

Film Footage of Trench Warfare at the Western Front (1915-1916)

Abstract

American war photographer and cinematographer Donald C. Thompson (1885-1947) became known for having captured the horrors of the First World War on film. When war broke out, he was first commissioned by a Montreal newspaper to film Canadian troops. Traveling along both the Western and Eastern Fronts, often hiding his identity and risking his life, he sold his photographs and film footage to various British and American news outlets. In 1916 the French army commissioned him as an official cinematographer. In this capacity, he managed to film the siege of Verdun and the Battle of the Somme, where he was wounded. The footage clips featured here are not dated but were most likely filmed in France in 1915 or 1916. They show the trench warfare that became synonymous with the Western Front. Large numbers of German soldiers are seen surrendering and being marched to prison camps. The footage also includes shots of artillery barrages, attacks “over the top” (French troops leaving trenches to attack enemy lines), wounded being carried back to the trench line, devastated landscapes and some gruesome images of fallen soldiers' dead bodies. It stands in marked contrast to the images and narratives of German military successes presented in German newsreels at the time. Thompson produced and distributed several documentary films edited from the footage he shot during the war. He reused some of the footage seen here in a film titled *War As It Really Is*, which was shown in American movie theaters in 1916, before the United States entered the war.

Source

Source: Camera: Donald C. Thompson, 1914-1918. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, RG Number: RG-60.1274. <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn1004544>

USHMM

Recommended Citation: Film Footage of Trench Warfare at the Western Front (1915-1916), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/wilhelmine-germany-and-the-first-world-war-1890-1918/ghdi:video-5171>> [September 26, 2025].