

The Playing Fields

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FADE IN:

EXT. PARK - DAY

The sun burns bright.

Tall trees and bushes run along a single footpath that dissects the lush green grass.

The bushes rustle.

KEVIN, 10, his cheeky smile blighted by his missing front teeth, runs from behind a bush. He has a long stick in his hands.

STEPHEN, 9, scruffy hair and a dirt camouflaged face, pops up from behind an opposite bush. He points a stick at Kevin.

STEPHEN
Bang, you're dead.

Kevin stops in his tracks and looks at Stephen. He throws his stick rifle into the air, clutches his chest and exaggerates his fall to the ground.

Stephen runs out and stands over Kevin.

STEPHEN
I got you good.

Kevin, his eyes tightly closed, smiles and chuckles. He snaps his eyes open and jumps to his feet.

KEVIN
This time you're the baddie okay?

Stephen shakes his head.

STEPHEN
I don't wanna play any more.

KEVIN
Why not?

Stephen walks away from Kevin.

Kevin walks after him.

KEVIN
You said I could be the good guy next time.

Stephen runs off down the path.

STEPHEN
Gotta catch me first.

KEVIN
Hey!

Kevin runs after him, both laughing.

They run past a large marble war memorial.

EXT. BATTLEFIELD - NO MANS LAND - DAY

SUPER: FRANCE 1917

The sun glares in a beautiful blue sky.

The silence only broken by birds in song.

The earth is scorched and devoid of vegetation. Craters litter the ground, bodies baked into the dried hollows decompose in the heat.

Rows of barbed wire snare more of the dead.

Beyond the wire, a trench crowded with young British soldiers.

EXT. BRITISH TRENCH - DAY

A bunch of young privates crowd the deep trench, a wooden ladder scales its mud walls.

JACK, 15, his face fresh and unblemished, grips his rifle to his chest. He is barely five feet tall, his uniform hangs from his slender frame. He looks skyward, his eyes tightly closed, the warm sun on his face. He breathes slow and deep.

ERIC, 16, slightly taller in stature, stands with one foot on the ladder. His finger poised by the rifles trigger, it anxiously taps the side of his weapon. His eyes stare deep into the trench wall.

HENRY, 16, sits calmly at the foot of the trench wall. His boyish looks tainted by a black eye. He unsheathes his bayonet and carefully attaches it to his rifle.

GEORGE, 28, an officer, walks slowly down the trench. He sports a large moustache, but it fails to hide his worn features.

George pats Henry on the shoulder as he passes.

GEORGE

Not long now lad, then you can
give the Bosh a damn good
sticking.

Henry looks up with an unconvincing smile.

George walks up to Jack.

GEORGE

It's a beautiful day to fight for
your king, don't you think?

Jack's eyes flicker open and he slowly focuses on George.

JACK

Yes sir, it is a beautiful day.

George ignores Jack's response, he looks down at his wrist
watch. The face is scratched and dirty. He gently rubs it
clean with his finger. He looks skyward.

A loud pop is heard, followed by more.

Huge explosions are heard, deafening the silence.

The trench shakes, dirt is displaced from the walls.

Boom after boom, the bombardment is relentless.

Artillery fire whooshes overhead and drops on the German
trenches.

A final explosion, then silence.

George removes a whistle from his jacket and walks down the
trench.

Jack closes his eyes and looks up to the sun again.

ERIC

Do you think we'll get a chance
to stick the Bosh?

Henry looks up at Eric.

HENRY

Four months of waiting, I surely
hope so.

ERIC

But do you not think they're
already dead?

Henry stands and walks beside Eric. He leans back against
the trench wall and lights up a badly rolled cigarette.

ERIC
I think they're dead...or
deserted.

Henry shrugs.

HENRY
Maybe.

He puffs on his cigarette.

ERIC
What do you think Jack?

Jack is unmoved, his eyes tight shut.

JACK
I don't know...perhaps they're
gone?

ERIC
I think so.

Henry takes a drag and blows the smoke skyward.

HENRY
Well, we'll find out soon enough.

Jack reaches inside his jacket and pulls out a small
photograph. He stares at it intently.

George walks back up the trench. He repeatedly glance at
his watch.

GEORGE
Remember lads, a nice steady
pace, and careful over the wire.
When you reach the Hun's trench,
be sure to stop and wait for
Dougie for tea and biscuits.

The lads smile.

Jack slides his photo back inside his jacket.

George glances at his watch.

GEORGE
(shouts)
Stand ready boys!

He raises his whistle to his lips and gives a sharp blow.
More whistles echo up and down the trench.

