



## HOW DID SO MANY SOLDIERS SURVIVE THE TRENCHES?

### Video transcript - Dan Snow reads the final letter of Second Lieutenant Percy Boswell

Percy Boswell's battalion was moved up to the trenches on the 29<sup>th</sup> of June 1916. The night before going over the top, Percy wrote a letter home.

In it, he says:

"I am absolutely certain that I shall get through alright 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."

These are not the words of a man who sees being sent to the frontline as a death sentence. He obviously expects to survive – he expects it to be another day of regular soldiering – and if the worst does happen he's obviously prepared to accept his fate willingly.

What comes through is a stiff upper lip attitude – trying to make his family feel better – but also a determination to do his duty. That is the spirit that made men obey their orders without question, even when they were unlucky enough to go into the frontline, just before a big push

It's a far cry from the familiar story of men trapped forever in a bloodbath. But, if the system did put them in the wrong place at the wrong time, then their chances of being killed were significantly increased.

Percy gave his life charging across no man's land at the Battle of the Somme – He became one of the tens of thousands who died on that single day.

It was a terrible day but we should think of these massacres as more the exception than the rule in over fifteen hundred days of war.

The trench system was designed to protect men from the viciousness of open fighting. Had trenches not been as effective, the death toll would have been much higher.

Of course we should remember those who died in the big attacks. But we should also remember the eighty-eight per cent of British soldiers who survived.

Men who lived on with their memories of the trenches, both good and bad.

IMAGE COURTESY OF IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM