



Was the tunnellers' secret war the most barbaric of World War One?

Video transcript – An unusual band of brothers

Behind me is the village of La Boisselle. Thousands of men died in the valleys to the right and the left. It was the epicentre of the Somme battlefield – a cauldron.

Most of us have a perception of the Great War: the war in the trenches, the heavy artillery, the pulverisation of ground as men creep forward over a moonscape of mud. But in fact there was another war going on – a secret, private, clandestine, barbaric war – and it took place beneath my feet in tunnels, layer upon layer of tunnels. That, too, was a battleground.

Here British tunnellers fought a brutal underground war planting huge mines beneath the German front line.

The men who came to fight here were known as tunnellers. They were an unusual band of brothers. They didn't need military training. They arrived with the knowledge of how to dig, how to survive underground, developed through generations of mining families. Many of them may have been working in coal mines since they were nine or 10 years old.

The key thing underground was to have steady men. It was one of the most dangerous battlefield environments on the Western Front. Every moment you were down there your life was hanging by a thread. The nature of the deaths of many of these men was truly shocking. They were entombed in a living grave.