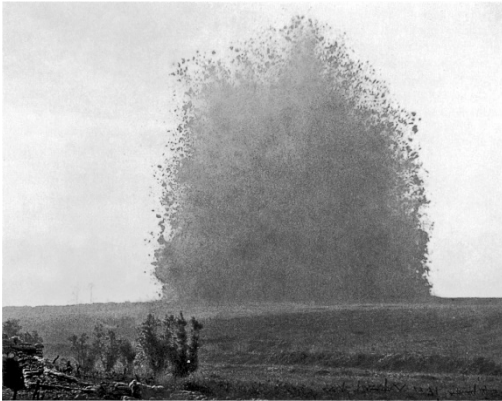


Sounding the Somme – Somme Starts

Fact File: The Film *The Battle of the Somme*

- The film *The Battle of the Somme* was made for the War Office by the British Topical Office for War Films in 1916.
- Lord Kitchener (Secretary of State for War at the time) had originally banned filming and photography from the front line when war broke out and it took a year to get that ban lifted.
- It was filmed by two experienced cameramen, Geoffrey Malins and John McDowell, who were sent out to the front line in 1916 and captured the week leading up to the battle and the first week, each man filming in different places.
- It is a pictorial record of one of the most significant WW1 battles for the British military and a lasting visual of what WW1 fighting was actually like, capturing footage from the sunken road and the Hawthorn Ridge Redoubt mine on 1 July.



Photograph of the Hawthorn Ridge Redoubt by Ernest Brooks from IWM Collections www.iwm.org.uk

- It was filmed on a Moy-Bastie camera which was large and heavy and needed a tripod. It was hand-cranked which meant the operator had to keep the reel running at a constant speed in one hand and operate movements with the other.



A Moy-Bastie Camera



John McDowell with his camera

Photographs from IWM Collections www.iwm.org.uk

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- The conditions for the cameramen were pretty difficult. The camera could only hold a few minutes of footage at a time and needed total darkness to reload, the reels were heavy and extremely flammable and it was pretty challenging to set up and operate, particularly in a live battlefield.
- The cameramen were extremely brave and put themselves in great danger to capture these images.
- The film was released in August 1916, only one month after the footage was delivered back to Britain whilst battle was still being fought: therefore, it is not a summary of the whole battle.
- It was used by the British Government to demonstrate to allies and neutral countries Britain's effort in the war. But, more importantly, it was an unprecedented opportunity for the general public to see the reality of fighting on the front line for the very first time.
- It was a huge box office success, and cinemas up and down the country screened the film, often adding extra screenings to satisfy demand.



- It was estimated that 20 million cinema tickets were sold within the first six weeks of release and this was almost half of the population at the time. This box office record wasn't broken until the release of Star Wars in 1977.
- There were moral and ethical issues associated with the film as it showed suffering and actual death of British soldiers (the only film ever to do so) and this was not deemed appropriate for entertainment for a general audience.
- There was also concern at the time that people might recognize someone they knew injured, or see someone fit and well who subsequently died, however, it was also felt that the film honored the fallen rather than glorify them.
- The film does contain controversy. There is a "staged" scene called the 'over the top' sequence which has become one of the film's most iconic scenes. We now know it was set up for the purpose of the film as the trench does not look like a real trench, the soldiers are not carrying full combat equipment and we can clearly see that the behavior of casualties in the scene is dubious.



A still of one of the staged shots from the film 'The Battle of the Somme' of British troops attacking on the Somme. Q 70167. www.iwm.org.uk

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- But it is an exceptional bit ‘fakery’ and researchers believe it was set up as an example of what it would have been like going ‘over the top’, as opposed to intentionally setting out to mislead people.
- *The Battle of the Somme* set a precedent for how battlefield documentary and propaganda films would be made in the future. It is part of the National Archive.
- The Imperial War Museums recognized the importance of this film and successfully registered it in the UNESCO Memory of the World in 2005, the first British document to gain entry to the register

Adapted, with permission, from the interview with Roger Smither from the Imperial War Museums on the Battle of the Somme DVD.



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