



The subterranean sanctuaries of the Somme

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In the British psyche, the 1st July 1916 has become a date that seemingly represents the entirety of the First World War. Type 'The Battle of the Somme' into Amazon and it will produce 2945 results, and that's just in the Books section. Television programmes revisit that summer's day almost a hundred years ago with monotonous regularity, usually superimposing images of poppies over footage of soldiers leaving their trenches, the voice-over adopting a sombre tone as it describes the fate of thousands of young men, walking slowly to their doom. The Battle has also become a story of statistics: the volume of bullets and shells fired, the quantity of artillery pieces employed, the size of the mines blown, the days of bombardment, the number of men killed in the first hour, the first two hours, the first day. Figures now stand in for human beings, inanimate objects silently lined up in their trenches, waiting to die.

Although many television programmes, books and magazines have influenced this view, it is one that is reinforced by the numerous memorials and cemeteries that now dominate the landscape. Yet, these artefacts don't represent the battlefields, or the humanity that coursed through them; they represent the appalling consequences on the human body of waging industrial war. With so little left to actually see from 1916, it is not surprising that the gaze of the visitor is directed towards death and not life.

This bias is also projected onto the subterranean battlefield that still lies relatively intact beneath most of the Western Front. The huge Lochnagar crater at La Boisselle on the Somme is one of the most visited sites on the Western Front, and on the surface it tells a story of destruction, and of the barbarity of modern industrial warfare. It is a tale that is by no means unique to that part of the Western Front. Between 1915 and 1918, more than 500 mines were detonated at the Butte de Vauquois near Verdun, in an area of front measuring just 460m wide by 340m deep. Beneath this one hill lies more than 17km of tunnels, some over 90 metres deep. Mine warfare was being waged from Flanders to the Alps and even the impressive Lochnagar crater is the result of just one of the 17 mines blown by the British on the 1st July 1916 (there were actually 23 detonated, but 6 were smaller by comparison).

Like the stoic cemeteries and glimmering memorials found right across this part of France, the surface remnants of subterranean warfare can also be misleading. Many mines were blown in this theatre of the war and mining was indeed an effective weapon, particularly on a stretch of front that was so static. But this is only part of the story. The underground landscape of the Somme was a place where life was preserved as well as taken.

The lethal nature of No Man's Land required men to live below the surface, not on it. Trenches, the first level of the subterranean battlefield, allowed some respite from the metallic skies above, protecting soldiers from all but a direct hit. Shell holes were utilised as forward positions, places to regroup during an attack, or as a refuge for the wounded. Deeper underground, communication tunnels allowed for the transit of men to and from the front. Dugouts of varying depths kept men relatively safe, were utilised as command posts and adopted as first aid

stations ' all in the name of preserving life. Even many of the mines blown were tactical, designed not to kill but to protect the lines by creating defensible positions further out into No Man's Land.

In 2006, the Durand Group conducted archaeological excavations at Y-Ravine near Beaumont Hamel on the Somme. It was a project that would highlight just how effectively men could be protected underground.

On the morning of the 1st July 1916, the 87th Brigade of the 29th Division attacked Y-Ravine across what is now the site of the Newfoundland memorial. The positions had been bombarded for days, but as the British advanced, the shaken and largely unharmed soldiers of the German 119 (Res) Infantry Regiment were able to clamber up from their deep dugouts, establish their machine guns, call in artillery support and stop the four advancing battalions in No Mans Land. A follow up by the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment and 1st Battalion of the Essex fared little better.

Yet, as the Durand Group excavation demonstrated, it was the defensive facet of underground warfare that decided this engagement. For the most part, the Germans had focussed on solidifying their positions. So by the summer of 1916, their underground systems were far more comprehensive than those of the British or the French, whose resources were largely committed to offensive action. Many of the same units had occupied Y-Ravine since 1914, and for two years they had been carving out a system of tunnels and deep dugouts in the chalk, allowing them to endure the British bombardment when it finally came.

The defensive philosophy at Y-Ravine was not the exception, but the rule. In 2009, the Durand Group began another project on the Somme to excavate a German dugout at St Pierre Divion, near Thiepval. The excavation unearthed numerous beds, still largely intact, showing how life could be lived in relative comfort deep within the earth. Further work at Serre, started in the same year, explored a German listening tunnel, painstakingly dug to protect the lines from the British miners.

It is tempting to portray the underground landscapes of the war as a claustrophobic and terrifying world, where men lived in silence waiting to be entombed. But those that occupied these places were far tougher and more used to hardship than the average twenty-first century European. In civilian life, miners were accustomed to working long days in appalling and hazardous conditions, often for little pay. When they began work on the Western Front, despite the dangers, they thrived underground. The Durand Group's work has showed that both the diggers and the soldiers that occupied these spaces didn't view the conflict in the same way that so many modern observers appear to do.

Living underground requires a renegotiation of the way that space is interacted with, but human beings are able to adapt to their surroundings remarkably well. In the restricted confines of a trench, or deeper down in the darkness of the earth, the effectiveness of vision is quickly surpassed by hearing, and touch becomes a much more practical way of understanding the environment. This radical change in the way that men understood and navigated their environment bonded them together, creating culture and promoting life. The seriousness of the situation and the dangers that men faced were well understood, but that didn't stop life being lived. Soldiers still laughed and joked, scrawled graffiti on the tunnel walls, and carved objects displaying the pride they felt in their units. These items of material culture show the human side of this mechanical conflict, and demonstrate man's

ability to flourish in the most adverse of conditions.

Even the terrible casualty figures the British sustained on the Somme between July and November 1916 taught the High Command valuable lessons on how to preserve life. Many of those killed and wounded never saw the front line trenches, as the German artillery stalked the area behind the British positions, destroying reinforcements before they could be brought into action. On the 8th April 1917, on the eve of the Battle of Arras, and barely ten months on from the opening day of the Battle of the Somme, some 24,000 British and Commonwealth troops were massed in the expanded cave system beneath the front line trenches, protected from the German guns and ready to be thrust into action.

Underground warfare on the Somme was far more extensive than the few remaining mine craters would suggest, and a network of trenches, tunnels and dugouts underpinned the whole battlefield, as they did along the majority of the Western Front. The destructive power of military mining is readily apparent in the few livid scars that are still visible on the Somme, but the real story of that battle is told deeper underground, in a world hidden from view. Through the application of modern conflict archaeology, a more holistic understanding of these spaces, as well as those that inhabited them, is being achieved, demonstrating that the subterranean landscapes of the Somme had as much to do with life as they did with death.

More information on the Durand Group can be found at their website www.durandgroup.org.uk

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