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The myth of trench warfare

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Millions of soldiers died on the Western Front in World War One. The horrific stories and images from the frontline all reinforce the idea that fighting in the trenches was one long bloodbath. But statistics tell a different story. There were certainly days of great violence during four years of war – such as the first day of the Battle of the Somme. But nearly 9 out of every 10 soldiers in the British Army, who went into the trenches, survived.

The horrific death toll paints a picture of trench fighting as a four year long bloodbath. But the facts and figures tell a very different story. There were terrible days of grim violence when thousands of lives were lost, and half of all British soldiers on the Western Front sustained some kind of injury. But nearly 9 out of 10 British 'Tommies' survived the trenches.

How was this possible, considering that over 5 million British soldiers served on the Western Front? And when they weren't involved in an attack, what was everyday life like for the troops?

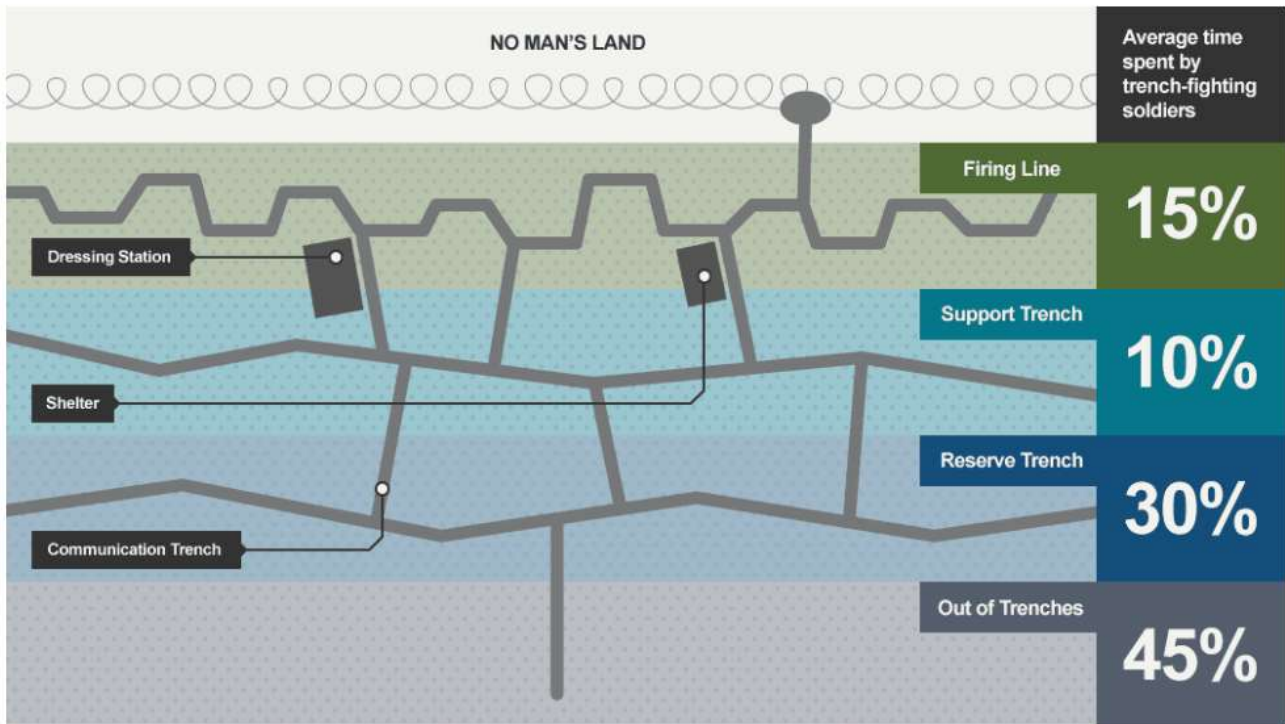
A typical day on the frontline



A typical day for a soldier on the front line (in April). Big attacks were rare, so most days were filled with uneventful routine.

