

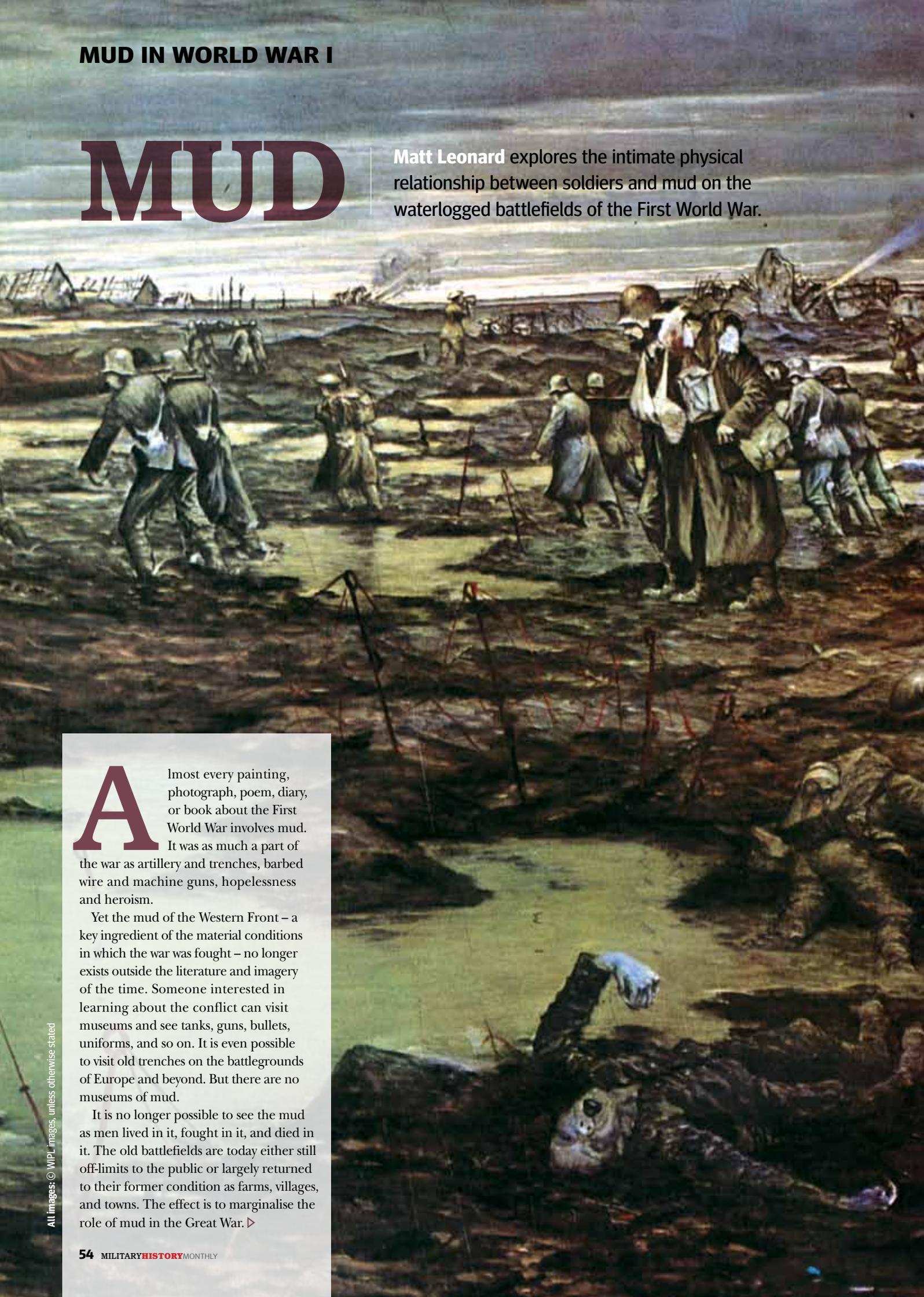
MUD

Matt Leonard explores the intimate physical relationship between soldiers and mud on the waterlogged battlefields of the First World War.

Almost every painting, photograph, poem, diary, or book about the First World War involves mud. It was as much a part of the war as artillery and trenches, barbed wire and machine guns, hopelessness and heroism.

