



NOTES ON...

THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME FILM





Notes on the *Battle of the Somme* Film...

This Useful Guide explores *The Battle of the Somme* film, the most popular film of the First World War seen by over 20 million people in Britain at the time. These momentous audience numbers make *The Battle of the Somme* one of the most popular films in British Cinema history. The film marked a turning point in film making, being the first feature length documentary about a war, and changed the way cinema and film were perceived by society. In 2016, IWM will be making the restored version of the film available to members of the Centenary Partnership to screen in their venues to audiences all over the world. This Guide will help inform your screenings and projects by providing you with the key information you need to know as well as suggestions for further reading.

The Somme Campaign

- The Battle of the Somme was first major offensive on the Western Front in which the British Army took the leading role.
- It was Britain's contribution to a coordinated offensive (with France, Italy and Russia) across Europe to defeat the Germans after the setbacks of 1915. Due to a preemptive strike (on 21st February) by the Germans on the French Army at Verdun, the most pressing aim of the Somme offensive was to force the Germans to divert troops away from this front, thus relieving the French Army which was locked in a struggle for survival. But the British commanders also wanted to inflict heavy losses on the enemy and were hopeful that the weight of their initial onslaught on the Somme could breach a substantial sector of the German lines leading to a rout
- Planning for the Battle was very detailed with the overall strategy aiming to carry out a sustained artillery bombardment over German positions for five days, followed by the infantry attack and further artillery barrage directed at secondary line trenches.
- Since initial recruitment campaigns in 1914, including the widespread recruitment of the so called 'Pals Battalion', the British Army had increased its size and strength hugely. By the time the Somme campaign began 60% of the British Army had no battle experience.
- Given the scale of the preliminary bombardment, British soldiers were told they would find the barbed wire blown away and the German soldiers dead in their trenches. However, the bombardment did not destroy the deep German dugouts and as the British lines of troops advanced, the German machine guns began to fire.
- The first day of the battle of the 1 July was the bloodiest in the history of the British Army with 57,740 casualties including 19,240 killed.

- The campaign lasted from 1 July 1916 – 18 November 1916, during which time the British and French suffered half a million casualties with a further half a million casualties for the Germans. Included in the 'British' casualties were heavy losses among the Dominion forces including the Canadians, Australians, Newfoundlanders, South Africans and New Zealanders all of whom participated in the campaign.

Purpose of the film

- The producers of the film had expected that the offensive on the Somme would be a great success, so the film was to record the victory and demonstrate the effectiveness of the British Army. It was hoped that the example of the brave soldiers would rally civilian support for the war effort, and in particular the people working in munitions, reflected in the film by a focus on the importance of good quality and plentiful shells of all sizes and guns.
- Kitchener had banned all photography and film from taking place until late 1915. The War Office agreed to the presence of cameramen at the front before the 'Battle of the Somme' following the lobbying of the British Topical Committee for War Films and pressure from the film industry who were keen to respond to the public appetite for real footage from the front.
- British soldiers are portrayed as well-fed, well-motivated, well-clothed and well-equipped. There is an emphasis on the care and medical assistance that the soldiers received, and indeed the chivalry shown to enemy prisoners.
- It would also have been hoped that the film would help with recruiting in Dominion and Empire countries where men volunteered to fight. This was particularly the case in Ireland, where conscription had not been introduced because of the Easter Uprising.
- A further purpose would have been to encourage British men to respond to their call-up papers, as many did not come forward after conscription was introduced; 93,000 men failed to appear at the recruiting office when called-up.
- Although understood to be a propaganda film in its nature, much of the style of the filming is documentary.

Making of the film

- The film was shot by just two cameramen; Geoffrey Malins and J B McDowell. Malins was attached to the 29th division and McDowell to the 7th division.
- Filming took place between 25 June and 9 July 1916 therefore covering the buildup and opening stages of the Battle of the Somme.
- The cameramen were given an official pass to the battle zone although they were only permitted access to particular areas and were always accompanied by an officer. As well as the censorship imposed by the military, the cameramen themselves would have exercised some self-censorship. Identifying with the troops among whom they were 'embedded', they would have wanted to portray the campaign in an overall positive light.
- The equipment used to film the Battle of the Somme consisted of large, hand-cranked cameras requiring a tripod for stability. The equipment was heavy and the cameras could only be loaded

with a few hundred feet of film at a time. It was very difficult to film in poor light or at great distance.

