

# **Front Line Transport in World War I: An Examination of the Vital Role Played by the Trench Tramways**

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The long stalemate on the Western Front that began in 1915 presented a number of challenges related to reliable transportation of troops, munitions and other supplies. At first it all went by road, a policy adopted to ensure flexibility of deployment. Steam traction engines hauled the heavier loads, but most traffic was horse drawn. Serious delays ensued when the roads, all of which were unsurfaced, were churned into quagmires in wet weather by the ceaseless heavy traffic. When off-road transport became essential due to tactical requirements, the battle scarred landscapes dotted with flooded shell craters presented further obstacles. The answer lay in the use of light narrow gauge railways that could be laid quickly and lifted and relaid elsewhere as need arose. Nicknamed 'trench tramways' they could achieve more efficient delivery of troops and armaments from railheads behind the battle area to the front line positions. But the British were reluctant to get involved in a fresh tier of logistics for a war that was still officially regarded as a short term campaign and dragged their feet on the matter. By the start of the Somme offensive in August 1916 some short French built two foot gauge light railways had come under British control as a result of sector adjustments. The rails only weighed 9lbs per yard and often broke under load but their usefulness was belatedly realised, and urgent requisitions were then made for hundreds of small locomotives and wagons, mostly supplied from the USA, while stronger 16lb per yard rail was ordered in great quantity as fast as the steel mills could roll it. By the end of 1916 a network of fully fledged light railways had been created, eventually extending some 800 miles on the Allied side of the Front.

Additionally serving factories and hauling train loads of horse fodder, these tiny trains also had the vital task of evacuating the wounded to field hospitals. German networks were even more sophisticated, including stations and signalling systems based on extensive pre-war planning. Camouflage was improved and early petrol driven units reduced the visibility of trains that sometimes operated within a few hundred feet of enemy lines, escaping detection by emitting no smoke as a steam engine would. Light railway support to the progress of the war was tremendous, but is usually overlooked by historians because just before the end of the conflict new policies directed the development of versatile tracked vehicles that would more effectively facilitate the war of movement being planned by the Allies for the spring of 1919.