

# Life on the Western Front



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# Life on the Western Front

What will you find out in this book?

## 1. Western Front

Find out about the Western Front.

Discover what life was like fighting on the Western Front.

Explore photographs, objects and pictures from the collections of National Museum Wales and National Library Wales.

## 2. Off - Duty

Discover what soldiers did in their spare time.

Explore objects that Welsh soldiers used 100 years ago.

## 3. Remembrance

Find out how soldiers were remembered

Discover the stories of Welsh soldiers who lost their lives on the Western Front



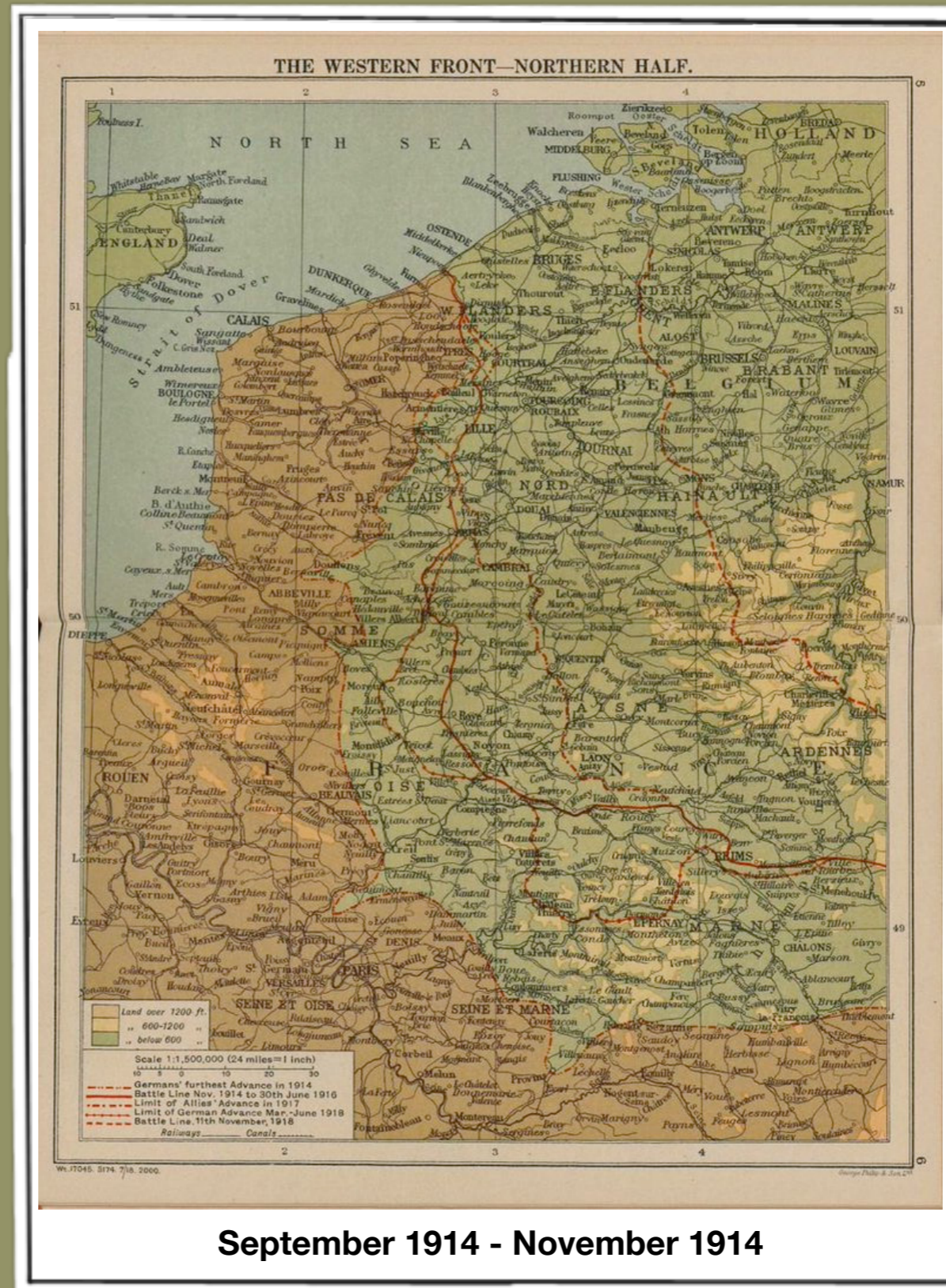
# The Western Front

The Western Front was the battle line where the armies of the Allies and the Central Powers met.