Yet the mud of the Western Front – a key ingredient of the material conditions in which the war was fought – no longer exists outside the literature and imagery of the time. Someone interested in learning about the conflict can visit museums and see tanks, guns, bullets, uniforms, and so on. It is even possible to visit old trenches on the battlegrounds of Europe and beyond. But there are no museums of mud.

It is no longer possible to see the mud as men lived in it, fought in it, and died in it. The old battlefields are today either still off-limits to the public or largely returned to their former condition as farms, villages, and towns. The effect is to marginalise the role of mud in the Great War. ▸





The Harvest of Battle (1919) by C R W Nevinson. Mud is central to Nevinson's apocalyptic image of the war on the Western Front. It depicts vividly the way in which battlefield mud was a mix of earth, water, matériel, and rotting flesh.

MUD IN WORLD WAR I



Above A German aerial photograph of the cratered, waterlogged landscape of First World War Flanders.
Below Nothing could prepare men arriving at the Front for the first time for the endless sea of mud into which the landscape had dissolved.

The dominion of mud

Visiting now, it is hard to imagine what the battlefields would have been like during the conflict. The corpses and detritus of battle have long since been cleared away or buried, the screeching noise of modern warfare has been replaced by calming countryside tones, and the pleasant rural air has banished the stench of war.

But the most immediately obvious difference between the landscape of Northern France and Belgium today and that of 1914-1918 is the colour. Today the fields are bright yellows, greens, and reds, the colour of life and crops and poppies. During the Great War, the colour was brown, grey, and dead.

Mud was ubiquitous and reigned supreme. It was created from the remnants of human beings and of murdered Nature – the by-product of modern industrial warfare on scale never before thought possible. It was not the same mud we know of today.

The trenches of the Western Front were always ‘muddy’, even when it



was dry. In Flanders, the landscape is predominantly flat and the water-table always high. Even in summer, after only a few feet of digging, the water appears, and summer rainfall is not uncommon in Belgium or France.

The mud, moreover, was not just wet earth, but a combination of the many kinds of filth produced by war. In the dry, men still bled, vomited, defecated, and urinated; water and food were still spilt in the trenches; and the earth contained the remains of thousands of rotting corpses and the ugly detritus of war. Drainage was not easy and surface water would often remain in trenches and shell-holes for days, harbouring disease and death.

Mud-shock

Back in Britain, the realities of this world were simply not portrayed to the public in the early years of the war. Take, for example, the exhibition trenches dug in Kensington Gardens to educate civilians on conditions at the Front. The public were presented with well-made trenches that were clean and fully furnished. Wilfred Owen referred to such 'exhibitions' as 'the laughing stock of the British army'.

Despite the excellent job done by army training grounds in Britain and



Above British trenches were regarded as temporary refuges in anticipation of the next 'big push'.

beyond, they could not prepare men for the monstrous reality of an enemy other than the Germans: the 'mudscapes' of the frontlines. The conflict landscapes of Belgium and Northern France were much larger, broader, and all-encompassing than anything hitherto known in war. Lack of preparation for this contributed to the disorientation of fresh troops arriving at the Front. ▷



Above German trenches were generally far better constructed. The Germans saw themselves as defending conquered territory, and they usually held higher ground, where drainage was more easily managed.



MUD IN WORLD WAR I

Landscapes are created through human interaction, and the mudscapes of the Western Front were no different. They were constructed by industrial weaponry mashing together pre-war and prehistoric geographies, time and time again. They were the result of a ferocious struggle for dominance – between nations, industries, and ideologies – in which modern warfare transformed ancient landscapes through previously unimaginable destruction, detritus, and death.

The mudscapes represented a whole new world in which millions of men lived and fought and died, and it became rapidly apparent to new arrivals in the trenches that surviving the onslaught of the landscape would be as challenging as surviving the weaponry of the enemy.

Trench life

For the Allies, life in the trenches was undoubtedly far worse than for the Germans, whose defensive lines were usually built to a much higher standard. Materials such as corrugated iron, wood, and concrete were all widely employed, making the German trenches more habitable in bad weather and amid the seas of mud that swept along the frontlines.

