BBC Learning

Commissioning Briefing
27 November 2013

BBC

Education is at the heart of the BBC's public service mission

"Inform, Educate and Entertain"

The Learning department leads the BBC's education strategy

To inspire a life full of learning for all audiences

BBC Learning works in three broad areas…

We commission programmes with an educational aim

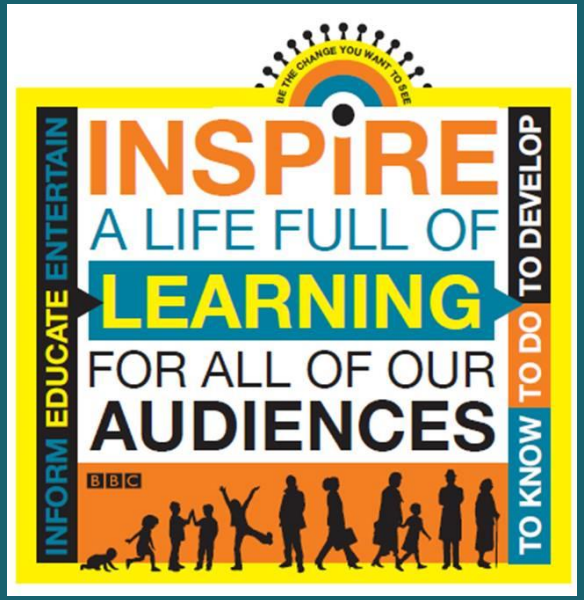
We use programmes to run campaigns to create educational experiences

We produce online materials for learners, teachers and mainstream audiences

Bitesize

BBC FOOD

Skillswise



Abigail Appleton

Head of Commissioning

BBC Learning Zone

BBC Learning Zone

Priorities

- Primary Maths
- Primary Design and Technology
- Key Stage 3 Physics (30') – Waves
- Key Stage 4 Chemistry (60') – Industrial Processes

Learning Fund

Learning Fund

Opportunities

Daytime - series that would inspire audiences through stories of lifelong learning

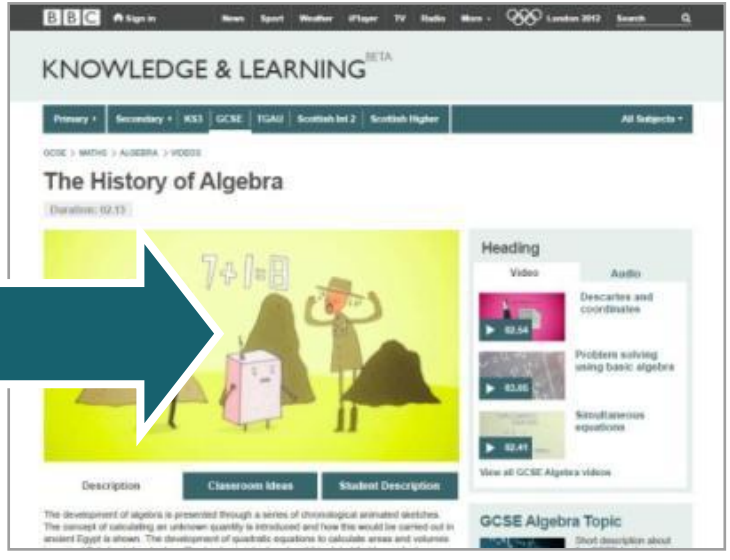
BBC Three - Science, Literacy, Coding and Digital creativity

CBBC - Food

Radio - Coding and Digital creativity

The Knowledge & Learning Product

Our K&L vision is to create a unified product and consistent audience experience



How did so many soldiers survive the trenches?

1

The myth of trench warfare

Millions of soldiers died on the Western Front in World War One. The horrific stories and images from the frontline all reinforce the idea that fighting in the trenches was one long bloodbath. But statistics tell a different story. There were certainly days of great violence during four years of war – such as the first day of the Battle of the Somme. But nearly 9 out of every 10 soldiers in the British Army, who went into the trenches, survived.

Despite their reputation today, the trenches themselves were relatively safe, designed to protect soldiers from the dangers of open fighting. The real danger came from going over the top in a big attack. And attacks like the Battle of the Somme were surprisingly rare. So what was the experience of frontline life really like?