Britain was one of the **Allies** and Germany was one of the **Central Powers**.

The Western Front was 440 miles long with parts in Belgium, France and Germany.

The line moved during the War as battles were won and lost on each side. Sometimes the line did not move for a long amount of time even if there were battles. This was a 'stale-mate' as the two sides could not move each other.



Allies  
Central Powers

THE WESTERN FRONT—NORTHERN HALF.



November 1914 - June 1916

THE WESTERN FRONT—NORTHERN HALF.



July 1917 - November 1917

THE WESTERN FRONT—NORTHERN HALF.



March 1918 - June 1918

THE WESTERN FRONT—NORTHERN HALF.



11 November 1918. Armistice Day

# The Frontline

The frontline is the line where soldiers are closest to the enemy side. On the Western Front soldiers were usually in trenches. Trenches were open tunnels dug into the ground to allow soldiers to travel safely on the frontline.



Inside the trenches soldiers made underground rooms called dugouts.

**Soldiers had to march many miles to get to the frontline. Sometimes they marched all through the night!**



# Welsh Soldiers on the Western Front

## Army Structure

Division

Biggest

Brigade

Regiment

Battalion

Company

Platoon

Smallest



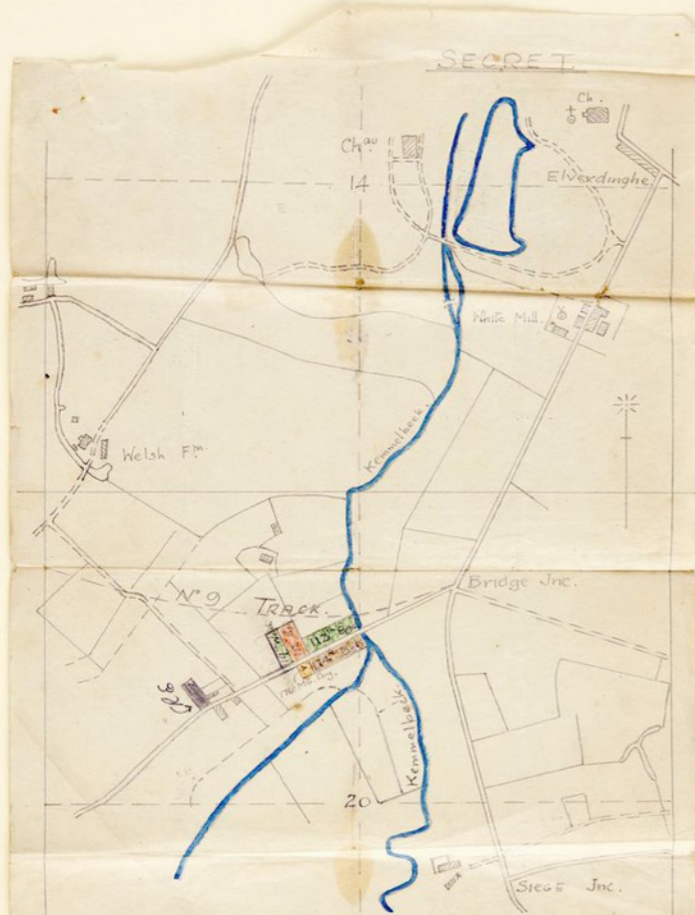
There were 4 Welsh regiments on the Western Front:

- Royal Welsh Fusiliers
- Welsh Regiment
- South Wales Borderers
- Monmouthshire Regiment

This Welsh Dragon was the 38th Welsh Division's badge. Thousands of Welsh soldiers on the Western Front were part of the 38th Welsh Division. This Division was made up of Battalion's from the Royal Welsh Fusiliers, Welsh Regiment and South Wales Borderers. Not all Welsh soldiers were in this Division.

