WORLD WAR I PART 6 OF 9 · AGES 11–16

LIFE IN THE TRENCHES

What everyday life was like for soldiers on the Western Front, from dawn stand-to to letters home.

Stand-to at dawn and dusk

Every man manned the fire step at first light and at dusk, the likeliest times for an attack. In between came weapon cleaning, sentry duty and sleep.

A few days at a time

Most soldiers spent an average of four days in the front line, then moved back to support, reserve and rest, where they could bathe and sleep.

Busy nights

Darkness hid men from the enemy, so night was for work: repairing trench walls and barbed wire, and patrolling no man's land.

Tinned food and hard biscuits

Much front-line food came in tins, like 'Maconochie' stew, often eaten cold. Army biscuits were so hard they had to be soaked first.

Water in petrol cans

Drinking water was carried up in old petrol cans and treated with chemicals. Most of it was drunk as tea, which also hid the taste.

Rats and lice

Rats fed on food waste. Lice lived in clothing seams and spread trench fever; soldiers crushed them by hand or burnt them out with candles.

Trench foot

Days in cold water and mud made feet swell and go numb. Dry socks, whale oil and foot inspections helped prevent it.

Letters home

Around 2 billion letters passed through the British Army Postal Service. Officers censored them, so they did not always tell the full story.

Not only the Western Front

At Gallipoli soldiers faced heat, flies and disease; in the Middle East and East Africa, malaria. Illness, not weapons, caused most British casualties at Gallipoli.

NEXT IN THE SERIES
7. Key People of World War I

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