Eric stands motionless on the ladder. Other soldiers
bustle over the top and out of the trench.

GEORGE

Move it lad!

Henry nudges Eric aside and climbs the ladder. He looks back down into the trench.

HENRY

Come on, lets give it to em.

He disappears from view.

Eric clambers up and out of the trench.

Jack looks up at the sun.

GEORGE

Get gone Jack.

Jack takes a deep breath and climbs the ladder.

EXT. NO MANS LAND - DAY

Jack squints across the vast area. Hundreds of British soldiers march toward the German trench.

He quickly walks to catch the others.

Henry squeezes between the broken barbed wire defences. Eric and Jack follow.

ERIC

They must have deserted?

George marches past at great speed. He waves his swagger stick in the air.

GEORGE

Nothing to stop us now lads.

Eric smiles and looks over at a disappointed Henry.

A huge explosion erupts a few feet in front of the lads. Lumps of earth rain down on them.

Eric and Jack jump to the ground, they bury their heads in their hands.

Henry grabs Jack by the scruff of his jacket and hauls him to his feet. Dirt and smoke everywhere.

HENRY

Gotta keep going Jack. Get up.

Jack and Eric slowly get to their feet.

More explosions and gunfire rings out, whizzing past. Machine guns open up and soldiers begin to fall under the hail of bullets.

The advancing soldiers begin to run toward the German trench.

Eric coughs and stumbles in the haze of flying dirt and smoke. He looks down, his foot treads on a fallen soldier. He gasps.

Jack grips his rifle to his chest and continues into the smoke.

Henry passes a British soldier who kneels, his head in his hands. Blood seeps through his fingers and his cry is burred.

He continues onward.

Explosion follows explosion.

The dead and dying scatter the ground.

Jack jumps into a crater and stops. An explosion erupts in front, dirt peppers down on him. He covers his head.

A decomposing German soldier, buried in the dirt beneath him, his face uncovered stares up at Jack.

Jack rolls backwards and covers his mouth, holding back his stomach. Henry jumps into the crater beside him.

HENRY

Jack, where's Eric?

Jack shrugs his shoulders.

Henry looks out of the crater and fires off a shot. He snaps the bolt back and chambers another bullet.

HENRY

Jack, we got to keep going.

Jack nods.

JACK

I know...I can't.

Henry grabs Jack by the hand and drags him out of the crater.

Henry and Jack run through pockets of smoke. They emerge in a clearing, the German trench a few feet in front of them. They both drop into it.

EXT. GERMAN TRENCH - DAY

Jack and Henry breath heavy, their lungs pounding. They quickly ready their rifles and aim down the trench.

The trench is empty.

JACK
Do we wait here?

Henry places his finger against his lips and shushes Jack.

A German soldier backs toward them along the trench.

Henry aims his weapon and fires a bullet into the enemies back. He drops without a sound.

Henry reloads.

JACK
Where are the others Henry?
Where's Eric and the others?

HENRY
I don't know.

Henry pops his head out of the trench and glances back toward the British trench.

Gunfire continues to ring out, soldiers screams and a few still advance toward their position.

HENRY
I can't see Eric or any of the
officers Jack.

Jack drops back against the trench wall, resting his frame.

Henry looks down the trench.

HENRY
Lets push on.

He looks at Jack with a reassuring smile.

Jack looks back, nervous.

JACK
But there's only us.

HENRY
Come on Jack, lets take the
trench.

Henry nods encouragement and advances down the tight corridor of the trench.

Jack watches him, he grips his rifle tight, his chest pounds hard.

A nearby explosion throws dirt over Jack. He jumps to his feet, wipes the debris and sweat from his brow and rushes after Henry.

INT. GERMAN TRENCH - GUNNING POSITION - DAY

Three GERMAN SOLDIERS surround a machine gun, one fires in short bursts, one feeds in the belt of ammunition and one stands nearby with a bucket in his hand.

The German gun spews out bullets, it cuts down a lone British soldier.

The gun stops and the soldier with the bucket pours water over the steaming barrel.

Henry sneaks up the trench behind the German soldiers. He looks out over no mans land.

EXT. NO MANS LAND - DAY

George slowly climbs from the safety of a bomb crater and waves his swagger stick in one hand, his other clutches his service revolver. Eric reluctantly emerges behind him and steadily they advance on the German trench.

EXT. GERMAN TRENCH - GUNNING POSITION - DAY

The machine gun bursts to life and cuts the two down with ease.

Henry gasps, his eye's bulge and he bites his lip in anguish. With a grimace, he aims his rifle and slows his breathing.

The machine gun stops. More water is poured to help it cool.