# Fighting on the Frontline

When the army planned an attack they had to make sure their plans were kept **SECRET** to stop the enemy finding out. Sometimes even the soldiers did not know the plan before they attacked.



**SECRET** battle plans used by 38th Welsh Division



Many men lost their lives in battles on the Western Front. Sometimes thousands of soldiers were killed or injured in just one day of fighting.

Hundreds of Welsh soldiers died in a battle at Mametz Wood in France in 1916. Almost 4000 soldiers died in this battle. This painting shows how that battle may have looked. It was painted by Christopher Williams who was born in Maesteg.





# Over the Top

When soldiers went 'over the top' they climbed out of their trenches and charged. Officers would blow their whistles to tell their soldiers it was time to attack. **Imagine how it felt to be a soldier waiting to hear the whistle.**

# Life in the Trenches

Life was very difficult in the trenches. The sound of guns firing and bombs exploding could last all day and night. A gun shell hitting the trench was not the only danger.

Here is just a small list of the horrible problems soldiers had to face in the trenches:

- Muddy water up to their waist
- Wearing wet and dirty clothes for days
- Rats climbing all over the trenches and even on soldiers
- Fleas and lice in their clothes and hair
- No sleep for days
- Trench Foot



Drawing of British soldier in a trench

**Some soldiers believed the Germans were draining water out of their trenches and into the British trenches to make life even harder!**

One of the duties in the trench was sentry duty. Soldiers had to stand guard and make sure no enemy soldiers attacked. This happened day and night even if the soldier had not slept. It lasted hours and could be a scary and tiring job. If soldiers fell asleep on sentry duty they would be punished.



**Normal tasks like shaving or washing became special treats for soldiers. Sometimes they could be in the same dirty clothes for days or even weeks!**

# Equipment

Soldier's had lots of equipment they had to carry. It would be very heavy to carry all of their equipment especially on marches.

**All of a soldier's equipment together weighed up to 40 KG. That's as much as a baby**



German bayonet taken by a Welsh soldier as a souvenir. Bayonets were added to the front of a rifle to use like a spear.



Binoculars used by a Welsh officer called Lieutenant Thomas McLachlan from Cardiff

A British soldier's equipment included:

- Uniform
- Boots
- Helmet
- Rifle and Bayonet
- Gas Mask
- Shovel
- Rucksack
- Belt with bullet

**After winning a battle British soldiers sometimes took objects from German soldiers. They could use these or keep them as a souvenir to remind them of their time in the army.**



