



WHY WAS THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME FILM BIGGER THAN STAR WARS?

Video transcript – Filming on the Western Front

When World War One broke out, the film industry was in its infancy. Filmmaking was a manual process. The equipment was cumbersome and difficult to operate and was around six times heavier than that used today.

So it's remarkable that two cameramen were able to capture one of the deadliest battles in military history – the Battle of the Somme. Geoffrey Malins and John McDowell were given permission to film on the front lines when the offensive launched on July the 1st 1916.

Around 20,000 British soldiers were killed on the first day alone. The vibrations from the bombardment were so powerful that they could be felt back in the south of England.

Malins wrote a book describing his wartime experiences.

“The risk had to be run, the picture was worth it. Up went my camera well above the parapet ... Pieces of shell were flying and ripping past close overhead. They seemed to get nearer every time.”

Malins and McDowell recorded the devastation to the landscape caused by the bombardment as well as the human cost of injuries and death. Malins and McDowell worked for The British Topical Committee for War Films. This was a group of commercial producers – they were trying to make films that they thought public would want to see.

However, their films gave a very biased account of life at the front. They looked and felt like official propaganda. In the Battle of the Somme, most of the dead troops we see are German, not British. And British soldiers are cast as heroes. The most famous scene in the film shows British troops coming out of their trenches and rushing bravely towards the German lines.

Given the tight control over information released to the public about the war, perhaps it's surprising that such a film was shown at all. Malins and McDowell operated in incredibly difficult conditions with bulky equipment. They captured life on the frontline, including graphic scenes of death and destruction.

So how did the Battle of the Somme become one of the most watched films in British history?