

In the lengthening years since we filmed World War Two I continue to ponder the approach of myself and other British Army cameramen to the coverage of that conflict. It seems to me that we suffered a psychological blockage. We were, to start with, first and foremost soldiers. We had all of us had some year or so of military training, in the ranks, before ever being accepted as combat cameramen, to be issued a camera alongside a revolver and ammunition. Although often very bloody-minded, we still regarded ourselves as soldiers, were numbered and issued orders as soldiers. If we came across a blown up face, a shattered body, friend or foe, we merely muttered 'poor sod' and moved on. It just did not occur to us to take a picture; unless he was still alive and gave us – like Malin's survivors of the Somme – a cheery grin and a 'thumbs-up' sign. Then it was another 'one of our brave lads'. Were we failing in our duty? Our duty as a cameraman, if not as soldiers? It did appear, and still appears, that this was a 'just' war. As military moviemakers, our task – with which we willingly identified – was to record the onward march of our own victorious side, hailed as it was by tears of joy by the peoples of Europe, as it triumphantly fought its way through the remnants of Mussolini's Empire and the ruins of Hitler's Third Reich.

But despite the liberation of hellholes like Dachau and Belzen that this brought about, in essence there is nothing noble about war. There is no greater obscenity. And it only remained for Stanley Kubrick to dramatise its final nuclear lunacy with *Dr. Strangelove*.

War is indeed the ultimate ego trip. And this holds true as much for the commander in chief as the combat cameraman. Both are exercising power. The one over the lives of men in the belief that he is saving his country, serving its cause. The other, through his viewfinder, in the belief that in some god-given way he is able to serve as a channel through which others may share in the excitement and 'glamour' of war. It has been left to a later generation of cameramen to identify totally with the rank and file, and attempt to act as self-appointed exorcists of its horrors.

Let us not forget Bob Capa and Larry Burrows, both dead in Vietnam.

The other factor distancing the picture on the screen from the report on the page in either one of the two world wars was the absence of any worthwhile telephoto lens. No British Army cameraman in 1914-18, or 1939-45 for that matter, had adequate long focus lenses. There just were not any available for the 35 millimetre clockwork hand cameras which were all we had. (Although newsreelers, like *Movietone's* Paul Wyand in Italy, might have had one – but essentially static and tripod-bound.) So although it was happening all around us, with very rare exception, the most we could ever really hope to get were at best wide angle general views. Nothing had really changed since the Boer War. Writing of Rosenthal's coverage then, the pioneer producer Charles Urban commented back in 1904 that: 'Modern battles are at long distance; the bullets go 'zip, zip', but you can't see the men who fired them: they are too far off. In the olden days it would have been different, when everything was at close quarters. But there were no Bioscopes then.'

So, if an audience was ever to be made to feel participatory in the action of the first two world wars, it became necessary to reconstruct – set up – some action showpieces. With his usual exemplary diligence, Kevin Brownlow has discovered that the famous 'going over the top' sequence in *The Battle of the Somme*, hitherto presumed to be Malins-like actuality, was in fact arranged for the camera at a trench mortar school well behind the lines. Until there developed hand held cameras with real long focus lenses, together with a new breed of combat cameramen who were not militarily committed to the war they had to film, there really was no other way. Compare, for example, the blood and thunder, total close-up 'you are there' on the spectacular re-enactment of *A Bridge Too Far* with the total lack of impact of the sparse material shot by the army cameramen actually dropped with the airborne troops at Arnhem at the time.

The 1920s saw a spectacular number of re-enactments of the great engagements which were already passing into the legend of the previous war. Harry Bruce Woolfe, for the hopefully named



Arnhem



Arnhem cameramen



Dutch nun nurses wounded at Arnhem



San Pietro

British Instructional Films, produced a series of compilation films made up of original shooting from Malins and others, mixed in with sequences set up and directed later at home. *The Battle of Jutland* employed model ships and tactical maps to trace on the screen the course of that indecisive naval confrontation. At greater length, and with additional reconstructions, *Zeebrugge* demonstrated how the Royal Navy attempted to block the North Sea to German submarines by blowing up the entrance to the Belgian port which served as one of their main bases.

The most exciting, successful and glamorous British victory at sea in World War One took place, and was fought out, not in home waters at all, but in the far and distant Pacific and Southern Atlantic. At the outbreak of hostilities, two enemy cruisers, an earlier *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, were reported somewhere off the coast of China, and roaming ominously at will in the path of the convoys bringing Australian and New Zealand troops to France. In the end, no less than two battle cruisers, one battleship, half a dozen heavy and two light cruisers of the Royal Navy – together with the then allied Japanese Fleet providing a distant cover flank – were needed to send these two Germans to the bottom of the sea off the shores of Chile and Argentina in this forgotten battle of World War One. But there was no film of this now legendary British naval engagement in the first world war, let alone a reconstruction, and unlike the army and the air force the navy had no film unit of its own to call on in the second. This led to a couple of us army cameramen being borrowed to film at sea what all concerned believed would prove to be a real spectacular. In short, a German 'Dunkirk'!