The Germans would often shelter in huge, reinforced, underground dugouts connected to their trenches by subterranean passages, and it was not at all uncommon for these systems to include electricity, kitchens, and dormitories. The German soldier who wrote *The Storm of Steel*, Ernst Junger, referred to the German trenches as ‘dugouts that have evolved by now from rudimentary holes in the ground to proper enclosed living quarters, with beamed ceilings and plank-cladded walls’.

Conversely, Allied trenches were usually temporary in nature, squalid, badly drained, and ill-supported against artillery barrages and damage. Their lines often consisted only of shell-holes in areas where the trenches had disappeared under bombardment or the lines had been pushed forward into no-man’s-land.

The British philosophy of attack rather than defence ensured that little energy was spent on building permanent lines on the German model. The assumption was that no trenches would be occupied for long, since great offensives were forever being planned that would break the enemy lines and end the war.



Mud dominates the art, the photos, and the literature of the Western Front. Here, Wellard's *Void* [above] depicts the industrialised destruction and detritus of the battlefield, and Rogers' *Gassed* [above right] reminds us of its rotting organic matter – both essential ingredients of the monstrous mud of the frontlines.

Art and photography

The ground at the Front was churned up so ferociously that it took on the form of a sea of mud, seemingly without beginning or end. The idea of the landscapes of the war dissolving themselves into one vast form – the sea of mud – is a common theme in the imagery and literature of the Great War.

William Rider-Rider's famous photograph of the aftermath of the Battle of Passchendaele, for example, conveys this sense of a landscape without shape. It was as though the conflict had itself declared war on Nature, and Nature did not stand a chance.

The surgeon and anthropologist Robert Briffault described the Front as follows: ‘Mile after mile, the earth stretched out black, foul, putrescent. Like a sea of excrement... it was one vast scrap-heap. And, scattered over or sunk in the refuse and mud, were the rotting bodies of men, of horses and mules. Of such material was the barren waste that stretched as far as the eye could see.’

Without traditional landmarks, the artistic depiction of battlefields was transformed. Paul Nash's *We are Making a New World* shows a landscape so broken that it appears to move in waves: the painting is more seascape than landscape.

Likewise, Nevinson's *After A Push* portrays the battlefield after the heavy

artillery has wrought its destruction on the frontlines. The ridges between shell-holes again seem like waves of mud that could consume men, horses, and equipment whole. They seem almost bottomless, and the scale is hard to judge.

The German soldier and artist Otto Dix takes the idea of the landscape as a sea of mud further. His haunting picture *Flanders* portrays the Front as a muddy version of hell. Soldiers dead and alive are being consumed by mud and slime. Their bodies are the breakers of large waves, and the never-ending sea of mud slowly consumes them.

Mud was created from the remnants of human beings and of murdered Nature – the by-product of modern industrial warfare.



Below *The War Budget*, a popular wartime publication, reports on 'The Epic of Mud' in January 1916 – mud was a greater enemy during the winter than the Germans.

Trench humour

Descriptions of the mudscape are common in the more light-hearted literature of the time. Bruce Bairnsfather's 'Old Bill' cartoons often turned a humorous eye on the appalling conditions. The famous trench newspaper *The Wipers Times* made countless references to the muddy nature of the landscape, from amusing adverts such as that for the 'Tunnel & Dug Out Vacuum Cleaning Company' to pieces with headlines like 'More Mud Than Glory' and articles declaring that 'Three submarines have been mined on the Menin Road'.

The art and literature of the war show time and time again how soldiers perceived the mud and how the war had created a unique landscape which they were forced to inhabit and adjust to if they were to survive.

A sense experience

The reality of life in the frontlines was that to be above ground in daylight meant almost certain death and the closer to the ground one could get, the safer one would feel. This close proximity to the earth and the mud meant that all the senses were exposed to it.

Touch and smell became as important as sight when experiencing the ubiquitous mud, and the senses became essential in adapting to the spatial disorientation that trench life inflicted. This reliance on the use of all the senses to survive is yet another ingredient in the dynamic mix that is represented by the mudscapes of the Front.

W Beach Thomas highlighted this when he wrote of the mudscapes of the Somme that 'everything visible, audible or tangible to the sense – to touch, smell and perception – is ugly beyond imagination'.

