

“Paths of Glory”

The combination of modern weapons and inept military leadership made World War I a particularly grim affair. With fortified trench lines reaching from the Swiss border to the North Sea, by 1916 the war had settled into a deadly stalemate. But that did not deter the generals from continually sending their troops “over the top” into murderous machine gun and artillery fire in attacks which had little or no chance of success. (As an example of the complete disregard for casualties some 10,000 men were killed in the last 6 hours of the war, even though it had been known for days that war would end at that exact time) All of this is the backdrop for Stanley Kubrick’s “Paths of Glory” (1957).

Looking to burnish his military career General Mireau (George Macready) seeks to curry favor with his superior, General Broulard (Adolphe Menjou), by having his division attack the heretofore impregnable German position known as the “Ant Hill”. He anticipates that it will “only” cost 50% casualties. He is right on that score but wrong on the hopelessness of such an attack. When it fails, his response is not to accept responsibility but rather to blame the cowardice of his troops. And what better way to shift the blame than to randomly select a number of men to court martial for cowardice or, as he puts it, “if they won’t face German bullets they can face French ones.” His first impulse is to pick 100 men but that is too much for even General Broulard and they finally settle on three men to make an example of.

The task of defending the men falls to Colonel Dax (Kirk Douglas). A famed criminal lawyer in civilian life, he finds himself in a courtroom where justice is an alien concept. Has one of the men been cited in the past for bravery; was one of them chosen by his Lieutenant because he witnessed him mistakenly kill one of his own men; and was the other selected by picking a straw? All such evidence is ruled irrelevant. The court martial is a travesty of justice and the result is foreordained. The men are convicted in a two hour trial and sent before a firing squad the next day. They are doomed but the ever cynical General Broulard finds a way to reward Dax for his service. It is a cold blooded act that gives the term “military politics” a whole new meaning.

Among the examples of Kubrick’s cinematic craft are:

The contrast between the soldiers' lives in their lice infected and muddy trenches and the headquarters of the senior officers who are housed in chateaus which would do justice to Louis 1 V. To such officers the troops are nothing more than abstract pawns.

The battle scenes as the troops make their way across "no man's land" in the attack on "The Ant Hill". Raked by shells and machine gun fire they are nothing more than sheep being led to the slaughter.

The insufferable arrogance of General Mireau; the cynical unctuousness of General Blouard; and Colonel Dax as a man of honor in a world where that counts for nothing

The conversations in the prison cell as the men await their fate. One speculates on all the different ways one can die on a battlefield and which are to be preferred; one greets the priest who comes to comfort them with reverence while another questions the existence of God; and the iconic scene with a cockroach.

There is no way Colonel Dax can bring the Lieutenant to justice in a military courtroom but that does not mean he is without means to make him face another form of justice.

Time has not dimmed the luster of this classic anti-war film.

(Amazon Prime)