

Version 1.0 | Last updated 13 January 2017

Close Combat Weapons

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The basic tactical question for all military powers prior to 1914 was how to approach and attack an enemy who was directing massive fire against the attacker and who was making use of natural or artificial cover. The answer was a combination of well-coordinated movement, sustained infantry fire over distance and artillery support. Close combat remained only the last – albeit often mystified – phase in a much more sophisticated tactical scheme.

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1. Infantry Weapons in Trench Warfare

The [infantry](#) of 1914 went to war with a fairly symmetric arsenal of personal [weapons](#). The rank and file carried a bolt-action [rifle](#) and a bayonet. Officers were equipped with a sword and a handgun (revolver or pistol). With the advent of permanent trench warfare, combat had to be reorganized not only across the trenches but also within. Here, fighting was determined by a temporary loss of command and control, by short distances and constricted space. This had consequences for the infantryman's [equipment](#). Swords and long bayonets became impractical to handle and disappeared. The (short) carbine proved to be more effective than the (long) rifle. [Hand grenades](#) like the British "Mills bomb" or the German "*Stielhandgranate*" became a main weapon in trench fighting. Trench raiding parties were equipped with pistols, [flamethrowers](#) and light [machine guns](#), and could receive fire support from portable mortars and infantry guns.

2. Adaption and Improvisation

Very soon, soldiers started to upgrade their personal arsenal. Knives, supplied by the army or acquired individually, became a standard weapon. Some of the knives had a dual-use-quality and also served as outdoor tools in trench life. Others, like push daggers or the US-Army “Mark I trench knife”, were designed to kill. Killing was no longer practiced according to the book. During periods of inactivity, soldiers spend their time improving and inventing individual weapons. The edges of a spade could be ground down, making it a deadly weapon. From a metal stake used for the setting-up of [barbed wire](#), French soldiers formed a push dagger called the “*clou français*”. Knuckledusters, clubs, maces and even morning stars completed the informal tool box of killing in the trenches. The non-lethal, silent clubs were also popular among raiding parties that went over the top to capture enemy soldiers as human intelligence sources. Due to insufficient documentation, the use of improvised explosive devices is hard to determine.

3. Close Combat and Martial Culture

Yet even under the extreme conditions of close combat, soldiers developed informal codes of conduct with regard to wounded soldiers, the use of particular weapons or the practice of surrender. Whether they adhered to these codes or decided to ignore them was heavily dependent on the conduct of the enemy and the actual situation.

Despite all popular narratives on the 1914-18 fighting experience, seeing the white in the enemy’s eyes remained a rare exception for most of the soldiers. A thorough assessment of unit diaries and medical statistics shows that 92 percent of the casualties were inflicted by the more distant and technical weapons, namely [artillery](#) and machine guns. Nevertheless, the narrative of close combat influenced the soldiers’ self-perception during and after the war. By acquiring and wearing the artifacts of close combat – knives, pistols, and trophies of all kinds – they were able to profit from their martial nimbus, even if close combat had never been part of their individual war experience.

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Citation

Pöhlmann, Markus: Close Combat Weapons , in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2017-01-12. **DOI:** [10.15463/ie1418.11032](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.11032).

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