

THE TRENCH 1914- 1918

A FULLDOME REALITY FILM PRODUCTION

Transcript

NARRATOR

In the early part of the last century, a great disaster struck Europe that was to affect the entire World. The First World War. For over 50 months nations would commit their countrymen to a war that was so dreadful it would be called The Great War. One word was to symbolize the horror and futility of the Great War - the 'Trench'.

Throughout the British Isles, mainland Europe and beyond, war memorials remember the names of those who have fallen in service of their country. Many of those names seen in Britain are for lives lost during The First World War.

The spark that was to set Europe and beyond ablaze was the assassination of the Austro-Hungarian, Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophia in the Serbian town of Sarajevo on 28th of June 1914. The killer, nineteen year old Serbian Gavrilo Princep who was violently opposed to the presence of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in his country.

Although Princep was arrested the Austro-Hungarians wanted revenge and declared war on Serbia on the 28th of July. Russia then mobilised her army in support of Serbia. Germany an ally to the Austro-Hungarian Empire was fearful of the Russians and on the 1st of August declared war on Russia. On the 3rd of August Germany, declared war on France and attacked the French through neutral Belgium causing international outrage. The following day, the 4th of August, Britain and her empire including Canada, Australia, New Zealand, India and South Africa declared war on Germany, and on the 6th of August the Austro-Hungarian Empire declared war on Russia.

Just 37 days had passed since the death of Archduke Ferdinand, and all of the tensions, rivalries, resentment and international alliances of the early century plunged the world into war. Although much fighting was to take place in France and Belgium, hostilities also took place in other parts of the world including thousands of square kilometres across the north and south Atlantic oceans.

During September and October 1914 both sides attempted to encircle the other but neither succeeded. By the beginning of November armies faced each other

in France and Belgium along a line 400 miles long from the Channel coast through Flanders to the Swiss border. Later, other countries were to join the conflict.

In the autumn of 1914, soldiers in France and Belgium were forced to seek defensive shelter in trenches and as the weather worsened into winter, both sides waited for the return of better conditions in the spring. The war of movement ended and the war of stagnation had begun.

Life for the soldier in the trench often followed a routine of repetitive and boring duties. But he was always in great danger. Having served in the Front Line Trench, the closest to the enemy, the soldier would be ordered to serve for a short spell in the Support Trench and then the Reserve Trench, both of which ran parallel and behind the Front Line. All three Trenches were connected together by a system of communication trenches. After a short rest period away from the trenches, the pattern would be repeated. However in an emergency situation of continuing attacks this system would have to be ignored and men would spend many weeks in the Front Line.

Private David Barnes

My name is Private David Barnes. I am nineteen years old although I look older now. I'm quite new here but already I feel like I've been here a lifetime. One of the hardest things to cope with in the Trench is the weather. The rain turns the ground into mud and the trench fills up with the water. At night it's bitterly cold. The hours before dawn are the coldest. I can't imagine what it's going to be like in the winter!

The most dangerous times of the day for us on the Front Line is the twilight hours of dawn and sunset. Often the enemy attack in the half-light. So for an hour at the beginning of the day and an hour at sunset the officer or lieutenant in charge will rally us all to stand on the fire-step ready just in case. This is called 'Stand To'.

Commanding Officer Alec Fitzgerald.

I am Commanding Officer Alec Fitzgerald. I am responsible for the men in this section of the trench. During the day the main watches are around 4 hours long and during this time either myself or the Non-Commissioned Officer are on duty. From dusk until just before dawn the watches are no more than a couple of hours long and during this time myself or the NCO tour the trenches. I have

to make sure the soldiers on duty are awake and alert. I find the best way to do this is to alter my routine and to go and see them at any time during the 'Watch'.

They never know quite when I might turn-up.

Sometimes a soldier on 'Watch' watch will put a bayonet under his chin – that way he'll be sure to keep awake.

Night is actually the busiest time, a lot of repair work has to be done and it can only be done in darkness and silently. We dig out fresh trenches, they always zig-zag at intervals. This reduces casualties if a trench gets a direct hit from an enemy shell. Supplies are also brought forward at night - food, ammunition, wood and metal shuttering for the trenches and communication wires are laid. The men have learnt to move like cats. They move silently don't make a sound, they know all our lives depend on it.

Private David Barnes

The shelters we rest in when we can, are cold. Sometimes we light a small fire to keep ourselves warm. There isn't much fuel but you can become really desperate with the cold. Some soldiers take bits from the trench but this is strictly forbidden but I knew a mate who was so desperate with the cold that he killed himself.

