

World War1

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World War I

World War I, also known as the First World War, the Great War, the War of the Nations and the War to End All Wars, was a world conflict occurring from 1914 to 1919. The Allies on one side and the Central Powers on the other fought the war. No previous conflict had mobilized so many soldiers or involved so many in the field of battle. By its end, the war had become the second bloodiest conflict in recorded history.

What interested me about WWI was that trench warfare was very brutal and the use of the shotgun, machinegun, and many other weapons such as chemical weapons were commonly used during this period. I also felt that during this time in history many Soldiers gave their lives to save others, so I wanted to recognize one Soldier, Corporal Freddie Stowers, the first black Soldier to receive the Medal of Honor for his gallant action during WWI.

After the first few months of World War I (WWI), the Western Front consisted of a relative static line of trench systems that stretched from the coast of the North Sea southwards to the Swiss border. To try to break through the opposing lines of trenches and barbed wire entanglements, both sides employed huge artillery bombardments followed by attacks by tens of thousands of soldiers. Battles could last for months and lead to casualties measured in hundreds of thousands for attacker and defender alike. After most of these attacks, only a short section of the front would have moved and only by a kilometre or two (Duffy 2004).

Trench warfare is a form of war in which both opposing armies have static lines of fortifications dug into the ground, facing each other. Trench warfare arose when there was a revolution in firepower without similar advances in mobility and communications. Periods of trench warfare occurred during the American Civil War (1860s) and the Russo-Japanese War of

1904–1905, and reached peak brutality and bloodshed on the Western Front in the First World War.

World War I became infamous for trench warfare. This was especially true of the Western Front. Over 9 million died on the battlefield, and nearly that many more on the home front due to food shortages, genocide, and ground combat. Among other notable events were chemical weapons.

The decline in military use of shotguns reversed in World War I. American forces under General Pershing employed 12-gauge pump action shotguns to the Western front in 1917. These shotguns were fitted with bayonets and a heat shield, which allowed for handling the barrel while the bayonet was ready for action. Shotguns fitted in this fashion are trench guns. Those without such modifications were riot guns. After World War I, the United States military began referring to all shotguns as riot guns.

Due to the cramped conditions of trench warfare, the American shotguns were extremely effective. Germany even filed an official diplomatic protest against their use, alleging they violated the laws of warfare. The Judge Advocate General reviewed the protest, and found it legal to use, so the complaint by the Germans went unfounded (Wikipedia 2005).

Nearly all infantrymen in the First World War used bolt action rifles. This type of rifle had been invented by a Scottish immigrant to the United States, James Paris Lee. The bolt is the device that closes the breech of the barrel. The bolt-action rifle had a metal box, into which cartridges were placed on top of a spring. As the bolt was opened, the spring forced the cartridges up against a stop; the bolt pushed the top cartridge into the chamber as it closed. After firing, the opening of the bolt extracted the empty cartridge case, and the return stroke loaded a fresh round.

Cartridges were injected into the magazine by means of a clip. They consisted of open-ended slides or cases within which a number of cartridges, 3, 5 or 6 were gripped by the spring metal of the case or a spring incorporated in the base (Jeeves 2005).

The Lee-Enfield was the main rifle used by the British Army during the First World War. The Lee-Enfield was first introduced in 1907 and by the outbreak of the First World War, was the British Army's main infantry weapon. It was estimated that the highly trained British Expeditionary Force that arrived in France in September 1914, were able to fire 15 rounds per minute. The Lee-Enfield could be aimed accurately over about 600 metres but could still kill someone over 1,400 metres away. Following the Spanish-American War in 1898, Erskine Allin, the Superintendent of the Springfield Arsenal, developed the M1903. The bolt action magazine rifle, an adaptation of the Mauser Gewehr, was used by the United States Army. The M1903 rifle remained the US standard rifle until 1936 while other popular bolt action rifles included the Mauser Gewehr (Germany), Lebel (France), Mannlicher-Carcano (Italy).

Other devastating weapons included machine-guns that were positioned all along the Western Front. The machineguns in use in 1914 required a crew of three to six men and were positioned on a flat trajectory tripod. For added protection, German machine-guns were often housed inside concrete blockhouses.

