

World War One

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Teachers' Notes

Theme: Life as a soldier

Subject area: Daily life in the trenches

Rationale

In this activity students will use primary source material to gain an insight into daily life in the trenches and an appreciation of the kinds of difficulties that the soldiers faced.

Content

Historical sources:

- Photograph - [British soldier washing in a shell crater](#)
- Photograph – [An Alpine barber in the trenches of Cerna](#)
- Book - [Cook book for the trenches](#)
- Book with photographs - [German book of First World War photographs](#)
- Photograph - [Highlanders and Drogas in a trench](#)
- Photograph - [Indian infantry digging trenches](#)
- Photograph - [Italian priest giving communion English Soldiers](#)
- Book - [Diggers Dialects: slang phrases used by Australian soldiers](#)
- Manuscript diary - [Extracts from the diary of Gerard Roland Garvin after detachment to Divisional Staff from July 1916](#)
- Photograph – [An officer's dugout](#)

Recommended reading (short article):

[Daily Life of Soldiers](#) by Paul Cornish

Key questions

- What was the reality of daily life in the trenches?
- What difficulties did soldiers face in the trenches?
- Was life the same for all?

Activities

- 1.) Use [British soldier washing in a shell crater](#) and [An Alpine barber in the trenches of Cerna](#) trench as the starting point. Deconstruct the images. What is going on? What are these people doing? What else might be considered an aspect of normal daily life? Ask students to briefly compare their normal daily lives. Brainstorm ideas. What are the differences between normal daily life then and now?
- 2.) Ask students to work in pairs or groups. Ask them to use all of the sources which show trench life across different nationalities. Ask them to identify what aspect of life each

source represents and, secondly, to identify the difficulties that each source reveals. This is laid out for reference in the table below but this is not an exhaustive list.

<u>Source</u>	<u>Aspect of Daily Life</u>	<u>Difficulties</u>
British soldier washing in a shell crater	Washing, shaving	Soldiers were expected to keep themselves and their equipment clean. Lack of clean water and surrounding mud means that soldiers' efforts to remain clean are in vain and could lead to disease. No mirror with a razor can lead to injury.
An Alpine barber in the trenches of Cerna	Hair cutting, shaving	May not be a trained barber. Lice. No proper facilities.
Cook book for the trenches	Cooking, eating	Lack of facilities. Text translation label reveals men lacked knowledge about how to cook.
German book of First World War photographs	Playing cards	Little to do to occupy time when waiting for/to attack or for orders. Little space to pass leisure time in.
Highlanders and Drogas in a trench	Resting	Although resting, constant threat of attack that they needed to be ready for. No space to lie down. No shelter from the noise of shells or the weather.
Indian infantry digging trenches	Manual work	Hard and tiring work. Threat of attack.
Italian priest giving communion English Soldiers	Observing religious beliefs and commitments	No church building. Constant threat of death or injury and sheer scale of war made some question beliefs. Facility for priest or religious leader may not have been open for all religions or all areas on a regular basis. This kind of open communion was likely to have taken place in the reserve trenches rather than at the front line

		trench.
Diggers Dialects: slang phrases used by Australian soldiers	Communication, getting drunk, seeing women	Getting drunk was a coping mechanism and alcohol was readily supplied for this purpose. Women were not with the men in the trenches meaning that soldiers missed their loved ones and had to bear the thought of possibly not seeing them again. Some soldiers visited prostitutes during rest times which led to a rise in cases of poor sexual health. The 'Diggers Dialect Dictionary' reveals that people of different rank and status and who spoke various languages were living closely together. As a result, communication was not always easy.
Extracts from the diary of Gerard Roland Garvin after detachment to Divisional Staff from July 1916	Typical days recorded	Long days, little to do, boredom. Other times, pockets of intense activity related to combat. Weather a constant problem, particularly rain.

- 3.) Was life the same for all soldiers in the trenches? Introduce students to the [An officer's dugout](#) photo. What is going on? Which difficulties might be made easier for him? Which difficulties would be the same for him?
- 4.) The information gleaned from the sources could be used by students in a number of ways. One example might be that students use the outcomes of their interrogation of the evidence to create a dramatization portraying the realities of life in the trenches. They could also create written pieces in the manner of scoop news reports to reveal the realities that went unreported. They may also like to create survival guides or games for fellow soldiers or write their own diary extracts or poems. This will need set up and structuring according to the choice of activity.

Extension activities

- Students could gain an insight into recruitment for the war by comparing the reality of the conditions in the trenches with the way in which recruitment posters, from various countries, presented the war effort.