Henry squints his aim and fires at the gunner. The bullet tears through his neck. He slumps without a sound.

The remaining two soldiers turn to Henry, panic and shock across their faces.

Henry chambers his next bullet.

A shot, from behind Henry.

Water pours from the bucket and the German drops to his knees. A clean shot through his abdomen, the soldier falls.

Henry fires at the remaining German, the shot strikes him in the head, killing him instantly.

Henry spins to see Jack behind him, his rifle barrel smokes.

Jack reloads.

JACK
Is there any sign of Eric, Henry?

Henry drops his head.

HENRY
No Jack, none.

Henry shuffles his frame and rests it against the trench wall. An emptiness in his eyes.

JACK
Henry, must we go on?

Henry looks at Jack.

HENRY
Perhaps we should wait here?

JACK
That sounds good.

Jack smiles. He leans back against the opposite trench wall.

Sporadic gunfire is heard.

Jack closes his eyes.

Henry reloads his rifle.

An unnatural silence and calm.

LATER

German orders are heard (O.S)

Henry jumps up and aims down the trench.

Jack's eye's spring open but he remains unmoved.

There's an eerie silence.

A bell rings out loudly and German orders follow.

Jack jumps up and stands beside Henry.

JACK

Henry...

Henry shushes Jack once more.

Henry looks over the trench wall and out toward the British lines. A fog slowly drifts toward them.

HENRY

It's gas, Jack, gas!

Henry drops his rifle and throws off his helmet. He frantically pulls out his respirator.

HENRY

Put your mask on Jack!

He slides his mask over his face.

Jack pulls off his helmet and struggles with his gas mask, Henry quickly helps him.

Henry pushes Jack.

HENRY

(muffled)

Go Jack...

Jack turns and runs down the trench. Henry snatches his rifle and stops in his tracks.

HENRY

(muffled)

...Jack.

Jack disappears into the fog.

Henry fidgets with his mask. He glance down, a tear is visible in his respirator.

Henry grasps his hands over the tear and runs down the gas filled trench.

EXT. GERMAN TRENCH - DAY

The fog hugs the trench walls, visibility is almost none.

Jack's breath is heavy in the mask. His pace slows.

A GERMAN soldier staggers from the cloud, his eye's burn red and his lips swollen. He chokes out a scream.

Jack, only a few feet away, fires a round into his chest. The soldier falls.

A second SOLDIER appears behind the first. He too is in a similar state.

Jack trusts his bayonet into his stomach. The German hangs from the blade and screams his agony into Jacks face.

Jack trembles and struggles to free his bayonet. He jerks his rifle back and forth, it slides free of the soldiers flesh.

Jack's respirator steams as his panicked breathing escalates.

He quickens his pace down the trench.

EXT. NO MANS LAND - DAY

The air is thick with gas.

Jack stumbles aimlessly over the craters and dead soldiers, his direction obscured.

He walks a few feet and the air clears a little, a few feet more and the sun pierces the sky.

Jack drops to his knees and pulls off his mask. He sucks in a lung full of oxygen and exhales with delight.

His face contorted and his hands shake uncontrollably.

He turns and looks back into the rolling cloud that covers the ground. He stares, expectantly.

He turns, the British trench is in sight.

He slides the photograph from his jacket and looks deep into it. A middle aged woman looks back.

He raises his frame and walks toward the trench.

INT. BRITISH TRENCH - OFFICERS DUGOUT - DAY

Timber lines the walls and a small bed rests in the corner.

ANTONY, 25, a fresh faced officer, sits and writes at his table.

DENNIS, 20, a Private, bursts in. His clothes are tattered and dirty.

DENNIS

Sir, one has returned from the
push yesterday.

Antony jumps up from his table, his documents scatter.

ANTONY

Returned, nonsense. I think you mean deserted private.

Dennis reluctantly nods.

ANTONY

Best fetch the rum then.

Antony marches past Dennis and out of the dugout.

EXT. PARK - DAY

The sun is low.

The park is all but empty.

Three teenage BOYS sit at the foot of the war Memorial. They wear sports wear and drink from large bottles of cider.

One swigs from his bottle, while another tokes on a cigarette.

The third youth gulps from a can of lager. He pouts his lips and squirts it on the memorial.

They all laugh.

The memorial reads '*To the memory of the Men who died in the Great War 1914 - 1918*'.

The fluid runs down the face of the memorial, and over the many names etched into the bronze plate.

The youths continue their boisterous behaviour.

SUPER: *The British army could no more afford to carry cowards than it could traitors. On the morning of 15th July 1917, Private Jack Oliver was executed for cowardice*

FADE OUT.