Content of the film

- The structure is simple, the first two reels cover the preparations for the infantry attack, the third reel covers the attack on the 1 July 1916 and the next two, the aftermath of the battle.
- The film stands out for its close-up footage. The cameramen would at many points during filming have been as much at risk as the soldiers. In some ways the cameramen act as guides to the audience, panning the scene from a stationary point following the action as it unfolds in front of them.
- Anticipating the desire of the audience to spot their loved ones, the cameramen captured as many faces as possible, often encouraging the men to turn and acknowledge the camera; British soldiers in turn can sometimes be seen urging German prisoners of war to make sure they are 'in picture'. The editors also named the regiments that were featured to help with identification.
- The inter-titles, which were written by the War Office, are a crucial element of the film and perform several functions

They provide commentary ['A Division waiting to move forward']

Point out important details on the screen ['A Battalion of the Worcesters fixing wire cutters to their rifles']

Guide the audience to an appropriate response ['Royal Field Artillery moving up during battle over ground where the Gordon's and Devon's dead are lying after a glorious and successful charge on the ridge near Mametz']

Reinforce a propaganda message ['Whilst "others" less fortunate depart under escort for England'].

Reassure the viewer following a particularly worrying moment. ['Wounded awaiting attention at Minden Post showing how quickly the wounded are attended to'].

- Some scenes such as the 'over the top' sequence or the one described as 'clearing the battle field of snipers' are understood to have been staged. The overall proportion of these scenes within the film however is small and historians have estimated that all but 70 seconds of the film footage was genuine.
- An estimated 13% of the film depicts images of wounded or dead soldiers including some very distressing images of communal graves filled with corpses. Such depiction of British dead soldiers is unique to this film in the history of British non-fiction cinema.
- Despite the depiction of dead bodies and injury throughout the film, the overall feeling remains that the Battle of the Somme was a military success.

Significance

- The film is listed on UNESCO's 'Memory of the World' register and was the first feature-length documentary to record war in action.
- The Battle of the Somme was the first battle to be extensively recorded in moving images and the first to feature vast numbers of ordinary citizen-soldiers.
- Images such as 'over the top' and the mine explosion at Beaumont Hamel have come to represent the Western Front in popular memory.
- The 'shoulder-carried trench rescue' is one of the most well-known sequences in the film, which suggests that viewers like to identify with a moment of comradeship and humanity rather than purely military action.
- Seeing real men looking directly at the camera in the midst of a military campaign helps audiences throughout the years make a connection with the men on screen and ask questions about who they were, how they felt and what happened to them.

Impact

- The film was first privately shown to David Lloyd George on the 2 August 1916 and the first major screening took place on 10 August at the Scala Theatre before its release to the public on 21 August. It continued to be distributed for at least five months afterwards.
- British and Irish audiences flocked to the cinemas in the hope of seeing someone they might know and to see what the fighting on the front was really like. The film was immensely popular and aroused great interest – By October 1916 the film had received around 20 million admissions (the UK population at the time was 43 million).
- The public understood that the 'realism' within the Battle of the Somme film made it different to the dramatic portrayals of war they had seen before.
- Audiences were offered an almost tangible link to their family members on the Battlefront. Indeed, the film was often advertised on the premise that people may be able to spot their loved ones on screen. The soldiers filmed were also fully aware of the possibility that they might be seen by people they knew.
- Before the Battle of the Somme film, cinema-going was not perceived as respectable by the upper classes and indeed by many of the officers serving in the British Army. The film helped to raise the status of film from a trashy form of mass-entertainment to a more serious and poignant form of communication.
- Although popular, the film was also highly controversial and many thought the scenes of the dead were disrespectful and voyeuristic. There was debate in the newspapers and at least one cinema manager refused to show it. Some commentators pointed out that the film was as effective as anti-war propaganda as at meeting its intended purpose.
- Reactions did vary depending on the context of where it was seen and the perspective of each individual, but many felt it was their duty to see the film and support the war, particularly as news of the huge level of losses and casualties reached home.

- The impact of the film, particularly in neutral countries, prompted the German's to make a competing film 'Bei Unseren Helden an der Somme', although due to timing, this film did not include authentic footage from the Somme front.

Restoration

- IWM took ownership of the film in 1920, by which time the original negative was already very worn owing to the great popularity of the film. The original negative was subsequently lost to irretrievable cellulose nitrate decomposition, and preservation and restoration work is based on master copies made by IWM in 1931.
- In November 2005, IWM embarked upon a project to restore the film to its original quality in order to engage contemporary audiences with its content.
- Digital restoration is a technique where the original film is scanned frame by frame to so that each of the images can be amended and improved using powerful software. There are 80,000 frames in the *Battle of the Somme* film.
- Due to the poor quality of many of the original images, the restored film does not create a perfected version. A number of breaks, blemishes and poorer quality shots are still evident.

Musical Accompaniment

- *The Battle of the Somme* was made before the era of recorded sound on film, however, in common with all cinema showings, it was always screened with accompanying music. Music played a number of important functions in the cinema, It covered the sound of the projector, noises from the audience and filled the gaps during reel changes. It also enhanced the meaning of the film and guided reactions from the audience. Musicians offered a range of responses to the films they accompanied, and the quality and appropriateness of the musical performances were reviewed alongside films and had a big effect on the audience response.
- Orchestral music was seen as a way of attracting middle and upper class audiences. Some musicians learnt composed scores to accompany the film but most improvised.
- The cinema musician J. Morton Hutcheson devised a medley of 41 existing pieces of classical and popular musical pieces to accompany the *Battle of the Somme* which a number of cinemas chose to use. Most of the pieces selected are up-tempo marches and loud overtures, but there are also more lyrical and slow-paced pieces to echo the scenes of the wounded and the dead.
- In 2006 IWM commissioned composer Laura Rossi to compose a special orchestral score for the film, with the aim of creating music that would properly match the action on the screen and to help contemporary audiences engage on an emotional level with the film.

