Trenches came into widespread use in 1914 as a way for soldiers to protect themselves against the firepower of modern weaponry. Over time, they developed into huge networks. As shown here, trenches were given names to help identify them. Sometimes these names related to familiar places from home.
Water and mud could be a problem in the trenches, particularly in the autumn and winter months. Wooden ‘duckboards’ were used to line the bottom of trenches and the sides were reinforced with sandbags.
Trench conditions varied across different fronts. In Gallipoli in Turkey, mud was less of a problem but rocky and mountainous terrain posed different challenges. Soldiers also suffered from the heat.
Hot food was not supplied to front line soldiers until late 1915 and even then it wasn't always a regular occurrence. Troops in the front line had a repetitive diet of tinned food, sometimes served cold.
This photograph shows an infantryman on sentry duty, whilst some of his comrades snatch a few moments of sleep behind him. They are in what was previously a German trench at Ovillers-la-Boisselle on the Somme, July 1916.
When able to rest, soldiers in front line trenches would try and shelter from the elements in dugouts. These varied from deep underground shelters to small hollows in the side of trenches – as shown here.
Most activity in front line trenches took place at night under cover of darkness. During daytime soldiers would try to get some rest, but were usually only able to sleep for a few hours at a time.
Soldiers in wet and muddy trenches were at risk from trench foot, caused by continually wearing tight, cold and wet boots. If untreated, trench foot could lead to gangrene, but it could be prevented by regular changes of socks and foot inspections – as shown here.
When soldiers were out of front line trenches and behind the lines they would be able to enjoy a full night’s sleep and a hot bath. There were also laundries where they could have their uniforms washed.
Life in the front line always carried an element of danger. The threat could be from snipers, shellfire or from taking part in a trench raid or a major offensive. This rare photograph shows the moment when the first men go over the top during a raid in spring 1917.