

Journal #6



British soldiers on a fatigue, take up wire for a night working party to reinforce trench defenses.

Great War historian, Jay Winter, said “That it was in no Great Power’s interest to go to war in 1914. Yet they all did. Maybe it was honor.” Why was this so?

Letter

Captain Rowland Fielding to his wife, 14 December 1916.

I can never express in writing what I feel about the men in the trenches and nobody who has not seen them can ever understand. According to the present routine, we stay in the front line eight days and nights, then go out for the same period. Each company spends four days and four nights in the fire-trench before being relieved. The men are practically without rest. They are wet through much of the time. They are shelled and trench-mortared. They may not be hit, but they are kept in a perpetual state of unrest and strain. They work all night and every night, and a good part of each day, digging and filling sandbags, and repairing the breeches in the breastworks, that is when they are not on sentry. The temperature is icy. They have not even a blanket. The last two days it has been snowing. They cannot move more than a few feet from their posts. Therefore, except when they are actually digging, they cannot keep themselves warm by exercise and when they try to sleep they freeze. At present they are getting a tablespoon of rum to console them, once in three days.

1. How long are the men in the actual fire-trench? Why do you suppose it is not more?
2. What is Captain Fielding's impression of his men?
3. Describe what the men are doing when not fighting.

Vocabulary

Boche: A German soldier. From French *tete de boche*, obstinate person.

Fatigues: A soldier's non-military duties, usually repairing and constructing trenches, placing barbed-wire, etc.

Red Eye: Rum

Silent Percy: Artillery piece firing at such long range that it could not be heard.

Stand-to: State of alert in the trenches at dawn or dusk when enemy attack was most likely.