



HOW DID SO MANY SOLDIERS SURVIVE THE TRENCHES?

Video transcript - Dan Snow discusses the rotation and routine that filled the life of a typical soldier

Trenches were not simply a series of muddy ditches criss-crossing North-West Europe. They were a complex system designed to protect soldiers from some of the dangers they would have faced if they were facing up in the open. They provided cover and they also allowed soldiers to spend less time in the firing line.

Typically, the British soldier would spend only around fifteen per cent of his time in the front line and forty per cent in reserve or support trenches further back.

So on average, for forty-five per cent of the time, the British Tommy found himself out of the trenches altogether – behind the line, in relative safety.

And Percy Boswell was no different.

In the month before the Battle of the Somme, Percy's unit were hunkered down in billets and bivouacs – in camps far behind the battle line.

Percy's unit took part in marches, working parties and training lectures. They even held a medal ceremony and parade just one week before moving to the trenches.

This experience wasn't unusual. During their time behind the line, soldiers would receive weapons training and medical treatment. Others might enjoy entertainment and relaxation – a welcome morale boost after their spell in the trenches.

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.

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