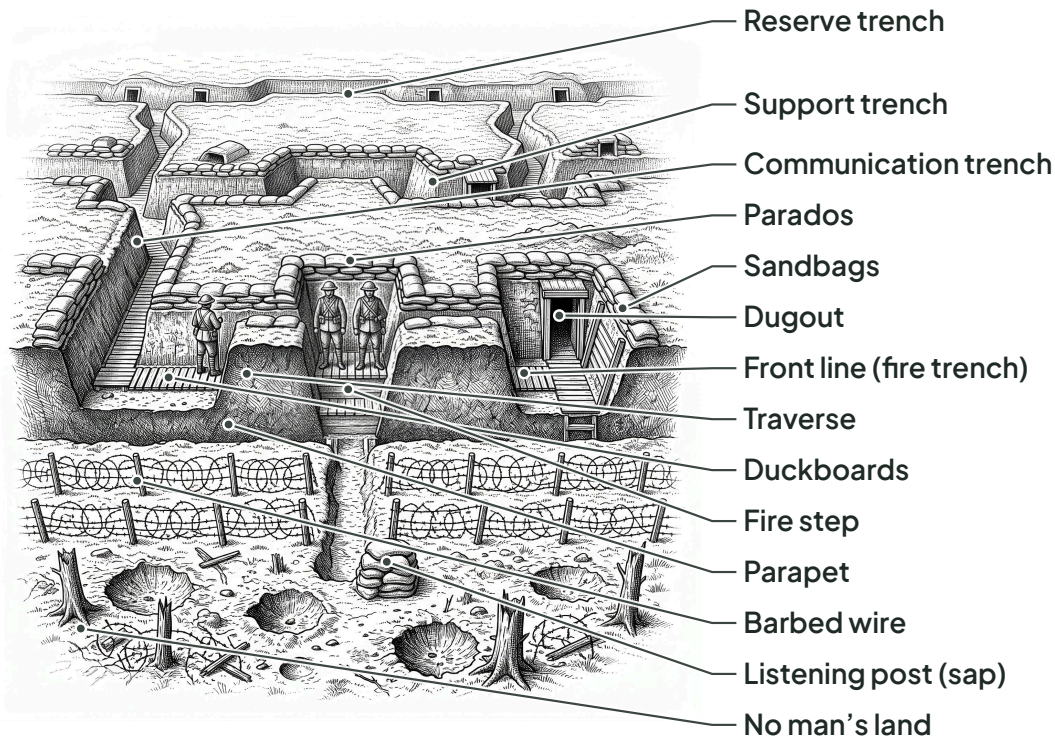
HOW A TRENCH SYSTEM WORKED

By 1915 both sides had dug trench systems hundreds of miles long on the Western Front. A system had several lines: the front line nearest the enemy, a support line behind it and a reserve line farther back, joined by communication trenches. Trenches were never dug straight. They zigzagged in short sections called bays, with a block of earth, a traverse, between each one. An enemy who got into a straight trench could fire straight down it; in a zigzag he could see only one bay. A shell burst was also kept inside one bay.



◆ THE PARTS ◆

Front line (fire trench) The trench nearest the enemy, where soldiers kept watch and fired.

Support trench A second line behind the front, with soldiers ready to help.

Reserve trench A line farther back, where more soldiers waited to move up.

Communication trench A trench running back, so men and supplies could move safely.

Traverse A block of earth at each zigzag that split the trench into bays.

Fire step A ledge to stand on to look and fire over the top.

Parapet The wall of earth and sandbags on the side facing the enemy.

Parados The lower wall on the back side, guarding against blasts behind.

Sandbags Bags of earth piled up to stop bullets and pieces of shells.

Duckboards Wooden slats on the floor that kept feet out of mud and water.

Dugout A shelter dug into the ground to rest and hide from shells.

Barbed wire Belts of sharp wire in front to slow down attackers.

No man’s land The torn-up ground between the two sides’ front lines.

Listening post (sap) A short trench pushed toward the enemy to listen for raids.