This sensorial experience was so intense that it often seemed that the human skin was the only barrier between the filth and the body. Towards the end of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Remarque writes, 'Those who still wear high boots tie sandbags round the top so that the mud does not pour in so fast. The rifles are caked, the uniforms are caked, everything is fluid and dissolved, the earth is one dripping, soaked, oily mass... our hands are earth, our bodies clay and our eyes pools of rain. We do not know whether we still live.'

The mud became hated to the same degree as the enemy. Siegfried Sassoon, in his *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, >

The War Budget,
January 1916, 25th.

THE EPIC of MUD

Winter Heroics of our Amphibious Army

By W. G. Fitz-Gerald

WHAT men will do for a cause is an awesome thing to consider. It is good for us all to realize that life in the winter trenches is a little kind of war – mud and other woes, from "trench-foot" to gas-attacks, from shattering shrapnel and shelling, mutilation or sudden death, to downright starvation and cruel economy of food, with no hotbed for roasting sandwiches, no outlook but a blasted plain broken with blasted mounds and jagged fragments of wire. But to think that such a people as this, perhaps long-dead comrades have to be replaced from top-holes with the bayonet.

range of them, crowded with millions of men and you imagine some soldiers a life but lately realized at the home front.

The trench foot is a menace, water-drip last year and perhaps knee-deep this – thanks to benighted labour of our engineers and quick-witted counterfeits on the part of the tank and the... We've mentioned too much of France, a sorry lot worse to his number.

"They're going to get a hand-out on our ships, but you could row tanks up and down our hulls! But the rubber life-boats are a great help."

The Gravity of Discomfort.

As one talks to them, mark in better old fellows how they can see the darker side of this hopeless fight with enemy (they and flanking alike). Yet the wounded man who drops in, and all but shivering, see heads in the dimmed darkness who come bounding at the double through the shallow mud, holding high in the air the precious innumerable and steaming. Here comes for a moment and pay homage to their destiny – no Lord. Making, V.C., starving for six and thirty hours without a stop; collecting and treating 200 men, till a high explosive burst and killed his last group of patients, surrounded his only soldiers, and headed in death the doctor himself and all his gear.

Or again consider young Maria-Louise, the only female V.C. of the war, who left a private position a War for one in

His Tommy gazes "trench foot" in the Flanders mud.

This underground war is a curious affair, with death so familiar as Nerve or Brains, or Thompson's, so that "trench foot" is the necessary sign of the soldier's day. Morning "armies" in a flash was but just the gay fighting spirit to which we owe a "subterranean academy" which the lot did never repeat. Look at those lads crawling back to follow more blocks of mud from their positions. "We never see our boys," they'll tell you, with quiet resignation.

Man-Tappers.

Mud, deep mud is unbreakable now, a solid deposit of slimes, ooze, all-germs, dung and war. They call the slaps the trench-dogs (all the women no longer sleep, but huddle the late late glaucous blocks. "Zee, and the ground-ooze." "Check and these beds of sea now down the. Mind you were you fat on the sea and that look for get stuck in the bottom."

That is to us little more than a world – an accumulation of rip-ooz that is leaving any service, and down at the splash of boiling wheels. But mud is water warfers in a ditch's position, as Napoleon himself found when cornered at the grandest new law of their hearts in the closely-packed of Poland. This a mass of slabs from the Alps in the North Sea coast that

A British soldier pumping water from a trench with a powerful petrol-driven pump.

Flanders, where slugs and snails traverse the plain and wade down the ravines with "snails in sand-ditches," greatly outnumbered and grave. On their winter months follow the mud, take down to be dug out, that wonder are on the top-holes past others ground.

Most which best in the trench foot. Their faces are soaked out, all their strength while away fighting the passing darkness of the German Flanders mud. Always on battle front, and had to today on the west of all his, killing the mud and laid in the line now. "There's no end to this life," says my friend

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The rifles are caked, the uniforms are caked, everything is fluid and dissolved, the earth is one dripping, soaked, oily mass.

describes wiping the mud from the face of a dead German he comes across in a shell-hole during an attack. Seemingly, the mud coating the German's skin makes the death of the young soldier worse, somehow ugly, detracting from the soldier's humanity.

