

Zeppelins

Zeppelins were massive airships full of hydrogen designed by Germany to drop bombs. They could travel at 135kph, they had 5 machine guns and carried 2000kg of bombs. They were silent and slipped above cities unnoticed. Within two years, over 500 civilians had been killed by Zeppelins. However, they were full of hydrogen so exploded when hit by bullets.

"Although dismissed by Winston Churchill before the war as 'enormous bladders of combustible and explosive gas' the zeppelins proved very hard to attack. They slipped over the British coast silently and at great height so they were difficult to reach with conventional weapons. They dropped their bombs on utterly unsuspecting targets and then melted away." Dan Cruickshank, military historian



Horses

At the beginning of WWI, there were 100 000 men in cavalry units in the British Army. Most of the senior army leaders were cavalry officers. This meant at the start of the war, the army were convinced that a strong cavalry would win the war so they sent men on horses galloping across No Man's Land towards machine guns. Later, the army realised that cavalry charges in the trenches were not practical so instead horses were used to carry wounded soldiers and supplies because they were better than tanks in the mud. Most of the horses sent to the front drowned in the mud or were killed in battle.

"Between the Somme in July 1916 and Armistice in November 1918, the British Army recorded 58 090 horses killed and 77 410 wounded by gunfire; 211 were killed and 2 220 wounded by poison gas; while several hundred were killed by aeroplane bombs." Max Hastings, military historian



Weapons of WWI

World War One was a time of change in the way wars were fought, new technology was being introduced and new weapons were being used successfully for the first time, alongside older ways of fighting.

Lee Enfield Rifles

The Lee Enfield rifle was first introduced in 1907 and during WWI was the infantry soldier's main weapon. When the soldiers were trained well, they could fire 15 rounds per minute. The rifle was accurate to 600 metres but could kill someone 1 400 metres away. Really well trained soldiers could do the 'mad minute', fire 20-30 rounds per minute and hit their target. When the British fought at the Battle of Mons, the German army thought they were meeting machine guns but they were actually fighting very well trained men using Lee Enfield rifles. It could also be used as a sniper rifle. They could jam up if they were dirty so it was really important to keep the gun clean. The Lee Enfield's magazine took 10 bullets, the standard German gun took 5. The rifle also had a bayonet that you could attach on to the end for fighting up close.

"Well entrenched and completely hidden, the enemy opened a murderous fire...the casualties increased....the rushes became shorter, and finally the whole advance stopped....with bloody losses, the attack gradually came to an end." A German account of British troop fire at Mons

"This rifle was the superb weapon with which the British Regular Army entered the Great War. The men, trained to fire 15 rounds a minute, were the most efficient riflemen of any European army and they proved themselves in the early battles of Mons and Le Cateau." Western Front Association



Gas

The German army were the first to use chlorine gas in 1915. Chlorine gas causes a burning sensation in the throat and chest pains. Death is painful - you suffocate! The problem with chlorine gas is that the weather must be right. If the wind is in the wrong direction it could end up killing your own troops rather than the enemy. Mustard gas was the most deadly weapon used. It was fired into the trenches in shells. It is colourless and takes 12 hours to take effect. Effects include: blistering skin, vomiting, sore eyes, internal and external bleeding. Death can take up to 5 weeks. Mustard gas stays in the soil so continues to be deadly.

British Gas Casualties: 1914-18

	Deaths	Non-Fatal
Chlorine	1,976	164,457
Mustard Gas	4,086	16,526



Machine Guns

Machine guns were first used in World War One. The army used rifles that fired 15 rounds a minute. Using new Vickers machine guns meant that soldiers could fire six hundred rounds per minute at the enemy up to 4500 yards away. Vickers produced about 80 000 machine guns for the British army. During the Battle of the Somme, British soldiers were told to walk, slowly, towards the German machine guns to avoid falling over in No Man's Land. This caused thousands of casualties. The machine guns needed 4 men to fire them and they had the power of 100 rifles. However, they frequently overheated or jammed.

"Facing the machine-gunners one saw how our men had fallen, one here, another there, one in front, and then others, one, two, three, four, five, all in a sort of sequence, here, here, here, here, here, one poor wretch had got far, but had got tangled in the wire, had pulled and pulled and at last been shot to rags." Private Stephen Graham describes the effect of machine guns



Aeroplanes

Aeroplanes in WWI were made out of wood and the pilots had no protection. The pilots fought each other with pistols and machine guns. They could also drop bombs and metal darts. Successful British and German pilots became celebrities. During the Battle of the Somme in 1916, the Royal Flying Corps had 421 aircraft, by the end of the war they had 4000 combat aircraft.

"As weapons the bombers were more deadly and accurate than airships had ever been. The death toll and damage they inflicted in Britain's cities was horrifying. On one raid 162 people were killed and 432 injured, including 68 children. It achieved little of direct military value but it had killed many, caused horrendous damage in city centres and created terror." Dan Cruickshank, military historian



Tanks

Tanks were meant to be the new inventions that would win the war. They could cross No Man's Land with their crew and crush the enemy's guns. However, the tanks frequently got stuck in the mud or turned over when crossing the trenches. When that happened, the crew were often drowned in mud, unable to escape.

Little Willie, the first tank, had tracks 12 feet long, weighed 14 tons and could carry a crew of three, at speeds of just over three miles. The speed dropped to less than 2 mph over rough ground and it was unable to cross wide trenches. They were disappointing in WWI but they had potential for future wars.

"There was a whip of silence from the enemy. Then, suddenly, their machine-gun fire burst out and splashed the sides of the tank. The bullets fell from its sides harmlessly. From its sides came flashes of fire and a hose of bullets, and then it crushed the machine-guns under its heavy ribs, and killed machine-gun teams with deadly fire. The infantry followed in and then advanced again round the flanks of the monster." From a newspaper in 1916.