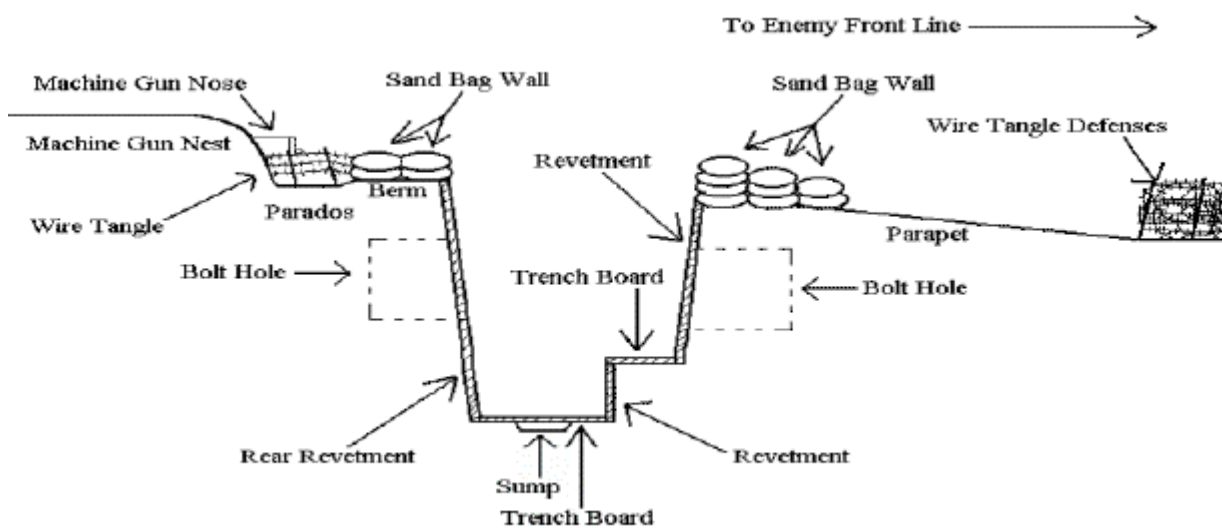
The average day began with 'stand to' before dawn. Gathering their weapons, soldiers took a place on the 'fire step', and as the sun rose, fired towards enemy lines in a daily ritual called the 'morning hate'. After breakfast, the men worked on chores, from sentry duty to trench maintenance, spending their spare time catching up on sleep or writing letters. The 'stand to' was repeated at nightfall before groups were sent into the treacherous and deadly No Man's Land. Others fetched rations, went on sentry duty, or left the firing line altogether. In all, most battalions rarely spent more than five days a month in the line of fire. So where were they most of the time?

How often were soldiers in the firing line?



This aerial view of a typical trench system shows how little time British soldiers spent in the firing line.

To keep pace with the demands of the war and help sustain morale, the British Army often rotated its soldiers around the trenches. One soldier, Charles Carrington of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment's 1/5th Territorial Battalion, worked out that his section of the Front could be held by just 10% of his platoon's troops. So the bulk of soldier's time was divided between a range of specialist areas behind the front line, all of which was made safer by the ingenious design of the trench system itself.



How the trenches kept men safe

Dressing stations and a trench rota helped aid a soldier's survival

There were many parts of the trench system that helped a soldier survive.

Dressing Stations

Provided immediate medical treatment to the seriously injured, who were then moved back behind the lines. On the Western Front, more than 92% of the wounded men who were evacuated to British medical units, survived.

Shelters

Thousands of 'dugouts' built into the trench walls provided protection from bad weather and enemy shell-fire.

Firing Trench

This 7 foot deep ditch at the front of the system provided cover for the most exposed troops. Dug in clever 'zigzag' sections to minimise damage, only a small area would be affected if it was attacked by enemy forces or hit by a shell.

Support Trench

Dug 200 to 500 yards behind the main firing trench, the support trench was a valuable second line of defence.

Reserve Trench

Further back, several hundred yards behind the support trench, the reserve trenches stored supplies and offered a little more comfort to troops en route to the front.

Communication Trenches

Connecting the entire network, a lattice of communication trenches enabled soldiers to travel quickly; keeping the army, its supplies, its reinforcements – and its casualties – on the move.

But if British soldiers spent only just over half their time in the trenches, where were they the rest of the time?

Life behind the lines

On average, the British Tommy spent almost half his time behind this line of trenches. Those who needed it received medical treatment and training, whilst others enjoyed relaxation and leave.

However, if the system of troop rotation put a soldier in the wrong place at the wrong time, his chances of being killed increased dramatically.

Wrong place, wrong time

After months of rotation, if a soldier's stint at the front coincided with an order to go over the top in a big attack, how might they feel? Second Lieutenant Percy Boswell was put in that position.

The night before his death at the Battle of the Somme in 1916, he wrote a letter home. In it he said:

"I am just writing you a short note which you will receive only if anything has happened to me during the next few days.

I am absolutely certain that I shall get through all right, but in case the unexpected does happen I shall rest content with the knowledge that I have done my duty - and one can't do more. Goodbye and with the best of love to all."

Whether demonstrating Edwardian stiff upper lip or expressing his innermost feelings, his words are full of resolve about the coming battle.

Percy lost his life charging across No Man's Land on 1 July 1916, as one of 20,000 British men who died that day. Almost one hundred years later, the first day on the Somme still shapes our view of the war and what it was like for the men who fought it. Although it doesn't change the terrible scale of the human tragedy, these days of mass loss were the exception in over four years of conflict.

Hundreds of thousands died, and millions more were wounded, some with life-changing injuries. But 88% of Britain's soldiers survived to return home and rejoin their families. It was only chance - a cruel twist of fate - that Percy was not among them.

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<http://www.bbc.co.uk/guides/z3kgjxs#zykgjxs>