After , 'Stand To' its Rum rations.

SERGEANT

RIGHT YOU LOT, RUMS UP! RIGHT GET YOU'RE MUGS.

Private David Barnes

First thing in the morning when it starts to get light. You can relax a bit. The rum is measured out carefully and you drink it down straight-away, you aren't allowed to save it up. The warmth goes right down to your toes. You have to keep your head down in case someone takes a shot at you, but with the sun coming up and the rum, you start to warm up.

SERGEANT

RIGHT HARRISON – HERE'S YOUR RUM MATE.

Commanding Officer Alec Fitzgerald.

The ground between us and the Germans is called 'No Man's Land'. It's a dreadful killing ground of unrecovered bodies from failed attacks strewn across a shattered landscape of No Man's Land - tangled barbwire – bodies – shell craters, it's a mire. Sometimes I have to order the men out at night across this area. They crawl out on their stomachs with shears to cut back the growing grass so our machine gunners have a better view of the enemy. Sometimes, they don't come back.

Soldiers at 'Stand To'

ERE, CAN YOU HEAR THAT. IT'S A PLANE. I WONDER IF IT'S ONE OF OURS OR ONE OF THIERS. IT'S JERRY! I'M GOING TO HAVE A GO! THERE'S ANOTHER ONE! GET DOWN GET DOWN. THIS ONE'S LOW, THIS ONE'S LOW!

SERGEANT

RIGHT. RIFLE INSPECTION!

SOLDIER

ERE HE IS!

Commanding Officer Alec Fitzgerald.

Even in the Front Line you have regular inspections. Everything is inspected, even their feet. With the pouring rain – your feet soaking in the trenches - If you don't look after them you can end up with Trench Foot. If your feet are wet all the time and if you don't change your socks and dry your feet then they can get so infected you can lose your toes or - worse!

SERGEANT

Whilst handling rifle and rubbing fingers together.

COME ON, WHAT IS IT? TELL US!'

SOLDIER

EXTRA OIL SIR!

SERGEANT

NO. I DON'T WON'T TO EVER SEE THAT AGAIN.

SOLDIER

YES SIR.

Private David Barnes

For breakfast, bread and cheese but if you're lucky, sometimes a bit of bacon. A pal of mine went down to an abandoned farm and found some eggs which he brought up when he came forward from the supply lines one night and they were so tasty. Getting clean water that doesn't smell of paraffin or worse for a cup of tea is a luxury. Pete and I were making a brew one day and someone knock over the pot and we were so cross.

SOLDIER

OH. WHY DID YOU PUT IT THERE FOR!

Private David Barnes

So next time I put the pot up on the parapet instead and a sniper blew it clean away. I was so angry but then Peter said 'at least it was the pot rather than your head' and we had a good laugh about that.

Commanding Officer Alec Fitzgerald.

Nothing can prepare a fresh soldier to the horrors he will see and smell in the Front Line. Bodies new and old add to the stench. Often enemy territory is captured, lost and then re-captured again. Trenches change position, the ground is being turned over by shelling and graves several years old are blown apart. Sometimes our trenches go through graveyards. German and British bones all look the same. Hundreds of thousands of dead soldiers have no known graves out there.

Private David Barnes

I don't mind the night raids or going into attack. You know what's going on and you can prepare yourself. It's that not knowing if we might be attacked that gets me.

SOLDIER

GAS GAS GAS!

Commanding Officer Alec Fitzgerald.

One of the worst jobs that I have is writing the letters home. Usually my letters arrives after the initial notification of death. I make it a point to personalise my letters hoping that they are some comfort in what I write. Sometimes a chap can be taken off by a snipers bullet or by some accident that had taken them off or perhaps a snipers bullet. But my letters speak of valour, courage and comradeship. I just hope they give some comfort to their relatives back home. They are all great chaps, well most of them. We've become a bit like a family, we share everything and we rely on each other.

Commanding Officer Alec Fitzgerald.

LETTERS CHAPS!

SOLDIER

RIGHT YOU ARE SIR. THANK YOU.

ONE FOR EVERYONE!

THANK YOU SIR.

Commanding Officer Alec Fitzgerald.

Even though we are so far away from home, post comes every day. We live for these letters. Hearing about home seems strange when you are in the Front Line.

