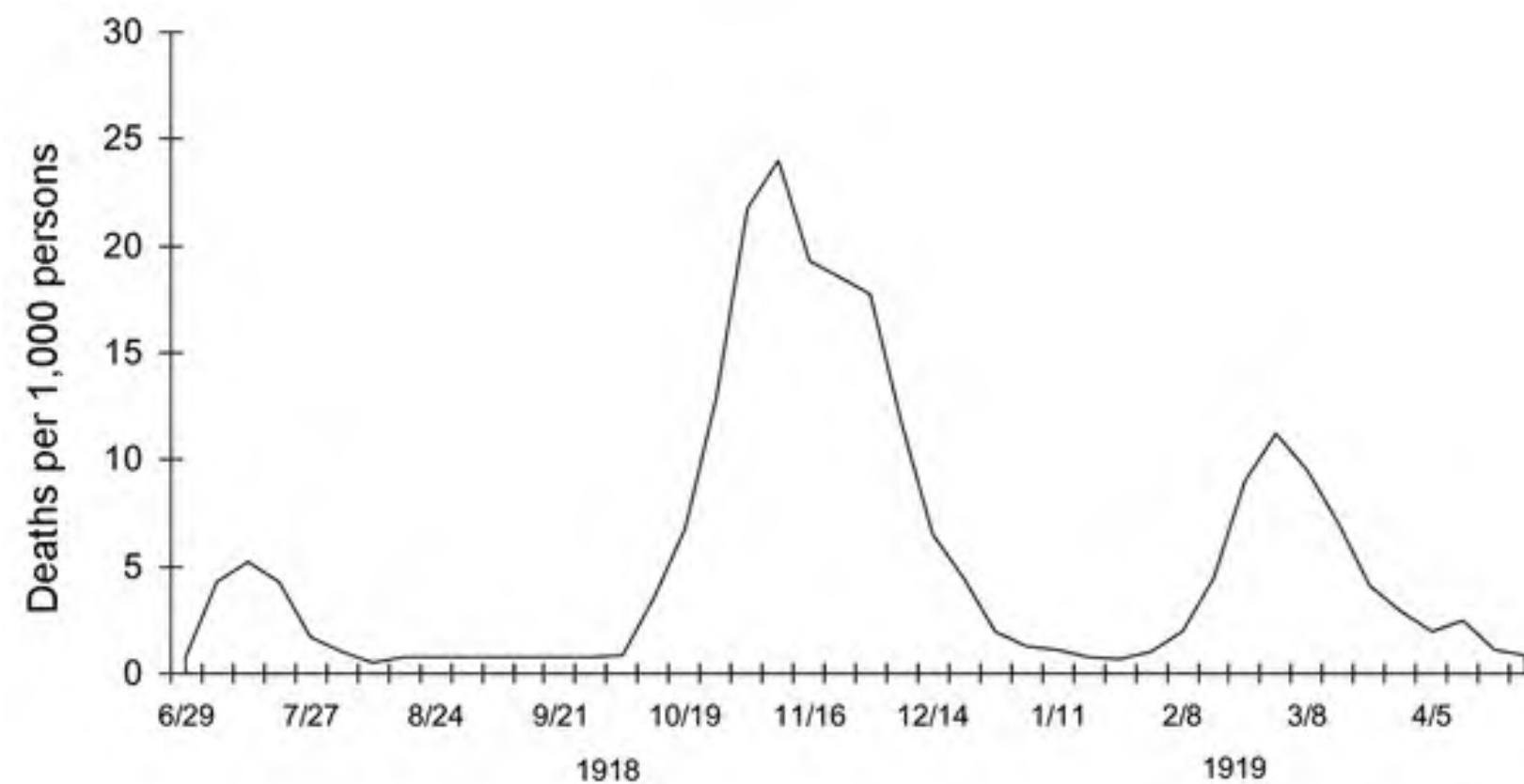


The Flu Pandemic of 1918

In the last year of the war an unusually deadly Influenza outbreak began to spread alarmingly in France, eventually going worldwide to form a pandemic. It involved the H1N1 influenza virus, responsible for the more recent 2009 outbreak. It went on to infect 500 million worldwide and was responsible for an estimated 50-100 million deaths. It has been described as “the greatest medical holocaust in history” and may have killed more people than the Black Death. In the UK it killed 250,000 people.



UK Deaths from the Flu Pandemic June 1918 to May 1919

Investigative research carried out in 2009 identified a major troop staging and hospital camp at Étaples, France as the most likely centre of the epidemic. Wartime censorship in Germany, UK, France and the US suppressed reports of death, but the press were free to report on the situation in Spain, giving rise to the name ‘Spanish Flu’.

There were two waves, and by the second wave in autumn the virus had mutated to a much deadlier form. Unusually, this flu strain was shown to affect more young fit adults rather than the very young and old who would be most vulnerable in a typical outbreak. If you get flu today the natural reaction is to stay at home for a day or so, thus minimising the spread. This was not an option for soldiers in the trenches, or sailors on ships, where those with mild symptoms remained by their colleagues so it spread to them. Those with more severe symptoms may find themselves on crowded transports to be put in crowded hospitals, infecting those around them who were already weakened.

This epidemic almost certainly claimed the lives of our servicemen Second Mate Frank Bate, Able Seaman William Josiah Blake and Driver Adolphus Lark. It is a cruel irony that so many who had survived the ravages of war fell victim to an unseen enemy that proved to be much more deadly than bombs, gas or bullets.

Sources

1918 Flu Pandemic: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1918_flu_pandemic