

LINE OF FIRE: Life as a 'Poilu'

- 'Poilu', meaning 'hairy' was the nickname given to the French infantry soldiers because of their unshaven, unwashed appearance. The English equivalent of a *poilu* – ie, an ordinary soldier – was known as a 'Tommy'.
- Poilus accounted for up to 75% of all fighting forces. They suffered a 26% death rate and 40% were wounded.
- Many spoke only a native, regional dialect. A high proportion of poilus were peasants who had been conscripted from the countryside.
- Average height of 5'4"
- For the first year of the war, poilus went to war in very conspicuous nineteenth century red peaked pill-box hats, blue frock coats and bright red trousers, which made them an easy target for the German forces. By late 1914, the uniform was changed to plain blue and included a greatcoat and a steel helmet.
- Poilus were initially equipped with rather antiquated weapons, including a bolt-action, single-shot rifle. In 1914, this meant 3000 rifles and 6 machine guns per regiment. By 1917 this had changed to 1800 rifles, 36 machine guns, 108 automatic rifles, 576 rifle-grenade launchers, 3 rapid fire cannons and an assortment of trench mortars, supported by heavy artillery, tanks and bomber aircraft.
- The French army supplied the bulk of the US army's needs once the United States entered the war in 1917. In that same year, three quarters of available French soldiers were assigned to the American Expeditionary Force (the name given to the American forces sent to fight in WWI).
- In principle, each soldier was to be supplied with two full meals per day. Each company (200 men) was provided with its own mobile field kitchen, well stocked with bread, tinned meat and other foodstuff as available. Nicknamed the ration 'monkey meat' as it was very greasy and stringy.
- Most importantly a daily ration of wine (Pinard) was issued.
- Fearsome regime of discipline, backed by courts-martial, prison and execution. Penal battalions were formed in each division.

What did a poilu have to carry?

Poilu's packs were extremely heavy (heavier than GB or US equivalent) and could weigh up to 40kg/88lbs. By regulation each poilu was required to carry the following:

Inside the pack

- Shirt -- folded and placed so as to cover the interior (back) surface entirely to form a sort of cushion.
- Handkerchief -- folded and placed on top of shirt.
- Reserve Rations (2 days) -- placed along bottom of pack. Included: 12 hardtack biscuits (in canvas sacks), 1 double-sachet of sugar/coffee, 2 cans of preserved meat, 2 cans of condensed soup.
- Blue woollen police cap
- Wash-Towel
- Pair of Extra Socks
- Sewing Kit
- Clothing Brush
- Tent-Stakes (3)
- Toiletries, including: mirror, razor, shaving brush, soap.
- Heavy Lebel rifle with bayonet (52cm) plus scabbard. Poilus nicknamed the bayonet the 'Rosalie'
- Extra Rifle Cartridges - 10 packets (when going on offensive)
- Jacket - when not in use, folded (lining side out) and placed so as to fill the full dimensions of pack and cover entirely all other items in the pack
- Soldier's Booklet - placed in the flap pocket (at the front, carried in breast pocket of greatcoat).

Attached to the outside of the pack

- Blanket - rolled into horseshoe and placed over top and sides of pack. Secured using greatcoat and side straps.
- Tent-Canvas - folded into a horseshoe and placed over the blanket.
- Portable Entrenchment Tool
- Squad Camping Implement
- Individual Mess-Kit - placed on top of blanket roll, slightly angled to the rear. Secured using large load strap.

Each member of a squad carried one of the following:

- Plates which served rations for up to four men (2 per squad)
- A 'marmite' pot': a large pot with handles for carrying hot food to the trenches (4 per squad)
- Canvas bucket for transporting water
- Collapsible lantern

- Coffee grinder

Per company, the following were carried by poilus

- Approximately 80 shovels, 40 single-headed pickaxes, 40 double-headed pickaxes, 8 axes, 1 folding saw, 4 pairs of wire cutters, 12 large knives.

Beyond the regulation items above, soldiers often carried an extra pair of hobnailed boots. Optionally, a sheep-skin in cold weather (typically rolled), walking stick.

While soldiers would have followed the regulations of pack arrangement for formal occasions such as formations and parades, in the field they would have arranged their packs according to individual preference.

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