A chilling portrayal of life and death on the front lines of World War One

Harvey Thompson reviews The Trench, directed by William Boyd

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In the early hours of July 1, 1916, a long line of British soldiers left their trenches in northern France and advanced slowly towards the German front. The military high command estimated that the dramatic increase of allied artillery shelling had largely destroyed the German positions, and that the advancing soldiers would find mostly abandoned fortifications. Their assessment was catastrophically wrong.

By the end of the day, in the greatest single loss of life in British army history, 60,000 lay dead or wounded. That day's slaughter inaugurated what became known as the “battle of the Somme”.

By the end of 1914, the French, British and German armies had dug in on a front 470 kilometres long, that stretched from the North Sea to the Alps on the Franco-Swiss border. The trenches were often shoddily constructed affairs, with barbed wire, sand bags and wooden supports for the walls and wooden duckboards underfoot. After the first few days, every soldier's uniform was infested with lice. The trenches were often full of mud and water. The big artillery gun bombardments on both sides largely destroyed the drainage systems. During the “battle of Paschendale” in the autumn of 1917, thousands of men drowned in the mud; whole gun and mule teams were sucked under, disappearing without a trace.

In the hot summer months, the heat increased the stench of the latrines and decaying corpses. Diseases borne by rats and lice, such as typhus, were rife. During the winter, many soldiers succumbed to extreme cold. In 1917, 21,000 British soldiers were admitted to hospital with frostbite—a condition the army authorities refused to take seriously, often regarding the victims as little more than malingerers.

During the defence of the fortress town of Verdun, which was tying up a significant section of the French forces, Douglas Haig, then the commander-in-chief of the British armies in France, decided that a “big push” was necessary on the Somme front to create a break in the German lines. Central to Haig's plan was an assault on well-defended high ground. When the German commander Erich von Falkenhayn heard this, he could not believe that any general would be stupid enough to attempt such a thing.

The bombardment of the German positions began on June 24 and lasted for a week, in which time almost 2 million shells were fired. But when the ground offensive began on July 1, the bombardment had only partially destroyed the German trenches. The German army was well equipped with several thousand American Lewis machine guns, bought before the war. The bombardment had also failed to the remove the barbed wire strewn across “no-man's land”. Survivors of the Somme offensive would later recall how they watched helplessly, as their comrades died lingering deaths after becoming caught on the wire.

The British troops had been instructed not to hold back and cover each other as they advanced, as this would slow down the assault. A German machine-gunner later gave this description of the first wave of the offensive. “The officers were in front. I noticed one of them walking calmly carrying a walking stick. When we started firing we just had to load and reload. They went down in their hundreds. You didn't have to aim, we just fired into them” (J. Simkin, *Contemporary accounts of the First World War*, 1981).

The battle of the Somme was fought between July and November 1916 and resulted in over a million British, German and French casualties. During this period, with fighting also raging at Verdun, the daily casualty rate was 6,600.

The Trench is set during the last 48 hours before the Somme offensive. Directed by the novelist William Boyd (*A Good Man in Africa*, *Brazzaville Beach*, *Armadillo*, *New Confessions*), the film focuses on a single platoon of British soldiers as they hold their position on the front. We catch glimpses of their existence in the cramped dugout tunnels they inhabit together—the lonely sentry watch; drill-time and other daily trench duties; the boredom of waiting for an attack that never comes.

Prominent amongst this group is the 17-year-old Billy MacFarlane, played by Paul Nicholls. This young soldier personifies many of the recruits to be found, not just in the British army but throughout Europe. Although he seems to have been influenced to enlist by the decision of his elder brother Eddie, who is in the same platoon, he does not regret joining the army. But he feels a lingering doubt, a sense of loss for what he has left behind.

Despite their uniforms and occasional swagger, Billy and his comrades are barely grown men. They had no sooner started to find their feet in the world than they were swept away by the war.

