

Life in the trenches

During World War One, both sides found it hard to advance due to barbed wire and machine gun fire (it's almost impossible to pick your way through barbed wire while being fired at by the enemy).

When the armies started trying to blast their way through with shells (explosives), both sides dug trenches as a form of protection. The front line ran for 400 miles and each side had several rows of trenches. There were so many that they were given names - generally names that the men could relate to, such as London street names.

The following soldier's account is taken from *The Modern Age*, Oxford University Press, 1980.

'What is it like in the trenches?'

'The first thing you notice is the mud. It is often up to my knees and has been up to my waist. They say the Germans can make it rain whenever they want. Well, that seems to be all the time. There is a foul smell too, from the bodies of the dead men and the horses. They sprinkle chloride lime on the bodies but it doesn't do much good. Something you soon realize is that it's not only soldiers that live in the trenches. Within a few days I was crawling with lice. There are rats, too. Big, fierce things they are. One night we shut a cat in a dug-out, hoping it would kill a few. In the morning the cat had vanished, bones, fur, everything.'



Were rats and lice the only 'creatures' to share the soldiers' trenches?



No. Frogs made their homes in shell holes covered in water and in the bases of the trenches. Slugs and horned beetles crawled up the sides of the trenches. To avoid head lice (a common problem), most men chose to shave their heads.



To return to 'the smell' ...

This can't be underestimated. Rotting carcasses lay around in their thousands. Roughly 200,000 men were killed on the Somme battlefields and most of these men lay in hastily dug, shallow graves. And then there was the smell of overflowing latrines (toilets), unwashed bodies, chemicals, poison gas, rotting sandbags, stagnant mud, cigarette smoke and cooking food. The soldiers got used to the smell but visitors to the front found it unbearable.

What food did the soldiers eat?

Mostly the soldiers ate tinned food such as 'bully beef' (corned beef) and tinned stew. Once a day they were given a ration of rum (as a way of boosting morale). The biggest problem for the soldiers was getting fresh water as there was barely enough to drink and definitely not enough to wash themselves or their clothes with.



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What was a day like in the trenches?

Soldiers had a 'stand-to' at dawn which meant that they took their rifles and stood on watch as dawn was a common time for the other side to attack. During the day they might clean their rifles, write a letter home or try to sleep (though they wouldn't get much, given that the shelling and gun-fire noise was constant). Most of the work was carried out at night. Sometimes soldiers would have to go into No-Man's Land (the land between each side's trenches) in order to mend barbed wire fences. Raids would happen too - on both sides.



Did the soldiers feel safe in the trenches?



No. Death was all around. In busy parts of the front line the constant shellfire brought random death to those in the trenches (many men were buried when walls of the trench collapsed). New recruits were told not to look over the parapet as many men died from snipers' bullets. And of course diseases such as trench foot (when a soldier's foot began to rot after being wet continuously), trench fever (caused by lice), shell shock (a mental illness, caused by the continual noise, danger and terror that the soldiers had to endure) and poison gas attacks meant that the trenches were very dangerous, horrible places.

Creative written response

Choose from the following:

- Create a simple trench fact sheet in which you tell others about the problems of trench life. Use headings, bullet points and diagrams if you like.
- Imagine that you are a recently recruited soldier and this is your first week in the trenches. Write a postcard or letter home to your mother or girlfriend and tell her how things are going for you. Are you going to be truthful? Or try to reassure her?
- Taking it further ... Is there anything else that you'd like to know (e.g. how often did soldiers receive letters)? Try to think of five other questions that you'd like answered about life in the trenches. Then see if you can research the answers.
- Imagine that you are a soldier and you have been told by your commanding officer to cheer the other men up with either a) a poem or b) a song that you have written. Write the words to this poem or song and think about what music you would set it to.

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