Helmet

Rifle

Tunic

Bullet  
Pouches

Bayonet

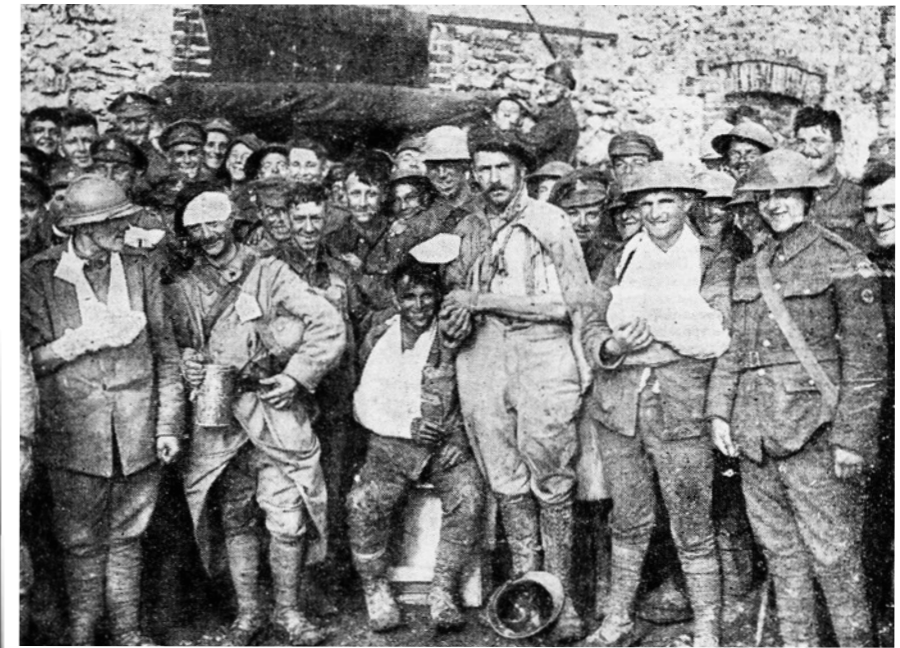
Puttees

# Health

Thousands of soldiers were injured fighting on the frontline. Soldiers called medics looked after injured soldiers on the battlefield. Injured soldiers went to hospitals behind the frontline. Many women from Britain went to the Western Front to work as nurses and look after injured soldiers.

Living in the trenches could make soldiers ill. Standing in water for a long time gave soldiers **'trench foot'**. The army told soldiers to check each others feet. A soldier that checked your feet was your **'trench foot buddy'**.

**Trench foot made soldiers feet feel like they were on fire!**



Injured British, French and Italian soldiers



All soldiers had a pack of bandages sewn into their jacket

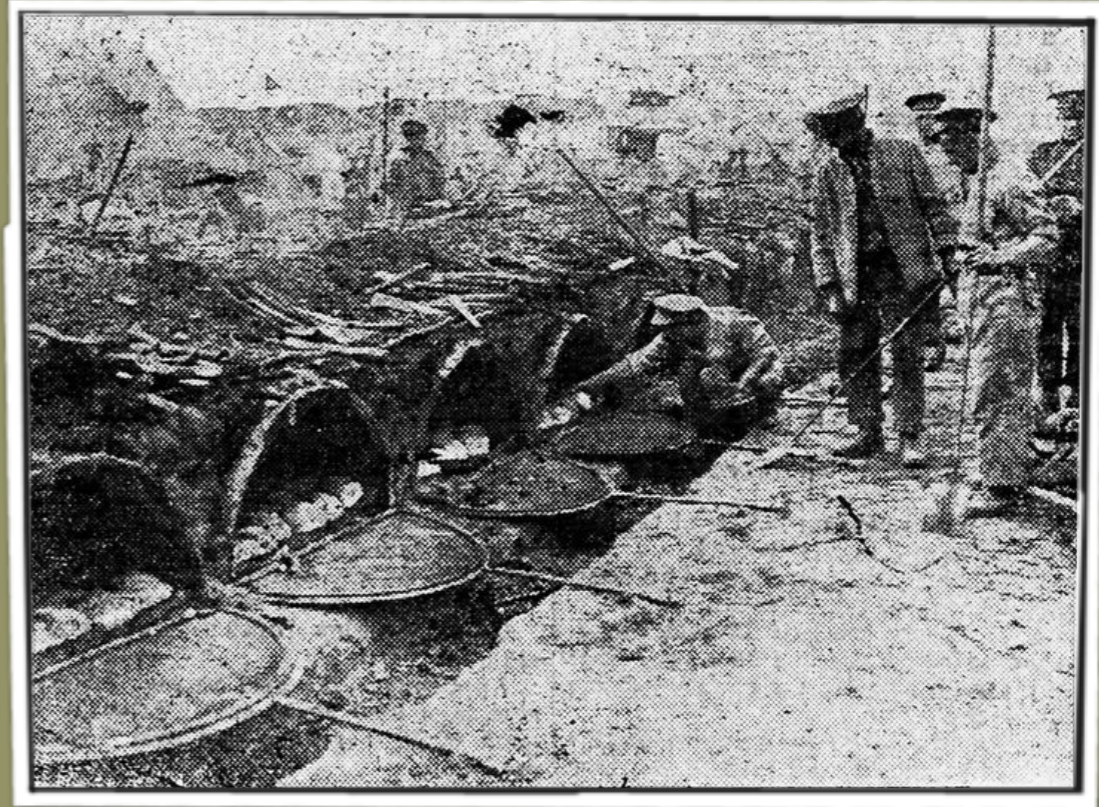
# Food in the trenches

The army gave food to soldiers in rations so they only had the amount they were given. The main rations were tins of 'bully beef' and biscuits. 'Bully beef' was the name for corned beef. It was difficult to cook food in the trenches so most meals were cold. Soldiers could get bored of eating the same thing everyday.

