitals and supply dumps were all constructed below ground, often protected by a warren of narrow tunnels, multiple camouflaged entrances and trap doors. As a matter of fact, in many places the South Vietnamese and US troops occupied the surface whilst the enemy lived beneath their feet. This led to the creation of special units called 'Tunnel Rats', who performed search and destroy missions underground using bayonets, grenades, fire, explosive charges, dogs and pistols. Another example in this period was the aptly named 'War of Attrition' fought between Israel and Egypt from 1967 to 1970.

⁶ Quoted in Bull, *Trench Warfare*, 154.

⁷ Ibid., 155.

Although there has been nothing in the past thirty years to rival the great fortified works of 1914-18 and 1939-45, there have been occasional stalemates which threatened to turn into full-scale trench warfare. The most obvious instance was the Iran-Iraq War, lasting from September 1980 to August 1988. After early success, the Iraqi invasion stalled due to unexpectedly fierce resistance and the fighting bogged down into a grim, attritional struggle. For about a year there was little change in the front. In July 1982 Iran launched Operation Ramadan, in which five human-wave attacks were met with withering fire from the Iraqis. The result was one of the biggest battles since the Second World War, but neither side was able to achieve a decisive result. Iranian attacks continued into 1983 and 1984 and the Iraqis, faced with a numerically superior foe, resorted to familiar tactics, building an elaborate system of field fortifications some 20 kilometres deep.

Unsurprisingly these new offensives generated massive casualties, but no end to the war. After four years of fighting both countries had seized a meagre 300 square miles of each others' territory, for the loss of nearly 300,000 men. One Arab commentator remembered that:

Mile after mile of mud, trenches, corpses, shell-holes and wrecked vehicles and artillery filled the landscapes of western Iraq. Not since the battlefields of the Somme had there been so much carnage, sacrifice and courage on this scale. . . . Iraqi gunners worked ceaselessly behind earthworks thrown up by bulldozers, battering a human wall which renewed itself as soon as it was destroyed.⁸

In the First Gulf War, the Iraqis attempted to use defences similar to those which had proved so effective against the Iranians. On the border with Saudi Arabia a dense network of fortifications was put together, including minefields, earthworks and anti-tank ditches, fire trenches, barbed-wire and heavy weapon emplacements. In the end these proved practically useless, as Allied air superiority, special forces and the latest tanks were brought to bear, meaning trench warfare simply did not have time to take hold. This was not an end to such fighting however. Short periods of trench

⁸ Quoted in Bull, *Trench Warfare*, 157.

warfare took place in both the former Soviet Union and during the Yugoslav Wars (the siege of Sarajevo, 1992-96, included extensive trench works). Another example of trench stalemate was the Eritrean-Ethiopian War of 1998–2000 and as recently as 2001 in Afghanistan, Taliban fighters occupied trench lines north of Kabul and successfully held off conventional ground attacks for a time.

Indeed, for most of human history, the true nature of war has been that of small groups of men sheltering in holes below ground; it should be plain that a reconsideration of the fundamental nature of combat in the twentieth century is required. It is the author's hope that the current work should fit into that context. We have seen that the Second World War was not as radically different as some would have us believe. Scratch the surface and one sees a great deal of continuity, not just with the trench fighting that engulfed Europe from 1914-18, but with numerous other conflicts, before and after 1945 (the Crimean War, the American Civil War, the Franco-Prussian War, the Second Boer War, the Russo-Japanese War and the Spanish Civil War to name a few earlier examples). Fred Majdalany, no stranger to this style of fighting, observed in reference to the stalemate at Cassino that 'Such a battle of attrition is the quintessential ordeal of infantry fighting and it is unavoidable when a well-positioned and determined enemy is willing to defend to the death the ground he holds'.⁹ Given this simple truth, it seems entirely possible that trench fighting will continue to recur: more often than not, it is *the* universal experience of war.

⁹ Majdalany, *Cassino*, 248.

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