Further Reading and Useful Links

Ghosts on the Somme: Filming the Battle, June – July 2016 Alastair H Fraser, Andrew Robertshaw & Steve Roberts 2009

How I filmed the war Geoffrey Malins Originally published 1920, reprinted 1990s

The Big Show: British Cinema Culture in the Great War Michael Hammond (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2005)

Official British Film Propaganda during the First World War Nicholas Reeves (published by Croom Helm, London, 1986)

The Power of Film Propaganda: Myth or Reality? Nicholas Reeves (published by Cassell, London, 1999)

'Watch the Picture Carefully, and See If You Can Identify Anyone: Recognition in Factual Film of the First World War Period' Roger Smither *Film History* Vol. 14, No. 3/4, War and Militarism (2002), pp. 390-404

'The Battles of the Somme and Ancre' (1993) Chapter - Teaching suggestions edited by Roger Smither
Reconstructing the Musical Arrangement for "The Battle of the Somme" (1916). Toby Haggith. *Film History* Vol. 14, No. 1, Film/Music (2002), pp. 11-24

"A wonderful idea of the fighting": the question of fakes in 'the battle of the somme' *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* /abstract content. Volume 13, Issue 2, 1993)

Useful Guide Partnership Resource 'Learning from Film' - http://members.1914.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Ideas_for_learning_from_Film.pdf

List of regiments featured in the film

Headings in italic type are more tentative identifications than those in normal type.

REGIMENTS

Bedfordshire Regiment, 7th Bn (18th Div)	S6, S36
Buffs (East Kent Regiment), 7th Bn (18th Div)	S6
Devon Regiment, <i>8th or 9th</i> Bn (7th Div)	S37, S48
Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry Regiment, 12th (Pioneer) Bn (7th Div)	S2
East Lancashire Regiment, 1st Bn (29th Div)	S28
East Yorkshire Regiment, 10th Bn (Hull Commercial)	

(31st Div)	S14
Essex Regiment, 10th Bn (18th Div)	S58
Gordon Highlanders, 2nd Bn (7th Div)	S37, S40
<i>Hampshire Regiment, 4th Bn</i> (29th Div)	S10
Lancashire Fusiliers, 1st Bn (29th Div)	S10, S28, S29, S31, S32, S35
<i>Lancashire Fusiliers, 2nd Bn</i> (4th Div)	S56
London Regiment, 1/14th Bn (London Scottish) (56th Div)	S14
<i>Manchester Regiment</i>	S36, S50
Manchester Regiment, 22nd Bn (7th Div)	S39, S40
Manchester Regiment, 24th (Pioneer) Bn (7th Div)	S14, S44
<i>Middlesex Regiment, 12th Bn</i> (18th Div)	S50
Middlesex Regiment, 16th Bn (Public Schools Battalion) (29th Div)	S28
Royal Fusiliers, 2nd Bn (29th Div)	S5, S10, S31
Royal Fusiliers, 13th Bn (37th Div)	S57
Royal Warwickshire Regiment, 2nd Bn (7th Div)	S18, S21, S33, S56
<i>Royal Welch Fusiliers, 1st Bn</i> (7th Div)	S6
Seaforth Highlanders, 2nd Bn (4th Div)	S28, S34, S56, S58
Suffolk Regiment, 8th Bn (18th Div)	S6
Worcestershire Regiment, 4th Bn (29th Div)	S22, S61

BRITISH UNITS - CORPS ETC

XV Corps Cyclist Battalion	S40
10th Machine Gun Corps	S59
<i>11th Machine Gun Corps</i>	S30
Royal Army Medical Corps (including stretcher bearers etc)	S34, S35, S38, S40, S41, S42, S43, S44
Royal Artillery (Field, Garrison and Horse)	S5, S7, S8, S9, S11, S12, S13, S15, S16, S17, S19, S23, S24, S30, S32, S37, S40, S55, S59, S60
Royal Engineers	S29
<i>West Riding Field Company</i>	S10
Royal Marine Artillery	S25, S26



IWM is leading the First World War Centenary Partnership, a network of local, regional, national and international cultural and educational organisations. Together, we will present a vibrant global programme of cultural events and activities, and digital platforms, which will enable millions of people across the world to discover more about life in the First World War.

This guide was produced as a free resource for members of the First World War Centenary Partnership, available to download from 1914.org/members. For more information about the partnership please email extranet1914@iwm.org.uk.

Disclaimer: IWM is not responsible for the content of the external sites contained within this guide. Their inclusion in this guide does not constitute an endorsement from IWM.