Tea was sometimes carried to the trenches in petrol cans. The tea would often be cold and taste of petrol!



Soldiers thought their biscuits were like dog biscuits as they were so hard. This biscuit was never eaten and is 100 years old!



At a safe distance from the frontline the army built **field ovens** for bakers to make bread for the soldiers.

# Animals and the Army

The army used many animals on the frontline. Horses carried soldiers and pulled carts. Pigeons delivered messages. Dogs delivered messages, sniffed out bombs and even carried packages through the trenches.

Sometimes dogs were only there to keep the soldiers company as a mascot. Away from the frontline Welsh regiments used the 'Goat Major' as a mascot. You may have seen the 'Goat Major' at a Welsh rugby game today.





# Off-Duty

Soldiers on the frontline were not always on duty. Being off-duty in the trenches could be very boring so soldiers did things to entertain themselves. This included making art, reading, playing music and playing games.



Soldiers would carve drawings into objects such as gun shells. This is known as trench art.



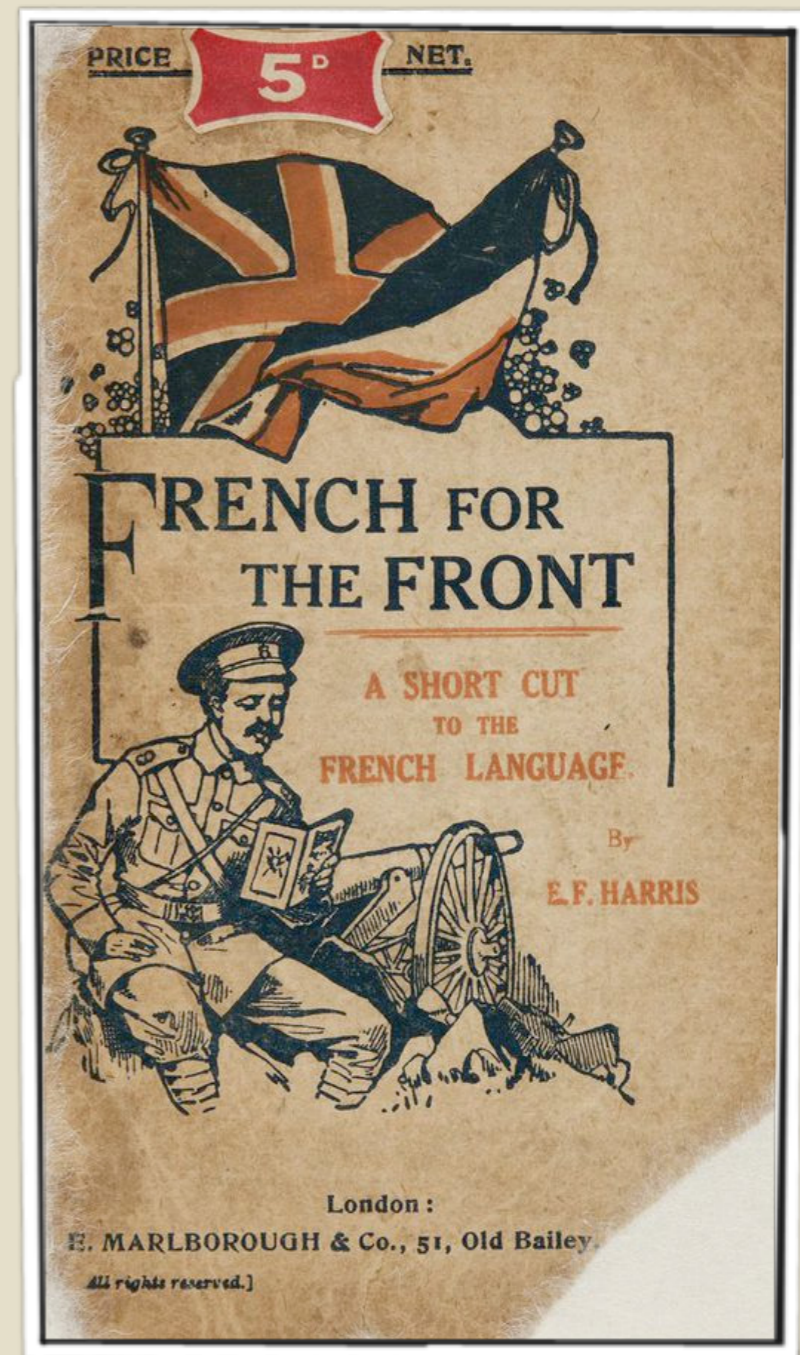
British soldiers off-duty in the trenches. The soldier on the left is playing a mouth organ