Presented by
Dan Snow

2

A typical day on the frontline

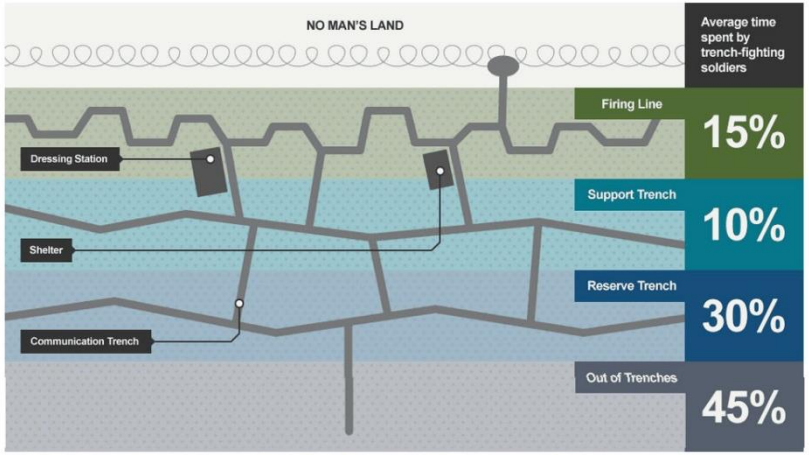
Images courtesy of Mary Evans Picture Library

A typical day for a soldier on the front line (in April). Big attacks were rare, so most days were filled with uneventful routine.

A typical day began with 'stand to' before dawn. Soldiers gathered weapons and took a place on the 'fire step'; as the sun rose they fired aimlessly towards the enemy line. This ritual, known as the 'morning hate', was followed by breakfast. The men were then assigned chores, often restricted to trench maintenance and sentry duty. Spare time might be spent sleeping or writing letters. At dusk, 'stand to' was repeated. Then, under cover of darkness, groups would be sent into No Man's Land. Others would fetch rations, go on sentry duty, or leave the firing line. It was unusual to find any battalion spending more than 5 days a month in the firing line. So where else did they spend their time?

3

How often were soldiers in the firing line?



This aerial view of a typical trench system shows how little time British soldiers spent in the firing line.

To adapt to the changing demands of war and to help boost morale, the British Army frequently moved soldiers around. One soldier, Charles Carrington, estimated that his section of the front could be held by just 10% of a platoon's manpower. As a result, an individual soldier's time was regularly divided between different areas – the trench system itself making all this movement relatively safe.

4

How the trenches kept men safe

There were many parts of the trench system that helped a soldier survive.

Dressing Stations

These provided immediate medical treatment for seriously injured soldiers. On the Western Front, more than 92% of the wounded men who received treatment in forward dressing stations and were moved behind the lines, survived.

Shelters

These 'dugouts' provided some protection from bad weather and enemy shell-fire.

Firing Trench

This deep ditch at the front of the trench system provided soldiers with some cover. It was dug in 'zigzag' sections which meant only a small area was affected if the line was attacked or hit by a well-aimed shell.

Support Trench

This was dug 200-500 yards behind the firing trench. It allowed soldiers to provide a second line of defence.

Reserve Trench

This was dug several hundred yards behind the support trench. It provided greater levels of comfort and was used to house additional supplies.

Communication Trenches

These connected the whole system together. They allowed soldiers to travel around quickly and ensured supplies could be brought up to the front and casualties could be moved back.

But if soldiers spent only 55% of their time in the trenches – where were they the rest of the time?

Top - Patient at a Red Cross dressing station; Bottom - Two British soldiers outside their dugout. Photos courtesy of Mary Evans Picture Library.

5

Life behind the lines

On average, the British Tommy spent almost half his time behind this line of trenches. Those who needed it received medical treatment and training, whilst others enjoyed relaxation and leave.

Dan Snow asks: what took soldiers like Percy Boswell away from the trenches?

Transcript (PDF 189 Kb)

If soldiers spent 55% of their time in the trench system, where were they the rest of the time? 20% of time was spent resting and 25% was spent engaged in activities like training, travel and leave. But if the system of rotation conspired to put you in the wrong place at the wrong time, your chance of being killed increased dramatically.

6

Wrong place, wrong time?

After months of rotation, if a soldiers' stint at the front coincided with an order to go over the top in a big attack, how might they feel? Second Lieutenant Percy Boswell was put in that position. The night before charging to his death at the Battle of the Somme, he wrote a letter home. In it he said –

"I am just writing you a short note which you will receive only if anything has happened to me during the next few days.

I am absolutely certain that I shall get through all right, 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. Goodbye and with the best of love to all."

Whether he was putting a brave face on for the benefit of his family or truly expressing how he felt, Percy's words are filled with a real sense of resolution about what's to come.