Dehumanised by mud

There was a feeling among the belligerents that the mud of the Front was turning humans into animals; that the war was eroding humanity. The mudscapes that the men were forced to live in became all-consuming, and the ground was like a living entity – a landscape 'alive' with the dead.

It was as if the landscape was taking revenge for the destruction wrought upon it by man. A frontline newspaper in 1917 carried an article that shows how the soldiers perceived the mud as something living: 'At night, crouching in a shell-hole and filling it, the mud watches, like an enormous octopus. The victim arrives. It throws its poisonous slobber out at him, blinds him, closes around him, buries him... for men die of mud, as they die from bullets, but more horribly.'

Thousands of men fell into the mud never to be seen again, joining the ranks of 'the missing', and this gave rise to notions of the landscape itself being a cemetery. To be in the trenches was like being in an open grave: mud and rancid, stinking earth on all sides, with only a ceiling of lethal light, waiting to be closed by a coffin lid of mud.

Blunden wrote in his *Undertones of War* that, at the Front, 'mud, and death, and life' were much the same thing, highlighting the inextricable connection between the reality of the war and the landscape in which it was waged.



Above Stretcher-bearers carrying a wounded comrade through the mire.

Below Soldiers ponder how to release a horse and trailer stuck fast in mud.

Bottom right Artillerymen attempt to haul an 18-pdr field-gun from the slime.

PASSCHENDAELE: THE EPITOME OF MUD-WAR

It rained relentlessly through the 15 weeks of the Passchendaele Offensive in 1917. The low-lying Flanders countryside was turned into a gigantic quagmire stretching for miles in every direction. The battle produced some of the iconic images of the war.



Mud and machines

The mechanical destruction had a curious by-product: that of giving men a closer appreciation of Nature. As they witnessed the terrifying power of modernity, somehow sending the world back to the Stone Age, the soldiers began to identify the mass killings of humans with the destruction of the landscape – man was murdering Nature through industrial war, and Nature was murdering man through the mudscapes he was creating.

This relationship between landscape, Nature, and the belligerents of the First World War is a primary feature of the human experience of the fighting. German cemeteries, for example, often took the form of heroes' groves: mass graves in natural areas of beauty that would show no crosses or headstones – often trees would be planted instead.

The groves symbolised a belief that the dead would be consumed by the earth

and become part of the changing seasons. Junger wrote, in *The Storm of Steel*, that 'The war had given the landscape a suggestion of heroism and melancholy... the simple soul is convinced here that his life is deeply embedded in Nature, and that his death is no end.'

The mudscapes of France and Belgium are intrinsic to understanding everyday life in the conflict. The mud of the Western Front, so often referred to in the literature of the conflict, helped produce a social and cultural landscape that affected every aspect of a soldier's life. This new and terrible variant of the traditional conflict landscape was felt, tasted, and smelt. It was lived on and in, and became a living object that the soldiers grew to understand, to dread, and to hate. 🇫🇷

Inset Mudscapes: Nature murdered by industrialised war, and men murdered by a soaking mire of rusting metal and rotted flesh.



LORD OF THE RINGS

The hell and mud of the Western Front influenced the work of many authors. It seems that once experienced, a life lived as an animal in the muddy hell of the frontlines could not be forgotten.

The literature of the Great War frequently makes use of words such as creep, burrow, and crawl, language more associated with animals than human beings. Patrick McGill, for instance, a stretcher-bearer on the Western Front, wrote 'a soldier came crawling towards us on his belly, looking for all the world like a gigantic lobster that had escaped from its basket'.

J R R Tolkien was not on the Western Front for long, but he did experience life in the trenches on the Somme, and what he referred to as the 'animal horror' of the war never left him.

His experience influenced his portrayal of the bleak, muddy, barren landscapes of *The Lord of the Rings*. Writing in a letter in 1960, he commented that 'The Dead Marshes and the approaches to the Morannon owe something to Northern France after the Battle of the Somme'.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Sam Gamgee refers to seeing 'dead things, dead faces in the water' beneath the stinking muddy mire of the Dead Marshes. This is probably a reference to corpses witnessed by Tolkien in the mud of the Somme – and akin to Dix's *Flanders*.

Above Frodo Baggins and Sam Gamgee cross the Dead Marshes in Peter Jackson's film version of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. The water was full of corpses – like no-man's-land on the Western Front.