

Fighting in France, during World War I, intensified during the Battle of the Somme. This war-movie clip, from the British National Archives, was shot on location at the [Western Front](#) in 1916.

The film—entitled "Battle of the Somme"—was privately produced and, [according to the U.K. National Archives](#), "proved more popular than the official films that the War Office had made during the war despite being shockingly graphic. Audiences, well aware of the real conditions in the trenches, seemed to prefer a film that didn't try to pretend that war was easy or fun."

This is a clip from the eighty-minute documentary, which became one of the most-watched films in British history (attracting an [audience even larger than that of "Star Wars"](#)). It features a young wounded soldier who is carried through one of the trenches.

One hundred years later, the silent film has a soundtrack which is performed, by young people (some of whom are the same age as the fighting soldiers). It is also available for online viewing, via YouTube, in its entirety:

Just pondering what happened during the Battle of the Somme is enough for every thinking person to seriously question why people fight wars.

During WWI, about 1 million men—from both sides—were killed or wounded during a five-month period, fighting a war of attrition over a stretch of French land, about 18 miles long, at the upper reaches of [the River Somme](#).

Meant to move things forward from the [Battle of Verdun](#)—another lengthy, miserable life-taking event—the Battle of the Somme led to the most-deadly day of death—ever—for British soldiers.

It all started on June 24, 1916, when British artillery forces began to rain shells on the German line. If the effort was meant to "soften-up" the dug-in Germans, the plan did not work.

A week later, the battle itself began on July 1st. Opposing trenches—occupied by Germans on the one side and Allies (soldiers from Britain, Ireland, Newfoundland, South Africa and India), on the other—were separated by an area called "No-man's Land."

Measuring a few hundreds yards, or so, [No-Man's Land](#) was the kind of place where a horse could get himself tangled in really nasty barbed wire (like [Joey in "War Horse"](#)). It was also the place where soldiers who "went over the top"—the top of the trenches, that is—could get their heads blown off.

On July 1st, British generals sent about 100,000 soldiers—[many of them teenagers](#)—"over the top." [The plan](#) was to overwhelm the German forces and take over the German trenches.

Things did not work out that way, however. The plan for victory could not have been more ill-conceived.

When they went "over the top," the Allied forces were mowed down by machine-gun fire and artillery bursts. The horrors of war—fought in such a manner—were beyond imaginable.

On the first day of fighting, the combined British forces—who'd gained about three square miles of land—sustained 57,470 casualties (of which 19,240 were deaths).

What went wrong? The BBC summarizes some of [the British Army's mistakes](#):

- Untrained men: Many of the British soldiers were young volunteers with little battle experience or training.
- Untested tactics: The Allies' planned an infantry assault aided by a huge artillery bombardment. This tactic had not been tested by the British on a large scale battlefield.
- Inadequate artillery: Britain's bombardment was ineffective against Germany's well-trained troops, who were safe in their deep trenches.
- Underestimated the enemy: The British attacked well-fortified German trenches, manned by battle-hardened soldiers, armed with large number of machine guns.

[This animation](#) helps us, in a limited way, to understand what the British troops were facing as they assembled, in their trenches, at 4 AM on the morning of July 1st:

- At 6:45 AM, while the German are sheltered in their deep trenches, the Brits unleash their final bombardment.
- Before the Allied forces begin their assault, gigantic British mines are detonated. This alerts the Germans that a major offensive is about to begin.

- At 7:30 AM - with the sound of whistles telling the British Army that it's "zero hour" (and time to go over the top) - the Germans are still dug-in their deep trenches.
- Although the British artillery has failed to take-out all of the German barbed-wire defenses, the Allied soldiers advance into No-Man's Land.
- As the Allied soldiers get closer to the German deep trenches, German soldiers emerge—unscathed—with their machine guns and rifles.
- Although the Allied soldiers make some gains, they are limited and costly. About 30,000 Allied soldiers become war casualties.
- By dusk, on July 1st, the British have lost ground. Worse, their casualties now number a staggering 57,470.

Meanwhile ... at the southern bank of the Somme ... French forces were also attacking German troops. The BBC tells us about this aspect of the battle:

On the first day, the German Army suffered around 6,000 casualties—mostly at the hands of the French on the southern part of the Somme. The French, for their part, managed to take all their objectives and suffered very few casualties.

The German lines were compromised where the British and French attacked alongside each other. The Allies exploited their initial success and, unable to draw on reserves, the Germans desperately improvised a defence. It took two weeks for the German defence to deploy enough reserve men to plug the gap and contain the allied assault.

The Battle of the Somme would continue for another five months. Before it was over, a million men—including casualties from all sides—were dead or wounded. More than 72,000 of them—"The Missing"—have no graves.

Before the battle started, a 23-year-old Brit named William Hodgson—who served as a Lieutenant—gave some thought to the events which faced him. A poet, Hodgson put his thoughts into words:

Before Action

by Lieutenant William Noel Hodgson, MC

*By all the glories of the day
And the cool evening's benison
By that last sunset touch that lay
Upon the hills when day was done,
By beauty lavishly outpoured
And blessings carelessly received,
By all the days that I have lived
Make me a soldier, Lord.*

*By all of all man's hopes and fears
And all the wonders poets sing,
The laughter of unclouded years,
And every sad and lovely thing;
By the romantic ages stored
With high endeavour that was his,
By all his mad catastrophes
Make me a man, O Lord.*

*I, that on my familiar hill
Saw with uncomprehending eyes
A hundred of thy sunsets spill
Their fresh and sanguine sacrifice,
Ere the sun swings his noonday sword
Must say good-bye to all of this; -
By all delights that I shall miss,
Help me to die, O Lord.*

Hodgson did, in fact, die during the Battle of the Somme. He lost his life on the first day of the fighting—July 1, 1916.

Credits:

Video clip from "Battle of the Somme," online via the U.K. National Archives. A copy is also maintained at the Imperial War Museum.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Somme-Deadly-WWI-Battle>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:
<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/Somme-Deadly-WWI-Battle>

Media Stream



War Horse - Joey in No Man's Land

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