I'M RATHER HOPING FOR NEW SOCKS

SOLDIER

I THINK THAT IS A BIT HOPEFUL SIR!

Commanding Officer Alec Fitzgerald.

AH, CAKE.

Sometimes we get some chocolate or other little treats like cake. You'd always share it, you couldn't leave it lying around because the rats as big as cats would get any food that's left. If your friend doesn't get a letter you share your letter from home with him as well

SOLDIER

THE JACK-KNIFE IS ON THE TABLE SIR.

Commanding Officer Alec Fitzgerald.

THANK YOU. RIGHT, LOVELY. CAKE?

Even though you're awake a lot of the night, you've still got to be ready for anything the Germans might throw at you during the day-time. We always keep at least one man at the periscope looking into No Man's Land. He has to have sharp eyes.

SOLDIER

HERE WE GO BOYS!

Commanding Officer Alec Fitzgerald.

Keeping the men healthy is a difficult job in these conditions. The weather and the close proximity we all have to live in all contribute to the many problems.

For the first time in my life, I've had lice. I found them in my blanket and then realised I had nits – insect eggs in the seams of my clothes. One of the chaps showed me how to get rid of them by running a candle over the seams. In the quiet moments you can hear the eggs pop—very satisfying.

Nothing can prepare a fresh soldier to the horrors he will see and smell in the Front Line. Bodies new and old add to the stench. Often enemy territory is captured, lost and then re-captured again. Trenches change position, the ground is being turned over by shelling and graves several years old are blown apart. Sometimes our trenches go through graveyards. German and British bones all look the same. Hundreds of thousands of dead soldiers have no known graves out there.*

Private David Barnes

I've been keeping a diary of everything that has happened to me out here in Flanders. I'd like to read you an entry.

June 28th. 4 am. Signs of another glorious day spreading across the sky. Still huddled up in the trench bottom. Everything is extremely quiet. Hardly any difference to an English summer morning. No fire whatsoever coming from the enemy.

5 am. All roused and Officer Fitzgerald passes along and speaks words of encouragement, but he seems to have a 'far away' look in his eyes. A few minutes before 6am Pete and I shake hands; he then joining his section.

Commanding Officer Alec Fitzgerald.

RIGHT, FIX BAYONETS.

Private David Barnes

Simultaneously whistles shriek out at the approach of 'Zero'.

Commanding Officer Alec Fitzgerald.

UPON MY WHISTLE.

SOLDIER

GOOD LUCK BOYS!

Over the top and the best of luck!'

SOLDIER

RIGHT, COME ON!

COME ON PERKINS!

I'M COMING!

Private David Barnes

Pete, who is on my right, exclaims 'Oh my legs! Take me out of this' and, sinking to the ground, expires, he having been shot through the heart. We reach our objective and I am told later that Brigade Headquarters are pleased with our results.

NARRATOR

Throughout the war technology in engineering, science and manufacturing advanced enormously. Aviation at the end of the war was unrecognisable from what it had been in 1914. Although the first petrol driven aircraft had flown some 11 years before the war began, aviation was thought of as a novelty.

However both sides realised that aircraft could be used to spy on the enemy. Pilots would fly across enemy positions and with maps and notebooks

record anything that might be useful. Eventually these reconnaissance aircraft with fighter escort would carry cameras to photograph the enemy trench systems and also the movement of troops and supplies. Aircraft would attack enemy trenches.

By the Spring of 1918 the war was beginning to change. Germany was starving and her soldiers were exhausted. The Americans had now joined the war and were fighting with the British and French in Europe. The Germans slowly and then hurriedly began a bitter retreat pursued by the Allies.

The fighting eventually ended with an Armistice on the 11th of November 1918. A day that is commemorated every year and in Ypres at the Menen Gate every evening at 8.00.

The British Empire had lost over 1,100,000 men, the French lost nearly 1,400,000 and Germany and her allies – over 4,000,000 dead.

Many of the dead were never found, they were lost in the mud of Flanders. To remember the dead with no known graves their names have been written on the war memorials in France and Belgium.

The nations that had fought the war could now mourn the loss of fathers, sons, and brothers. The signing of the Treaty of Versailles that officially ended the First World War was very controversial. Germany mourned her dead but many Germans felt they had been unfairly treated and humiliated. After all the losses many in the German army felt betrayed. One such soldier who had served on the Western Front was seething with resentment. His name – Adolf Hitler.

VOICE

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.
We are the Dead. Short days ago

We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

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