



How did 12 million letters reach WW1 soldiers each week?

Video transcript – Why letters were censored

With more and more letters being sent to and from the front line, the British Army became increasingly worried about the messages they contained. It was this worry that led to a huge censorship operation.

At the start of the First World War, there was only one person involved in censorship. By November 1918, 5,000 people were involved in that job.

In their letters home the soldiers were forbidden from saying where they were, from talking about their general condition. Suspected enemy movements, action plans, indeed, even a comment as simple as “Three of my friends have died” wouldn’t have made it past the censor.

So why did the army go to such lengths? They claimed this sort of censorship would keep vital information out of the enemy’s hands. But in reality the powers that be were more concerned that any bad news would damage morale on the home front.

The army believed that if the public understood the true nature of the battlefield, support for the war would simply collapse.

Any letters that contained forbidden information were abruptly censored. Banned phrases were scribbled out with pencil or coloured pen. Whole chunks of the letter were simply torn away.

The task of checking letters home fell to the junior officers at the front. Many of them got to know their own soldiers through their letters, discovering their hopes and dreams and fears.

The letters were often so deeply personal that some junior officers refused to read them – though of course someone else would have to. And once they reached Britain the letters were re-opened and read again, before finally being delivered to the expectant families.