



BY PHILIP WATSON

BEHIND THE LINES

NOVELIST WILLIAM BOYD CHOSE THE BLOODIEST, MOST RESONANT BATTLE IN BRITISH HISTORY AS THE SUBJECT OF HIS DIRECTORIAL DEBUT. SET IN A TRENCH BEFORE THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME, IT GRAPHICALLY ILLUSTRATES THE HORROR AND THE DRUDGERY OF WAR

A company of young men huddles in a narrow trench. It is 3am, the temperature is sub-zero, and they are hungry and disorientated.

Exhausted from hours of marching, filling sandbags and carrying heavy kitbags, they cannot sleep for the cramped conditions. Some try to slumber sitting down or by leaning against their rifles; others lie on wooden duckboards or in small holes scraped out of the earth. There are explosions in the distance, and thunderflashes which illuminate the landscape and their uncomprehending faces. The sound of bullets buzzes through the air.

While officers bark instructions at them to take turns on sentry duty, some are sent to the rear to fetch ammunition and provisions. A few are ordered over the top, into the murky blackness, and they crawl on their bellies in the mud, repairing barbed wire fences and patrolling No Man's Land for signs of enemy activity.



THE CAST

THE INNOCENT

Billy Macfarlane, a 17-year-old Lancastrian lad, away from home and country for the first time. Played by Paul Nicholls



THE VICTIM

Billy's beloved older brother, Eddie, badly wounded by a German sniper. Responsible for Billy signing up. Played by Tam Williams



THE COCKNEY COWARD

Lance corporal Victor Dell, all front and no khaki trousers. Steals crucial rum ration before the attack. Played by Danny Dyer



THE LILY-LIVERED SECOND LIEUTENANT

Remote, weak and bewildered senior officer Ellis Harte. Public school. Played by Julian Rhind-Tutt



THE PATRIOT

Horace Beckwith, an idealistic Scot whose brother and best friend are killed by the Hun. Has blind faith and seeks revenge. Played by Anthony Strachan



THE FATHER FIGURE

Telford Winter, a brave, honourable, working-class sergeant and leader of men. Played by Daniel Craig



THE JOKER

Easygoing Ulsterman Charlie Ambrose, one of the few soldiers to have seen action, is drafted in from another battalion. Played by Ciaran McMenamin



THE CYNIC

Smart, irreverent and aloof foot soldier Colin Daventry. Increasingly aware of the reality of the impending massacre. Played by James D'Arcy



"It was freezing cold, I'd run out of fags, and I just couldn't sleep for shivering," says one of the men, a boy barely out of his teens. "And I was so starving that when I got a plate of this revolting, well, stew I guess it was, it didn't seem to matter that the plate and food had mud in it."

"The sense of claustrophobia was unbelievable – it was impossible to move around and squeeze past each other," says another. "In the morning, an officer came on inspection, we stood to attention, and were handed postcards and told we could write to our mums. It was a bizarre experience."

The two men are not, however, Army

The Trench was his first film. "You become very aware of the fact that you are acting and you feel a terrible sense of responsibility for getting it right."

Boyd was scrupulous in his desire to make the film as physically and emotionally real as possible. He cast the soldiers very near to their ages – most at the Battle of the Somme were between 18 and 22; some were as young as 16 – and wrote a script that allowed for a range of regional accents and a great deal of "swearing like troopers".

"There is a tendency to glorify or romanticise war, and very few books and films resist that," he says. "I wanted to strip away

BOYD CAST THE SOLDIERS VERY NEAR TO THEIR AGES – MOST WERE BETWEEN 18 AND 22, SOME WERE 16

veterans recalling the privations of trench life on the Western Front in France during the First World War. They are actors Paul Nicholls and James D'Arcy, and they are describing 24 hours spent in a field in Essex.

Having been cast in *The Trench*, a film about the Battle of the Somme written and directed by leading British novelist and screenwriter William Boyd, they were part of a troupe sent out unexpectedly to spend time with a group of enthusiasts who, for fun, recreate and re-enact the battles of the Great War. One, a farmer, has gone as far as digging a 50-ft trench on his land.

Boyd is the first to acknowledge that the exercise could only give the actors the smallest insight into the degradation – and drudgery – suffered by the real soldiers. Acting is, after all, verisimilitude. Even though the men wore rigorously authentic – and uncomfortable – First World War uniforms, puttees, ID tags and steel helmets, formed their own battalion with its own military colours, and stayed in character throughout, all the bullets were blanks. He knows also that what his actors experienced is a long way from the scrupulous embodiment of The Method employed by such American actors as Robert De Niro and Harvey Keitel. Or, indeed, from the weeks of Army training endured by the cast of Steven Spielberg's film *Saving Private Ryan*.

