

Conditions in the trenches, source pack

A

Photograph
from a field
hospital on
Western Front



B

Photograph
from Western
Front , 1914



C



Photograph from the Western Front

D

“Burial was impossible. There were thousands of bodies, not just ours but Germans as well. And where we fought several times over the same ground, bodies became part of the material of the trenches themselves. In one place we had to dig through corpses of Frenchmen who had been buried two years earlier. The bodies were rotten. I once put my hand straight through the belly of a man...”

Stuart Cloete, writer.

Cloete was a South African who volunteered to fight in the First World War. He was injured in 1916 and spend the rest of the war in England, recovering.

E

“British soldiers on the Western Front spent only 40% of their time engaged in Front Line activities. The other 60% of their time was spent in four main areas: shopping, food, leisure and sexual / romantic liaisons.”

Lives of the First World War, by J. Fuller— a historian, 1991

F



Soldiers bathing near Aveluy Wood, Belgium.

G



An early tank in a ditch, 1916

H

Graves fought in the First World War but was injured in 1916.

“The familiar trench smell still haunts my nostrils: a mixture of mud, toilet buckets, half-buried corpses, rotting sandbags and stale human sweat.”

Robert Graves, poet.

Borton was an officer in the British Army. He won many medals for bravery including the Victoria Cross

“We come out of the trenches for a rest tomorrow... I shall be glad. I haven’t had my boots or clothing off for five days and nights and had no bath for a fortnight.”

Arthur Borton, soldier.

I



Canadian Soldiers on the Western Front

During the day time soldiers often slept or wrote letters, like these Canadian soldiers photographed near Willerval.

J



Cigarette Tin

These cigarettes belonged to Albert Tattersall. Cigarettes were an important part of life in the trenches, and were given to soldiers as part of their rations. If you didn't smoke yourself they could be swapped and traded for other goods. Albert's cigarettes were sent home after he died of wounds received on the first day of the Battle of the Somme.

K



A man on watch whilst his fellow soldiers rest. 1915

L

“In one part of the trench we found, piled on one on top of another, Welsh soldiers... Headless and armless, they lay with the sickly-grey-white look of death...”

Glynn Roberts, 38th R.W.F.

“The dead were everywhere... grim disfigured corpses, rotting in the sun, so horrible in their discolour that it called for good imaginations to believe that these were once young men, sent to their (deaths) by fellow men.”

Captain Wyn Griffiths.

This is an extract from Griffiths' memoirs (the story of his life at war) published in the early 1920s.

M



Men inspecting a trench. April 1915

N *“There was a danger of trench feet and the men had to rub a sort of fat or whale oil on their feet to prevent it. Lots of blighters avoided doing that because they knew that if they got trench feet they would be sent back down the line.”*

Sergeant J. Haddock.

“Your feet swell up two or three times their size and go completely dead. I have heard grown men cry and scream with pain... many have had to have their feet and legs amputated.”

George Coppard, British machine-gunner.