The warfront in North Africa had now narrowed to a tiny area in Tunisia. Bottled up by the victorious American and British forces in a peninsula jutting out into and surrounded by the Mediterranean, the defeated Germans and Italians had but two options – to surrender or attempt to get away by sea. Naturally it was assumed they would do their best to go for the latter, and the Royal Navy concentrated a large force around this Cape Bon to intercept and blow them out of the water.

But no cameramen on the ships to film what would be a truly spectacular climax to the war in Africa.

So, flown out from Egypt to this new battlefield, and by way of Algiers, one day in May 1943 I boarded a Royal Navy destroyer, and for ten days we two army cameramen to and froed, up and down, offshore Cape Bon. Not even a rowing boat ever put out to sea. While every night we listened to the drone of aircraft overhead. The Germans flying out key personnel in the darkness all around us. But not a foot of film had we shot when word reached us that the entire enemy army group, surrounded still intact on land, had surrendered. The war in Africa was accordingly over.

Winched aboard a landing craft which came up alongside to take us back to dry land at Bizerta, we waved goodbye to *HMS Laforet* – to be sunk with all hands on an Arctic Convoy to Russia a few months later.

Bruce Woolfe, and British Instructional Films (on the Board of which there served for a while that imperial romancer John Buchan) received lavish official assistance in their plans to recreate this one decisive British naval victory of World War One. Their film of *The Battles of the Coronel and Falkland Islands* was backed by the Federation of British Industries. The Admiralty lent ships, including some of the actual participants, still in service. Photographed by Jack Parker and Stanley Rodwell, and released in 1927, the result was a great contemporary success, popular with public and critics alike.

More than half a century later, audiences at home were to cheer or swear at their TV screens as a British Task Force once again went into action off these bleak islands in the South Atlantic. The images were this time brought to them by video cameras – delayed by distance and, at times (like Dickson in the Boer War) official and deliberate intention. The 1982 'Battle of the Falklands' brought a new dimension to the screen of war. For the first time, on their nightly TV news, a British audience saw pictures from the other side as well. By way of satellite transmission, their adversaries in the Argentine often got their coverage onto the screen ahead of the British cameramen, plodding along

bravely with their ENG equipment towards Port Stanley – by way of San Carlos, Goose Green, and Bluff Cove.

Another British producer saw the destruction of the First World War in more human, if not indeed sentimental terms. In his story of a widow who lost all of her three sons in the last few weeks of the fighting, George Pearson ended this film, *Reveille*, in 1922, four years after the Armistice. By then the symbolic significance of the two minutes' silence on the anniversary of the signing of peace, eleven o'clock on the morning of November 11th, 1918, had become a sacred institution, in which everyone the length and breadth of Britain stopped whatever they were doing and stood with bowed head for a full two minutes; a ritual which was to last unbroken until the next round with Germany broke out the morning of September 3, 1939. The climax of *Reveille* is this two minutes' silence. The mother is frozen in the grief of her memory. A problem for the maker of the silent films – how to convey the impact of silence?

This was not such a difficulty for Pearson as it might seem to later film maker who think that 'silent' films were silent. As viewers of the Thames Television's series *Hollywood* have now been made well aware, they were never shown in silence. From the beginning there was always a sound accompaniment. Either an upright piano, or an orchestra ranging from a few instruments to a full symphonic ensemble. For *L'Assassinat du Duc de Guise* a score was composed as far back as 1908 by no less than Saint-Saëns. Films like *Reveille* were shown with full orchestral score, to which literal sound effects were added by mechanical means. All Pearson had to do, when one of the musicians struck a bass drum to accompany above him on the screen the firing of a gun in close-up signalling the commencement of the silence, was to instruct the conductor to stop playing for two actual minutes – the total silence in the theatre to be only broken two minutes later by a bugler playing an actual *Reveille*. How many film makers today would dare to kill their soundtrack dead like that, for as long as that, one wonders?

Four years earlier, Griffith had brought his own silent film epic of World War One to a climax with *sound* alone. On the

edge of a battlefield, his heroic French people huddle together for shelter in a ruined farmhouse. Terrified. Then a sound. What was that? Tramp, tramp, tramp. Yes – marching feet. Louder and louder. Nearer and nearer. (Feet of course, of stagehands, tramp, tramp, tramp behind the screen). Our anguished innocents, staring out of the window of their shattered farmhouse. The whole scene still only played on their faces. And now, at first faintly, but increasingly in volume all the time, a band. A military band, in rhythm with the tramp, tramp, tramp of marching feet. Louder and louder (all the brass in the theatre orchestra now going full blast below the screen). But on the screen, still only the faces of our innocents – now joyful, tears of joy. For only now, in yet another of his famous last minute rescues, do we cut to what they see – the American Army. The New World coming to the rescue of the Old. Line after line, column after column, of American soldiers, marching into battle. Led by the band visually at last on the screen, but actually in the theatre, blaring out the rousing tune of 'Over There'. Cameraman Billy Bitzer's assistant Karl Brown was at that 1918 premiere of *Hearts of the World*. One of a stunned audience who found their feet instinctively beating time, in triumphant and deafening unison, with those *silent* marching men.