**One game soldiers played was to put cheese on the bayonet at the end of their gun. Wait for a rat to eat the cheese. Then SHOOT the rat!**

The soldiers would get time to rest away from the trenches in **billets**. These were buildings used for soldiers to stay in away from the frontline. Billets could be a local person's house, barn or even shed. Away from the frontline the soldiers would have the chance to eat bigger cooked meals.



Soldiers off-duty behind the trenches



It was important for soldiers to be able to speak French. Speaking French meant they could speak to local people and French soldiers. Most British soldiers would not have spoken French so the army gave them books with phrases to help them.

# Writing Home



To message their family soldiers had to write letters or postcards. These could take a very long time to arrive back home.

Postcards had different images and messages on the front. On the back they only had a small amount of space to write a message. Sometimes postcards had messages printed on them so soldiers could just write their name.

**Why do you think some soldiers only wrote their**



Postcard sent by a Welsh Soldier from the Western Front

If soldiers had more time to write home they could write letters. Writing a letter gave soldiers the chance to write more information. The army would draw black lines through some words to hide **SECRET** information.

May 29<sup>th</sup> 1916.  
Somewhere in France  
Dear Mr Griffiths.  
Am taking  
the greatest pleasure to write  
these few lines to you as  
promised, trusting that they  
will find you and your family  
in the very best of health,  
as they leave me at present.  
The Weather is lovely out here  
now. Wel Mr Griffiths I havent  
been in the firing line yet, but  
we are not very far off all the  
same, ~~\_\_\_\_\_~~  
every day, ~~\_\_\_\_\_~~  
~~\_\_\_\_\_~~ Am sleeping in an  
old barn ~~so~~ of a French

Letter sent home to Merthyr from David Davies fighting on the Western Front. Page 1

Farm - house at present along  
with eight others, the hens, and  
the pigs are your daily visitors.  
they tramped all over us one  
night, they soon woke us up,  
but we are quite happy all  
the same, we dont expect to  
get everything here like when at  
home. Yr David L. Davies 59911  
99 Siege Battery R. G. A.,  
British E. Force, France.  
Wel Mr Griffiths am glad  
to inform you that we get  
plenty to eat here, so we will  
manage all-right. Wel I  
must now draw to a close  
hoping that this will find  
you safe Good bye.  
Kind regards. Davies. ~~\_\_\_\_\_~~