Percy lost his life charging across No Man's Land. He was one of the 20,000 that died that day; a day that continues to dominate our view of what World War One was like. It doesn't change the tragedy of these catastrophes, but it's important to remember that these days of mass loss were the exceptions.

Only by exploring the realities of the soldiers' experience can we truly honour the memory of all who fought in the British Army during the war. Hundreds of thousands died, but 88% of soldiers survived. In some ways it was only chance - a twist of fate - that meant Percy was not one of them.

Dan Snow reads the final letter of Second Lieutenant Percy Boswell

Transcript (PDF 193 Kb)

7

Could things have been different?

What if the system had put Percy somewhere else? What if he had been in the place of one of these other soldiers on the 1st July 1916?

Corporal Arthur Cook

Choose ?

1st Somerset Light Infantry

Private Walter Hutchinson

Choose ?

10th Battalion, York and Lancaster Regiment

Bernard Brookes

Choose ?

Signaller for Queen's Westminster Rifles

8

Where next?

History

Was World War One propaganda the birth of spin?

Presented by Neil Oliver

History

A group of veteran Tommies remember life in the trenches

History

The Wipers Times: the funny side of trench life

British Army war diaries at the National Archives

History

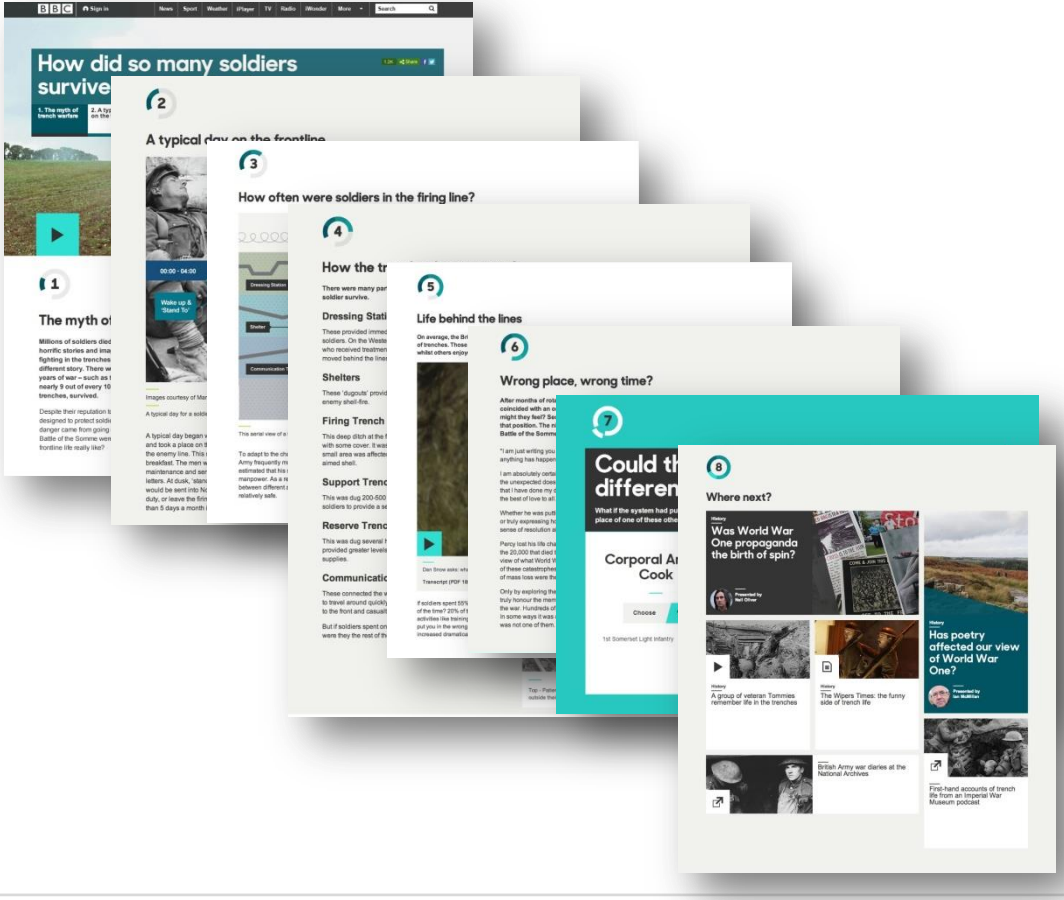
Has poetry affected our view of World War One?

Presented by Ian McMillan

First-hand accounts of trench life from an Imperial War Museum podcast

Current opportunities

- Space interactives
- Magna Carta anniversary




Questions