Platoon leader Sergeant Winter (Daniel Craig) has a strong belief in rigid discipline. He neither shares the patriotic enthusiasm for

the war of his immediate circle nor the somewhat naïve sentiments of the trench soldiers. He is uninterested in the “glory” of battle, but neither is he afraid to make the ultimate sacrifice.

In contrast, Winter's immediate superior, Second Lieutenant Hart (Julian Rhind-Tutt), cuts a rather pathetic figure. He spends most of his time holed away in his quarters, swigging whisky. He seems to be completely unsuited for the front line.

The film begins with the men “holding position”, but soon they are ordered to storm the enemy lines. After their long wait, the men greet this news with a sense of relief. After all, they are led to believe “the big push” will involve minimal danger, little more than a walk straight across no-man's land to take control of the ruined enemy defences.

Billy witnesses the wounding of his brother and later sees the remains of a ration party, blown up by an enemy shell. These traumatic experiences leave their mark on the young soldier.

On the night before the battle, the rum (Dutch courage) that was to be shared out amongst the troops is lost. In desperation, Winter asks Hart to donate his personal supply to the men. Hart refuses repeatedly and threatens to charge Winter with insubordination.

On the morning of the offensive there is a palpable tension in the air. Billy turns to Winter for reassurance. Winter's resolve weakens. The signal is given. In the final scene we see the slow steady march of the soldiers over open fields devoid of any cover. The gunfire starts. One by one they fall.

Boyd's decision to tackle the Somme was in part influenced by the fact that his grandfather and great-uncle had fought in the First World War. Growing up in Nigeria in the late 1960s, Boyd also experienced an unfolding civil war at first hand. He realised for the first time the fragility of life in a war situation. But he felt drawn towards the First World War as the “ultimate challenge”.

The Trench is in many ways a compelling and evocative film. Both the monotony of life in the trenches and the rising sense of trepidation felt by the soldiers towards the end are captured well. Their impending fate is also made tangible—through the nervous, jittery behaviour of Hart and the brooding and at times uneasy manner of Winter, as well as the confused restlessness of the men themselves. The main character, Billy, is approached with a degree of understanding and compassion. His sense of being lost and forlorn is translated to the screen with real feeling. In Winter's character it is possible to feel what it must have been like for such a person, entrusted with responsibility for these young men but only being able to prepare them for their deaths.

Boyd has written with conviction and passion about the war in his novel *New Confessions*. It is evident that he is someone who cares about seriously conveying the authentic feelings of the ordinary soldier. The actors in the film were made to spend time in full uniform in a period trench, maintained by military enthusiasts in a farm in Essex, England. The cast is generally good, particularly Craig and Nicholls.

The film has its weaknesses, however. Boyd's inability to develop any of his characters in the film ultimately damages it. Although there is sympathy for the characters, they have little individuality. The resonance of any of their personalities is wholly absent, so we are left with little more than a rather sketchy picture of a group of young soldiers preparing for a military assault. There are also many missed opportunities and loose ends. The exchanges that take place between Winter and Hart are brought to a point, but nothing much is made of them. The incident of the captured German soldier, to whom the trench soldiers show some kindness, is also left unexplored.

There is a kind of admission by Boyd of his film's failings, in his comparison between film and the written word. “If you were writing the novel of *The Trench*, you would describe the trench over one page, but the wonderful thing about the 90 minutes of a film is that the wood, the mud, the corrugated iron is always there. You couldn't in a novel say every 10 pages ‘the walls of the trench are eight feet deep' because people would go mad. That's a real gain. But the disadvantage is that you can only get into a character's head fleetingly, through voice-over. That is film's ultimate frustration. You're constantly aware of the boundaries and the parameters; whereas the novel is the most generous art form. You can do anything you want at all. And that's why I will be a novelist who occasionally enters the world of film.”

The Trench, despite it's disappointments, is to be welcomed in sincerely seeking to depict an important episode of history that still has the power to affect us some 80 years on.

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