Page 2

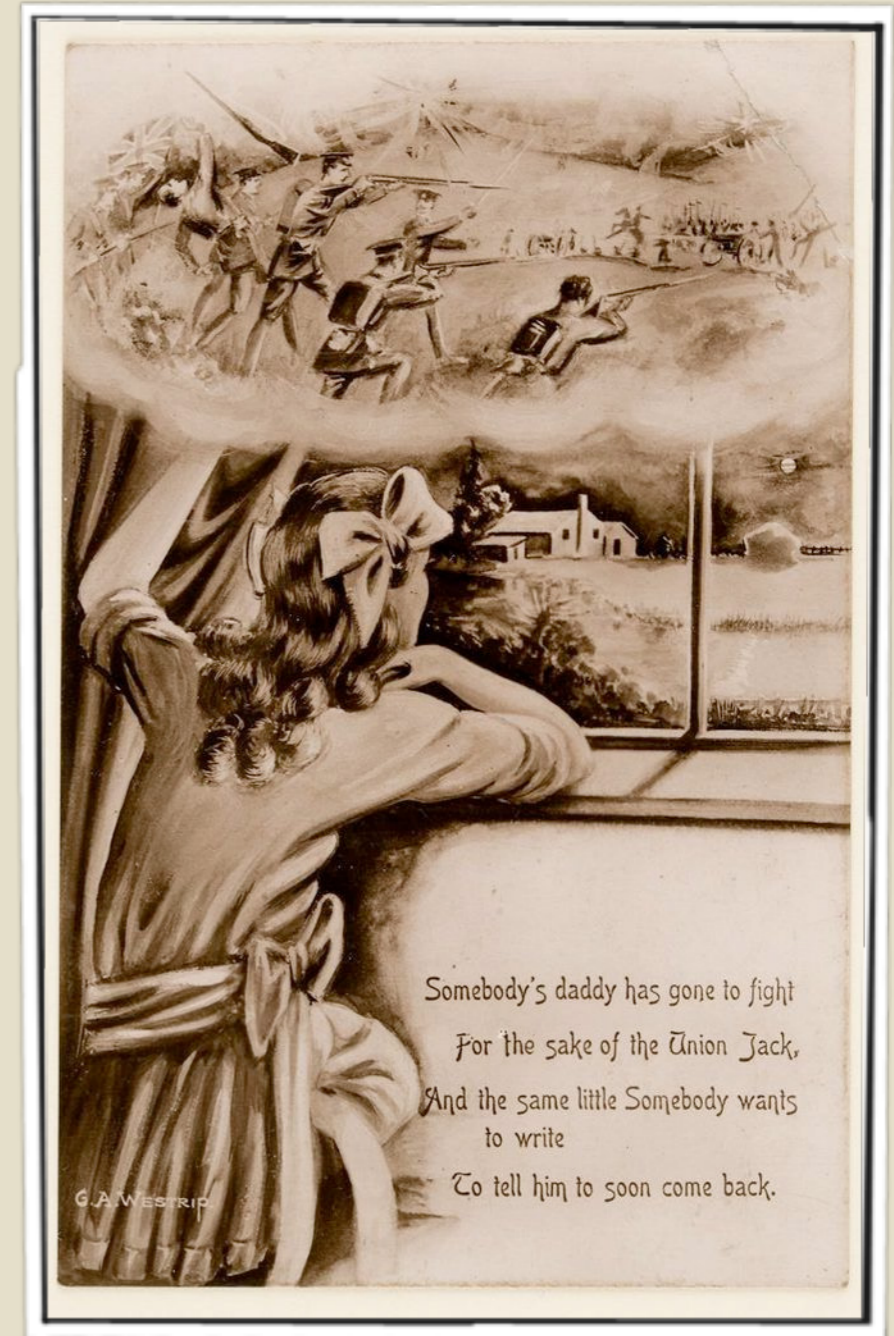
# Presents From Home

The families of soldiers would send presents to the Western Front. Presents could be things such as socks, biscuits, chocolate and tobacco. After a long day in the trench it would have been a nice surprise to receive a present from home.

**Imagine how it felt to eat chocolate after eating the same food for days or putting on new socks and taking off the wet mouldy ones.**



Knitting soldiers new socks would be a good present for a soldier with worn out socks



Somebody's daddy has gone to fight  
For the sake of the Union Jack,  
And the same little Somebody wants  
to write  
To tell him to soon come back.

Soldiers received letters and postcards from home.

# Luck and Loss

Living and fighting on the Western Front was a scary time for many soldiers. Some soldiers wore amulets as lucky charms. They hoped an amulet would bring them luck and protect them from danger.