Yet for Boyd and his men it worked. "I have never been on a job in which I felt such a charlatan and a fraud," says James D'Arcy, who has appeared on television in such series as *Tom Jones* and *The Ice House*, but for whom, like many others in the young cast,

the veils of myth-making and make something gritty, vivid, filthy dirty, and in glorious Technicolor."

The Trench tells the story of the preparations for the first day of the Battle of the Somme on 1 July 1916. Propelled by a British military command desperate to break the 20-month stalemate of trench warfare, and which feared the French could not hold their positions at Verdun to the south, the soldiers were part of an offensive designed to break the German front line, and to turn the war in favour of the Allies. It would also, thus, restore national pride.

A "big push" was planned in which a concentrated British artillery bombardment would obliterate enemy positions. So unerringly confident were the commanders of the supremacy of this strategy that officers informed their men that they would be able to walk in a slow and methodical way to the German lines, take them easily, and then settle down to a hot cup of tea. "You will be able to go over the top with a walking stick; you will not need rifles," one officer told his battalion. "When you get to the enemy positions you will find the Germans all dead, not even a rat will have survived."

The reality could not have been more different. Not only were most of the British soldiers woefully inexperienced and not fully trained, the Germans held higher and better ground. All along the 18-mile stretch of the Somme front line, British soldiers had to attack uphill. The Germans were also operating in better built trenches and deeper dug-outs, and had better machine guns.

The result was a sustained and systematic

slaughter. During that one day – from Zero Hour at 7.30am to the last desperate spasms of the battles at dusk – 60,000 young British soldiers fell. Twenty thousand died; 40,000 were wounded – more than on any other day in British military history, before or since. All were volunteers. Most fell without any ground being gained. In areas of the front where the opposing trenches were little more than 100 yards apart, the dead lay 10 deep.

It remains one of the British Army's worst military misjudgements – rarely has there been such an immense contrast between the means of protection and destruction. As the outspoken historian Niall Ferguson has written of the frontline tragedies of the First World War, "It is nothing less than the greatest error of modern history."

While Boyd's film certainly confronts the carnage, and hints at the wider social and political upheavals the First World War unleashed, its gaze is more intensely focused on what happened in the two days leading up to the battle. It stays, for almost the entirety of the film, in the trenches with the men. And in contrast to the famously articulate and expressive poems and memoirs that have emerged from the officer classes (*vide* Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves and Edmund Blunden), it is very much a story seen through the eyes of the ordinary foot soldier. It puts the war back in the hands of its victims.

"I wanted to show the poor bloody infantry's view," says Boyd, who has written previously about war in his novels *An Ice-Cream War* and *The New Confessions*, and whose grandfather and great uncle fought in and survived the Great War, his uncle being wounded at the Somme.

"There are some books on and by ordinary soldiers and they give quite a different picture to that filtered down from the officers. It's much more disenchanted. They disliked their officers and distrusted their fellow soldiers. As well as giving each other support, there were animosities – they argued, bickered and pilfered from each other's kit. They got bored, farted about, took the piss and talked about sex. They were diverse personalities, and I wanted to show them as ordinary human beings."

Eschewing the often bombastic and heroic treatments characteristic of such classic war movies as *Where Eagles Dare*, *The Longest Day*, *The Dirty Dozen*, and most recently *Saving Private Ryan*, Boyd took cinematic inspiration instead from the 1981 surprise German hit movie *Das Boot* (*The Boat*). A film which takes place almost entirely within



A GOOD DAY'S SHOOTING William Boyd, top left, chats with cast members on the set of 'The Trench'

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ANATOMY OF LIFE IN THE TRENCH

Battalions were supposed to do tours of eight days' duty in the trenches, and then return to their billets in the rear. In practice, soldiers could be in the front line for two or three weeks before being relieved.

British trenches were usually eight feet deep and, at their base, no more than three or four feet wide. Trench systems comprised three rows: the front line, the support and the reserve. These were joined by communications trenches; the whole system was entered by a trench dug in ground invisible to the enemy.

Trenches were built in a zig-zag to make them a more difficult target for enemy gunners, and to minimise the mortal power of shell blasts. Each short stretch was known as a "bay", and they were often named (eg Regent Street,

Piccadilly Circus and The Strand).