Although it is popularly believed that the German army was the first to use gas it was in fact initially deployed by the French. In the first month of the war, August 1914, they fired tear-gas grenades (xylyl bromide) against the Germans. Nevertheless the German army was the first to give serious study to the development of chemical weapons and the first to use it on a large scale.

Mustard Gas (Yperite) was first used by the German Army in September 1917. The most lethal of all the poisonous chemicals used during the war, it was almost odourless and took twelve hours to take effect. Yperite was so powerful that only small amounts had to be added to high explosive shells to be effective. Once in the soil, mustard gas remained active for several weeks. The skin of victims of mustard gas blistered, the eyes became very sore and they began to vomit. Mustard gas caused internal and external bleeding and attacked the bronchial tubes, stripping off the mucous membrane. This was extremely painful and most soldiers had to be strapped to their beds. It usually took a person four or five weeks to die of mustard gas poisoning.

British Gas Casualties: 1914-18	Deaths	Non-Fatal
Chlorine	1,976	164,457
Mustard Gas	4,086	16,526

From all the carnage that existed during WWI, the most important factor in the war is the human element. The toll on human life was outrageous. Before an infantry advance during the First World War, it was a common strategy to bombard enemy defences with all available heavy artillery. The idea was that this preliminary bombardment would either kill the defending Soldiers or would at least force them to retreat. The most devastating aspect of WWI was the dehumanizing effect on the men. With so many dead or maimed men, soldiers became mechanical. Dead Soldiers lay everywhere in the trenches and in the fields. Human life was devaluated. Remnants of war continue to be found today, reminders of the battle that took the lives of many fathers and sons.

It's been said that the ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience but where he stands at times of challenge. On September 28th, 1918, Corporal Freddie Stowers stood poised on the edge of such a challenge and summoned his mettle and his courage.

Corporal Stowers distinguished himself by exceptional heroism on 28 September 1918 while serving as a squad leader in Company C, 371st Infantry Regiment, 93d Division. His company was the lead company during the attack on Hill 188, Champagne Marne Sector, France, during World War I.

A few minutes after the attack began; the enemy ceased firing and began climbing up onto the parapets of the trenches, holding up their arms as if wishing to surrender. The enemy's actions caused the American forces to cease fire and to come out into the open. As the company started forward and when within about 100 meters of the trench line, the enemy jumped back into their trenches and greeted Corporal Stowers' company with interlocking bands of machine gun fire and mortar fire causing well over fifty percent casualties.

Faced with incredible enemy resistance, Corporal Stowers took charge, setting such a courageous example of personal bravery and leadership that he inspired his men to follow him in the attack. With extraordinary heroism and complete disregard of personal danger under devastating fire, he crawled forward leading his squad toward an enemy machine gun nest, which was causing heavy casualties to his company.

After fierce fighting, the machine gun position was destroyed and the enemy Soldiers were killed. Displaying great courage and intrepidity Corporal Stowers continued to press the attack against a determined enemy. While crawling forward and urging his men to continue the attack on a second trench line, he was gravely wounded by machine gun fire.

Although Corporal Stowers was mortally wounded, he pressed forward, urging on the members of his squad, until he died. Inspired by the heroism and display of bravery of Corporal Stowers, his company continued the attack against incredible odds, contributing to the capture of Hill 188 and causing heavy enemy casualties (American Heroes: Medal of Honor Recipients).

No Medals of Honor were awarded to Black Soldiers for heroism in World War I. This was finally corrected in 1991 when President George Bush presented a posthumous award to the sisters of South Carolina's Freddie Stowers. The Medal of Honor was presented to Stowers' surviving sisters during ceremonies at the White House on April 24, 1991.

World War I was definitely a brutal war. Soldiers were dying by the thousands with very little advancement in territory. The use of the shotgun, machinegun, and chemical weapons contributed to this devastation and catastrophic loss of life. Through all this turmoil, and fighting, Soldiers paid the ultimate price for our freedom. The highest award for bravery, the Medal of Honor, has been awarded 3,459 times to 3,440 individuals like CPL Freddie Stowers, who fought to protect their country with courage and bravery above and beyond the call of duty.

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