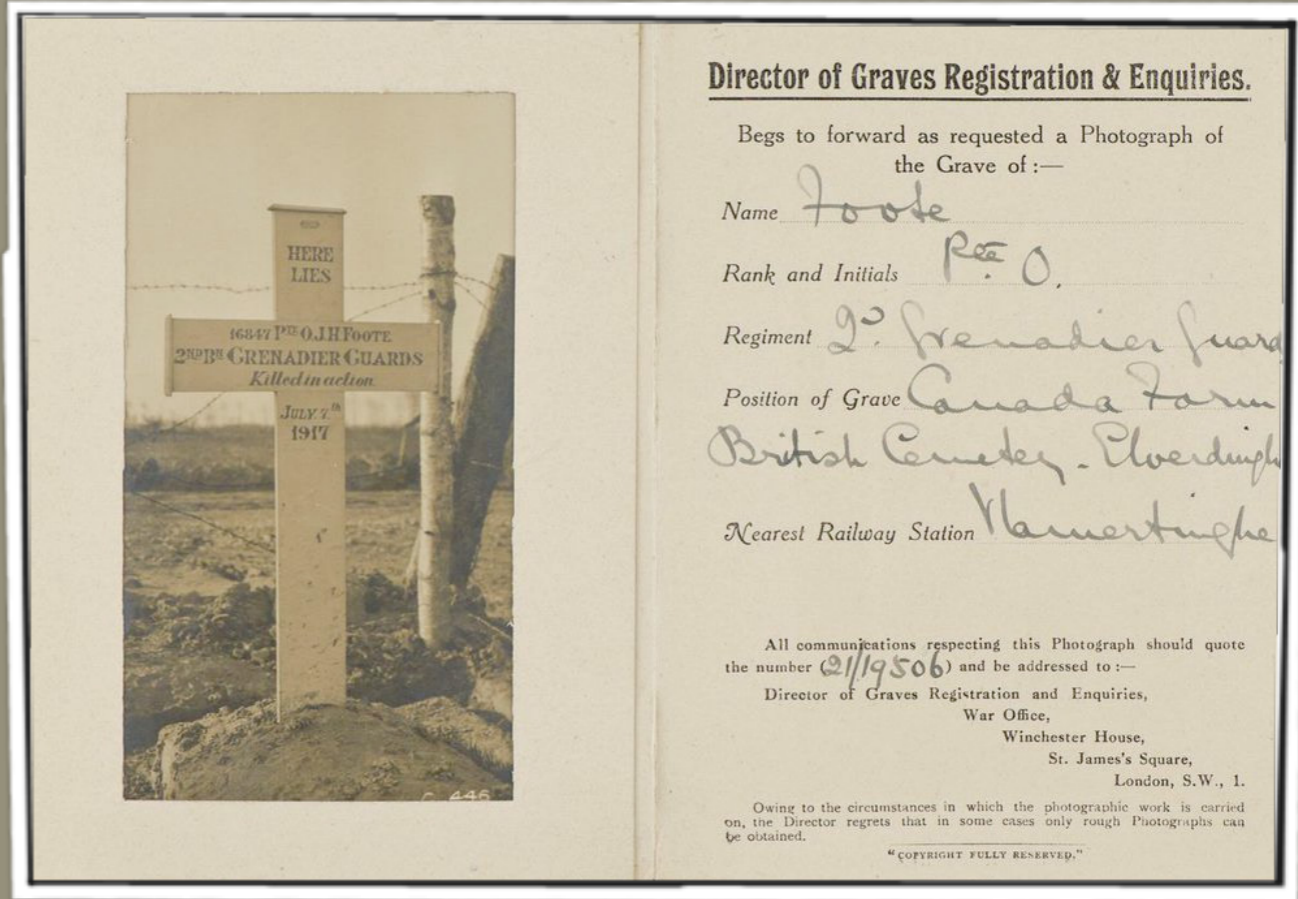
Amulet worn by a soldier to bring him luck



All soldiers wore an identification tag with their name written on. If soldiers died on the battlefield the army could use these to find out who they were. This tag belonged to David John Griffiths from Morriston. He died 21 March 1918. This tag was sent to his family. **Imagine how it felt to receive this in the post.**

The government sent memorial plaques to families of soldiers. The soldiers name would be added to them. These were nicknamed '**Dead Man's Penny**' as they looked like a giant penny. These were also sent to families of women who died working as nurses on the Western Front.

**For many people this would have been a sad reminder of someone they had lost.**



Memorial plaque sent to the family of David John Griffiths



Oscar Foote

Not all soldiers that were killed on the Western Front died on the frontline. A welsh soldier from Penarth called Oscar Foote died when he was off-duty. Oscar had only just arrived at billets after leaving the trenches. A German shell landed near a hut Oscar was in. Sadly Oscar was killed by the explosion.