



## Boy Soldiers & WW I

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### How many underage soldiers volunteered in WW I?

All armies in World War I used under-aged soldiers. While the exact number is not known, it is estimated that Great Britain had as many as 250,000. For Canada the number was much lower, around 20,000.

According to historian Tim Collins, approximately 2,500 of the 20,000 underage soldiers who went to the front died.

### Why did Canadian boys join up?

**For the adventure:** In the early 1900s boys were raised on stories of the British Empire, of war as "the great adventure". Newspapers predicted that the war would only last a few months and that victory was certain. Teenage boys who were bored with life on the farm or with factory work were keen to join in, to take part in this great event.

**Because they could:** At that time Canada did not issue birth certificates. A boy who was eager to enlist could just add a few months or a year when asked his age. Recruitment officers who had quotas to fill did not question recruits closely, particularly if they looked old for their age. Many boys would just go from one office to the next until they were accepted.

Also, things changed as the war progressed. Stories of the horrors of trench warfare made many reluctant to join up. In the early days of the war underage recruits were often refused. However, as enrollments reduced in 1915- 1916, enlistment office were more likely to accept younger applicants.

**To do their bit:** The beginning of the war was filled with patriotic fever. There were posters everywhere, particularly in the cities, asking men to "do their part". To be in the army was to be a man. Teenage boys were proud to put on their khaki uniforms, to prove that they were truly "manly men".

***Because they didn't know what they were getting themselves into:***

Unlike today, people had little access to news about what war was really like. Instead they heard stories of the excitement and how noble it was to serve the British Empire.

One young recruit remembers the cheering and celebrations as they marched the streets. As he said, "Weeping was yet to come."

**What was life for a WW I soldier like?**

"The men and women who served in the First World War endured some of the most brutal forms of warfare ever known. The new technologies available to First World War armies combined with the huge number of men mobilized made the battlefields of 1914 – 18 horrific, deadly and terrifying places."

*British Library*

**The following quotes provide a summary of WW I warfare as provided by the British Library:**

"Soldiers and laborers dug trenches and machine gun placements to protect men from enemy shelling and to allow them to fire back at the enemy without exposing themselves to danger.

Men lived outside for days or weeks on end, with limited shelter from cold, wind, rain and snow in the winter or from the heat and sun in summer. Artillery destroyed the familiar landscape, reducing trees and buildings to desolate rubble and churning up endless mud in some areas. The incredible noise of artillery and machine gun fire, both enemy and friendly, was often incessant...Even in more active parts of the front, battle was rarely continuous and boredom was common among troops, with little of the heroism and excitement many had imagined before the war...

New weapons were introduced during the war, like poison gas in 1915 and tanks in 1916, which made combat more unpredictable."

'Going over the top' was a terrifying experience for most soldiers. Yet it was rare that men disobeyed the order to attack...

**According to the British Library military discipline was very strict:**

"Traditionally, the authorities believed – or hoped – that men would be motivated by loyalty to an idea: patriotism. French and Serbian soldiers were defending their homeland against invasion, while British, German and Austrian soldiers were encouraged to focus on their duty to their King or Emperor. These ideas encouraged men to volunteer for military service and could keep their

spirits high through long spells of front-line service, but once under fire men needed more than ideals to maintain their courage.”

One important explanation for soldiers’ resilience is the idea of the ‘primary group’: men were motivated above all by comradeship as they fought alongside friends and companions. Effective training also helped, making soldiers familiar with the chaos and fear of the battlefield so that their actions in battle became second nature to them. But armies did not leave men’s behaviour in battle down to chance: the system of military discipline existed to coerce them into obedience. Punishments for disobeying orders could be severe, and men who were convicted of ‘cowardice in the face of the enemy’ or desertion from their unit could receive the death sentence. Many hundreds of soldiers were executed by their own armies for military offences during the conflict.”

Source for text and for more information please see:

[www.bl.uk/world-war-one/themes/life-as-a-soldier](http://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/themes/life-as-a-soldier)

### **Photo Credits (First Page)**

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Photo in centre: <http://www.greatwar.nl.frames.default-children.html> accessed 15.08.2015

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