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Opening extract from

You Wouldn't Want to be in the Trenches in World War One!

Written by

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You Wouldn't Want to Be in the Trenches in World War One!



A hole you'd rather not be in

Written by
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Introduction

It's August 1914. You are 16-year-old Tommy Atkins, living in London. War has just broken out in Europe. The Allies, led by Britain, France and Russia, are fighting the Central Powers, led by Germany.

You're very proud of your country. Britain is the most the powerful nation in the world, with an enormous global empire. But recently, Germany's grown powerful, too, and is now challenging Britain for the role of top superpower. In Britain, everyone is very enthusiastic about the war and confident of victory. You get swept up in the excitement. Many people optimistically predict a victory by Christmas. Little do they know that because of new weapons and tactics the conflict will drag on for four years and will be one of the bloodiest, most gruesome wars ever fought.



* Neutral in 1914, but joined the Allies later in the war
** Neutral in 1914, but joined the Central Powers in 1915



Joining up

Even though you're under age, you join the queue at the local recruiting centre and try to enlist with the army. When it's your turn to be interviewed, the recruiting sergeant asks for your age. You tell him and he says 'Clear off, son. You can't join up unless you're 18 and can't fight until you're 19. Come back tomorrow and see if you're the right age.' So you return the next day and give your age as 19. Then you hold up your right hand and swear to fight for king and country. The sergeant winks and hands over your first day's wages. You realise that the army is so desperate for soldiers, it's prepared to bend its own rules.



FIGHTING PHYSIQUE. You can't join up unless you're at least 5 foot 6 inches with a chest size of 35 inches.



YOUR COUNTRY NEEDS YOU. Lord Kitchener's impressive moustache and pointing finger are responsible for recruiting millions.



TAKING THE OATH. Recruits have to swear loyalty to king and country.





Handy hint

If your parents won't let you join up, sign on with a false name. That way they won't be able to track you down.

CAPS AND HELMETS. At the start of the war, soldiers wore peaked caps made of cloth. But the alarming number of deaths from head wounds led the authorities to issue Allied soldiers with steel helmets from 1915. German troops had to wait until 1916 to get the same protection.

UNIFORM AND EQUIPMENT. British soldiers wear woollen khaki uniforms with belts, packs and pouches made of a strong material called webbing.

Training

You're sent to your regimental depot where you receive your kit, then to a training camp to join your battalion. Here you get your first taste of army discipline and training. You sleep in a tent because there aren't enough huts. There are shortages of kit and equipment, and for the first few days you train in your own shoes and a red jacket dating back to the Boer War. There's also a shortage of officers because all the experienced ones are in France, fighting. Men have been brought out of retirement to train recruits. One gives out instructions while sitting in a Bath chair.







NEW SKILLS. You're given training in physical fitness, how to march, first aid and how to defend yourself against a gas attack.

You're also taught basic field skills, like how to handle your weapons safely, fire a gun, throw a grenade and fight with a bayonet.



TO FRANCE. After just a few weeks' training, you're sent to a camp in northern France. You see the wounded returning from the front.









The trenches

You go 'up the line' to the trenches. The trench at the front is the 'fire trench' and behind that are rows of support and reserve trenches where you can fall back if under attack. Beyond the fire trench is 'No-man's-land', then the German trenches. These lines of opposing trenches stretch all the way from the North Sea to Switzerland. You quickly learn that life in the trenches can be both tough and boring. Every day begins with a 'stand-to' an hour before dawn, when the enemy is most likely to attack: every man has to stand on the trench fire step for an hour or more, rifle loaded, bayonet fixed.



GERMAN TRENCHES (left) are the best: deep and lined with concrete, with dug-outs 15 m below ground, safe from shell fire.



BORING DAYS. When not on sentry duty or digging, soldiers retire to their dug-outs. They fill their idle moments writing letters, playing cards or singing songs.

STAND-TO. Tommies dread this daily routine. They call it 'Morning Hate'.

BUSY NIGHTS. Trenches are often busiest at night, when soldiers can't be spotted by the enemy. Trenches are repaired and teams sent out into no-man's-land to collect the dead and wounded.

Handy hint

When on night duty, develop a sign language to communicate with your comrades.