Accounts from soldiers who fought on the Western Front

O



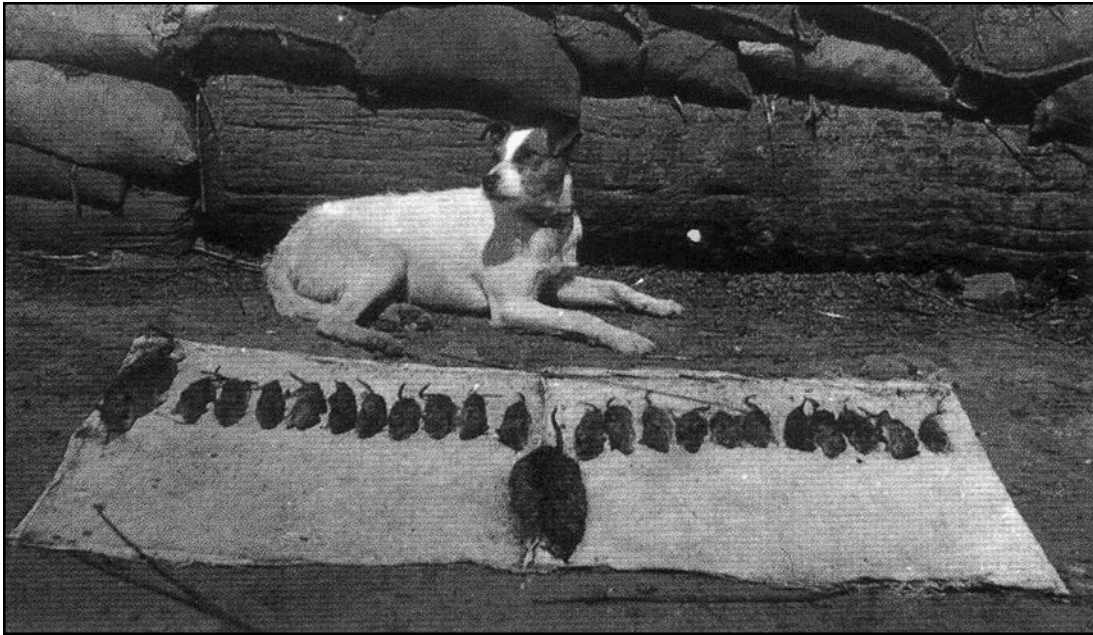
P

“If anyone had asked they would have been told that every soldier got half a load of bread each day. We never got this once. Many, many times we had only a single slice for breakfast and hard biscuits for tea. They were so hard that I’ve held one in my hand and hit the sharp corner on a brick wall and only hurt my hand.”

William Pressey, soldier.

Pressey was a soldier. He was gassed on 7th June 1917 but he survived. He wrote about all his experiences after the war.

Q



Photograph of a dog with rats it had caught. Dogs were kept as pets and were used to keep rat numbers down.

R *“The area was infested with rats. They grew fat on the food that they stole from us and were bloated and terrible to look at. One night a rat ran across my face. Unfortunately my mouth happened to be open and hind legs of the filthy little beast went right it.”*
Stuart Dolden, writer.

“To add to the general discomfort, trenches were alive with rats. The knowledge that the gigantic trench rats had grown fat through feeding on the dead bodies in no man’s land made the soldiers hate them more fiercely than almost anything else.”
S. Case, historian.

S

It was at about 8 o'clock in the morning, as I came back to headquarters past the "dug out" I saw a man lying near the trench. I went over and found there was a coat over the man's face. I lifted it off and saw it was the BODY OF COLONEL LOVEBAND. He had, as far as I could make out, been shot through the lip, just at the bottom of the nose. I looked at the wound and saw the bullet had gone through the back of his head. He came out of the trench and was evidently got by a sniper. When I got to hospital I was like a ragman - my clothes flittered by bullets.

Private James Rogers

Rogers was from Birmingham and joined the army at the start of the war. He died when a ship he was on was sunk near Gibraltar in 1915

T

One of our men came stumbling back through our lines. An officer of ours held him up with levelled revolver, "What's the matter, you bloody lot of cowards?" says he. The man was frothing at the mouth, his eyes started (bulged and came loose) from their sockets, and he fell writhing at the officer's feet.

Anthony R. Hossack; soldier describing a poison gas attack

U Quotes from 'Mud, Blood and Poppycock' by Gordon Corrigan a Revisionist Historian

Despite the tales of rats, lice and general filth, cleanliness in the trenches were strictly enforced. The army paid a great deal of attention to its latrines (toilets), as indeed it had to. By now the army was well aware that if human waste was not disposed of properly, unnecessary casualties (deaths) would follow.

Good discipline got rid of rubbish and edible scraps, and rats were rarely a problem in the trenches, although lice, inevitable when men cannot wash properly, sometimes were. On coming out of the line troops had their uniforms fumigated (de-liced), laundered (washed) and ironed, and if necessary exchanged to reduce the risk of infestation.

The so called horrors of the trenches were very short lived indeed, and it is unusual to find any battalion (about 500 soldiers) spending more than four or five days a month in the firing line. Away from the front line there was much to do.....men were relatively safe and comfortable.

Men visited independent prostitutes or enthusiastic amateurs. Altogether the army medical services treated 153,531 cases of VD on the Western Front. VD is venereal disease (sexually transmitted infections)

Daily intake of calories was 4,111. It was a healthy and balanced diet. Nevertheless whilst not fancy cuisine (food), this was a far better diet than many been used to at home, where in poorer households meat was eaten once or twice a week.

It has generally been considered that one indicator of morale and discipline in a unit is its sick rate: that is, the percentage of men saying they are sick with illness due to causes other than actual fighting. Throughout the war on the Western Front the sick rate was well below acceptable peacetime rates, and not much higher than actual pre war levels (0.30 was considered acceptable):

1913 0.12%

1914 0.26%

1915 0.13%

1916 0.15%

As for blood, there was much less of it about than is portrayed. Stories of men wading through blood and the ground being red with blood are, sadly for Hollywood film makers, just stories.