



## Background

### In the firing line

There is no question that going 'over the top' was utterly horrific. However, it was a relatively small part of the soldier's experience in the Great War. This is one of the factors that help to explain how and why morale and discipline remained strong throughout the war and how soldiers were able to cope with life in the front line.

When they were at the front, they spent a maximum of 2-3 days in the direct firing line at any one time. British commanders worked very hard to organise it so that troops were regularly rotated in the most dangerous areas. A typical soldier would spend a total of about 4-5 days per month in the firing line. Historians today think that the chances of being wounded were about 50:50. About 1 in 12 soldiers were killed.

### Daily life



**Image 1**

**A postcard that a soldier could send to friends or family**  
(Catalogue ref: RAIL 253/516)

For much of the time, the greatest enemy was boredom. Soldiers spent about 60% of their time well away from the front line. Here they had easy access to alcohol and cigarettes. They spent a lot of time in relatively comfortable surroundings. These were usually farmhouses or cottages in villages that had been taken over by the Army. Here they usually had access to good food, hot water and clean uniforms.

While they were out of the front lines, soldiers had a lot of leisure time. Many took correspondence courses. Others organised football matches. There were entire leagues of different units and the officers and men played together as equals.

Another important feature of life in the trenches was loyalty and friendship. Most soldiers felt they were fighting in a just cause and fighting for their country. They were extremely close to their mates – the other men in their unit. The British Army deliberately recruited troops from localities so that they had a common bond. They also organised men into platoons, small units of about 30 men, so that these soldiers lived, worked and fought as a team.

## Links

### **Bairnsfather Cartoons**

<http://www.whatalovelywar.co.uk/Bairnsfather.html>

Here is a small selection of cartoons by the war's most popular cartoonist, along with some interesting analysis of the cartoons.