

# Life in the trenches

## Guided Reading

## Source

A

## Source

B

*The average day in the ordinary bit of the trenches was just by the way doing nothing! Except perhaps filling a few sandbags to strengthen a bit of the parapet of the trench. But of course there had to be always somebody on sentry go all the time, on each section of the trench. Apart from that, trench life was extremely dull. You simply slept and wrote letters, except when you were on that sort of duty.*

James Pratt served in the Gordon Highlanders - Interview for IWM

## Source

C

*Rats were common, very common, you didn't dare leave a bit of food about or else there'd be swarms of rats round you. And all the time you didn't attack them, they didn't attack you. But on one occasion where we got a bayonet and stuck one; needless to say we got out of that place quick! There were thousands of rats, must've been thousands, the number I couldn't count them - didn't stop to count 'em! Didn't matter what part of the line you was in, you'd got these rats. One of our men who was asleep, and had his forehead all bitten by them. Oh yes, he had to go into hospital special for it.*

James Harvey - Interview for IWM

*Oh, that's a sore point: rations were very poor. The rations when you went up in the trenches and you couldn't get rations up! You'd try to brew tea and you couldn't, it was always cold and probably the water was all tasted of petrol because it came up in petrol tins - which were never cleaned out properly - and the tea was half petrol and cold. The food, they were supposed to give you some bacon, well you were lucky if you got a piece of bacon it was all cold and greasy. I mean you couldn't get any. If you were out of the line they'd cook some bacon and you could, they'd let you have - you'd get a piece of bread and dip it in, that was that, or you could have a tiny bit of bacon without dipping your bread in, that was all you got. And the cooks, probably if a man was a chartered accountant they'd make him a cook or something like that because it was always square pegs in round holes, you know. They couldn't cook; we used to say they couldn't boil water without spoiling it or something. The food was terrible.*

Harold Mayhall of the Durham Light Infantry - Interview for IWM

1. What were trenches designed to do. According to the story of life in trenches?
2. What problems were common in the trenches? Name at least two of the diseases.
3. What was shell shock, and why did it happen?
4. How did ordinary soldiers feel about the trenches? Provide a quote from source A to support your answer.
5. What problem was common, according to source C?
6. What does Harold Mayhall say in source D about the rations?



The story of life in trenches



Summarise each paragraph in 1 or 2 bullet points.



When Union Army general William Sherman famously said "War is hell," he was referring to war in general, but he could have been describing trench warfare, a military tactic that's been traced to the American Civil War. Trenches—long, deep ditches dug as protective defences—are most often associated with World War I, and the results of trench warfare in that conflict were hellish indeed.

Long, narrow trenches dug into the ground at the front, usually by the soldiers who would occupy them for weeks at a time, were designed to protect World War I troops from machine-gun fire and artillery attack from the air.

Disease and 'shell shock' were common in the trenches. With soldiers fighting in close proximity in the trenches, usually in dirty conditions, infectious diseases such as dysentery, cholera and typhoid fever were common and spread rapidly. Constant exposure to wetness caused trench foot, a painful condition in which dead skin and muscle spread across one or both feet, sometimes requiring amputation. Trench mouth, a type of gum infection, was also problematic and is thought to be associated with the stress of nonstop shelling.

As they were often effectively trapped in the trenches for long periods of time, under nearly constant bombardment, many soldiers suffered from "shell shock," the debilitating mental illness known today as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

### First:

Read through the story of life in trenches. For each paragraph, you need to create a 'title' on one side (one word), and a short summary (two bullet points maximum) on the other – what is each paragraph talking about?.

### Next:

Make sure you have read each of sources A, B, and C – you are going to need them for the final task!

Highlight anything that tells you something new about life in the trenches

### Then:

Answer the questions in the box