

Life in a Trench on the Western Front

Please study the documents below. Use them to create a letter home from a soldier in the trenches. You could also write a couple of diary/journal entries.

Source B

One British private said that his overriding memory of all his time on the western front was the smell. Another in his diary spoke of a "penetrating and filthy stench". One of the first demands of the conquering troops was for a double ration of tobacco to mask the overwhelming stink of the corpses. A Frenchman who fought in the sector wrote, "We all had on us the stench of dead bodies' the bread we ate, the stagnant water we drank, everything we touched had a rotten smell, owing to the fact that the earth around us was handily stuffed with corpses."

Source C

"There was always something to be done, digging, filling sandbags, carrying ammunition, scheming against water, strengthening the wire, resetting dock-boards. These duties seemed of such importance that they absorbed one's entire stock of energy."

Source D

"Soldiers never knew when they would be able to get home. Often it was over a year before they saw their friends and families again. Soldiers longed for "Blighty" which was army slang for Britain and of home. Most of them carried photographs of their families, wives, or girlfriends in their tunic pockets. Their only contact with home was by letters and postcards. Soldiers in the front lines were only allowed to send field postcards. Those further away from the fighting could write letters. These letters were censored by the authorities to make sure that no one had given away information which would help the enemy. Families and organizations like the Red Cross sent parcels of luxuries to the troops - razor blades and soap, cigarettes, cake and chocolate, hand-knitted socks and gloves."

Source F

One soldier wrote: "The rats were huge. They were so big they would eat a wounded man if he couldn't defend himself." These rats became very bold and would attempt to take food from the pockets of sleeping men. Two or three rats would always be found on a dead body. They usually went for the eyes first and then they burrowed their way right into the corpse."

Source A

The diagram below shows the supplies an average British soldier would be expected to carry.



Source E

Rats bred by the tens of thousands and lived on the fat of the land. When we were sleeping in funk holes the things ran over us, played about, copulated and fouled our scraps of food, their young squeaking incessantly. There was no proper system of waste disposal in trench life. Empty tins of all kinds were flung away over the top on both sides of the trench. Millions of tins were thus available for all the rats in France and Belgium in hundreds of miles of trenches. During brief moments of quiet at night, one could hear a continuous rattle of tins moving against each other. The rats were turning them over. What happened to the rats under heavy shell-fire was a mystery, but their powers of survival kept pace with each new weapon, including poison gas."

George Coppard, *With A Machine Gun to Cambrai* (1969)

Source G

"If you have never had trench foot describes to you, I will explain. Your feet swell to two or three times their normal size and go completely dead. You could stick a bayonet into them and not feel a thing. If you are lucky enough not to lose your feet and the swelling begins to go down, it is then that the indescribable agony begins. I have heard men cry and scream with the pain and many have had to have their feet and legs amputated."