Although trenches were fortified by timber duckboards, slatted wooden fencing and sandbags, they were often poorly drained and became mudbaths. During the Battle of Passchendaele in the autumn of 1917, thousands of men actually drowned in the mud.

Inside the trenches were dug-outs (or "funk holes") – tiny caves carved out of the chalky earth and used by officers and senior NCOs. Other ranks had to sleep in the open, on the floor or on ledges, covered only by waterproof sheets. German officers' dug-outs were often panelled in wood, had cloth hangings to cover the rough walls, and were furnished with tables, chairs and even pianos stolen from nearby villages.

One sentry per



platoon was posted day and night to guard against attacks from "the Hun" (aka the Boche, Jerry and Fritz). He carried a rifle fitted with a fixed bayonet. Sentry duty lasted two hours; there were severe penalties for falling asleep on the job.

Soldiers' uniforms consisted of steel helmets (although these were issued only after spring, 1916; previously soldiers wore nothing stronger than soft service caps); puttees – itchy strips of cloth tied

tightly around the legs from the ankle to the knee; and boots, which often failed to keep out the water and mud, resulting in "trench foot" and sometimes gangrene. Fur jackets were distributed in winter in an attempt to keep out the cold; layers of underclothes and even newspaper were also used.

As well as the intense odours emanating from decaying bodies, overflowing latrines and horse manure, men suffered from lice – tiny

transparent parasites which fed on blood up to 12 times a day. Soldiers would attempt to rid them by cracking them off with a fingernail or burning them out of the seams of their uniforms with a candle flame.

Food rations were mostly tinned food (bully beef, pork and beans) and cooked over small fires. Breakfast was an army biscuit, one loaf of bread divided among three men, jam, a mug of tea (no milk).

Supplies were unreliable; water was carried in cans formerly used for petrol, and tasted like it.

Soldiers were entitled to one tot of thick, strong rum per day, but some officers restricted its allocation on religious grounds and because they thought it bred ill-discipline. On the morning of the first day of the Battle of the Somme, however, most units were allowed as much rum as they wanted. PW

the confines of a U-Boat patrolling the Atlantic during the Second World War, the *Das Boot* cleverly portrays all the cramped clutter and confusion of life aboard a war submarine, and the sweaty fear and claustrophobia suffered by its crew.

"*Das Boot* showed me that, pretty much, I could portray the First World War in microcosm," says Boyd. "I realised that the world would come to the trench – the British class system, humour, even sex [in the form of saucy Edwardian postcards] – and that I didn't need to cut away. I realised that the size of your canvas need not determine how powerful your film is going to be."

The result is a remarkably confident, controlled and moving piece of film-making, especially for a screenwriter (albeit experienced) making his directorial debut. Rejecting a roll call of established Brit Pack stars in favour of a cast of fresh-faced newcomers (only Paul Nicholls has had any mainstream exposure, playing troubled Joe Wicks in *EastEnders*, although Ciaran McMenamin starred recently in the popu-

BOYD'S FILM STAYS IN THE TRENCHES. IT PUTS THE WAR BACK IN THE HANDS OF ITS VICTIMS

lar *Young Person's Guide to Becoming a Rock Star*), Boyd has produced a sobering and intelligent film that explores character rather than action. There are some affecting individual and ensemble performances, and the direction is unfussy and unobtrusive – the camera seems at times a ghostly visitor to the trench.

Not that there aren't Peckinpah levels of blood on the screen. One member of a ration party is blown away by a direct hit from a stray shell; another is shot in the mouth by a German sniper. And Daniel Craig, who played Geordie Peacock in *Our Friends in the North*, is menacing as the tough-but-fair sergeant; he is an actor with a screen presence that recalls the latent energy and physicality of Ray Winstone and Tim Roth.

Yet it is Paul Nicholls, as central charac-

ter Billy Macfarlane, who emerges as the real star of the film. If the suspicion remains that *The Trench* is simply too static and slow-burning for the general film-goer – it is a war movie, after all, without much action, and like *Titanic* you know the ending in advance – Nicholls potently transcends the physical limitations of the setting. His performance is subtle, complex and naturalistic.

"I simply played it moment by moment, truthfully and from the heart," he says. "I could relate to Billy's naivety and innocence – he isn't a fighter or an experienced soldier, and has never seen battle or anyone shot or die. He was just a kid with a gun and a helmet – and that's all any of them were." **E**

The Trench is on general release from 17 September