The non-talking film reached perhaps its apotheosis with the vast and complex visual metaphor that is Abel Gance's *Napoleon*. The battle for Toulon takes place in pouring rain, at dead of night. The attacking French fall back, despairing and dispirited. Our hero – whose great chance this is – calls for a beating of the drums to rally his troops. But all the drummers are dead, swallowed up in the mud and mire of battle. Supernatural intervention. The rain turns to hail, which beats on the abandoned drums in a furious tattoo. But to what effect? This was a *silent* film. Don't you believe it. At this point the tympanist in the orchestra below the screen (the Paris Opera for the premiere) beat out a rapid and synchronous tattoo on his own drums – and swept us all along to triumph.

With a few notable exceptions such as King Vidor's *The Big Parade*, most of the films of the First World War originating in

American and British studios were little more than adventure stories As Paul Rotha summed up the era: 'The barbaric thrill provided by modern methods of war is too exciting to be dampened by a pacifist message. Box office appeal demands only that romance should play its part.'

The arrival of synchronously recorded sound – initially to provide cinemas with an already packaged full orchestral accompaniment (plus crashes and bangs) without the need to pay for live musicians – brought not only the added excitement of real gunfire, but Russian born Lewis Milestone's production of the German Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Nobody wins in this one. Death at the instant of reaching for the unattainable and incongruous beauty of a butterfly perched on the edge of a shellhole is its climax, and final comment.

At the time, Paul Rotha believed that this was even eclipsed by a British film. As a climax to their series of reconstructed First World War land battles, of which *Ypres* and *Mons* had also caught the public fancy, Bruce Woolfe and British Instructional Films produced a sound film on the Gallipoli campaign, which had been Churchill's plan to knock the Turks out of the war in 1915 by landing on their coastline in the Eastern Mediterranean. Nowadays only the play *Journey's End* captures the Rupert Brooke-like dialogue on the part of its young heroes – before the reality of war hits them. And only the Russians in their original epic reconstructions of their own revolution had hitherto bettered Geoffrey Barkas's re-enactment, and Anthony Asquith's editing of the Dublin Fusiliers storming ashore from the converted freighter River Clyde which served as their assault craft. *Tell England* was the title of this film. Tell England indeed! 'Tell it what?' Rotha wrote in later hindsight, forty years later. But at the time Grierson too shared his earlier enthusiasm. 'The biggest job,' he wrote, 'so far performed in the history of English cinema ... It is in a higher category altogether than other English films ... (but) a film of Gallipoli to be genuine must either be a rollicking farce like (Chaplin's) *Shoulder Arms* or a drab tragedy which finishes in honour but in futility.' As ever, Grierson proved to be a

prophet. In 1981 the Australian Peter Weir directed *Gallipoli*, a film in which all honour is given to his countrymen who bore the brunt and futility of fighting in that stricken peninsula.

'I have striven to be, and I have tried all the time to realise that I was the eyes of the millions of my fellow-countrymen at home. In my pictures I have endeavoured to catch something of the glamour, as well as the awful horror of it all. I have caught a picture here, a picture there; a scene in this place, a scene in that; and all the time at the back of my mind has always been the thought: that will give them some idea of things as they are out here.' The *cri de coeur* surely of all combat cameramen, summed up by Geoffrey Malins after his years of filming the trench warfare of World War One – and expressing something of what I myself felt as I set out to follow in his footsteps twenty-three years and another World War later.

As I embarked on a troopship in early December 1941, quite unbeknownst either to myself or my companions of the first muster of a newly formed 'Army Film and Photographic Unit' was a letter which had preceded us, sent from on high only a few weeks before. On the 27th of October, from the War Office where we had just paraded in full battle order, the Secretary of State for War had written to the Commander in Chief Middle East, whence we were now bound. 'My dear General (he was thus addressed and informed) there has been strong criticism in certain quarters of our failure to compete with the Germans in the production of battle films and photographs for propaganda purposes. The demand for battle photographs here and (in the then still neutral) USA is almost insatiable.'

Well, we had accordingly been whisked out of the hodge-podge of different units where we had been languishing since first called to the colours, and were off now to see what we could now do about it. Unfortunately we film men had as yet no cameras with which to do so – although we were assured they would be there and waiting for us when we arrived in Egypt. Obviously they had to be, and eventually were, hand cameras. The American Bell and Howell Eyemos, holding a hundred feet of 35mm in daylight loading spools, with three lenses of varying focal length

mounted on a revolvable turret, with a hand grip screwed into the base were, at that time, the most suited. They had become the badge and hallmark of the intrepid newsreel cameraman as played by Clark Gable in *Too Hot to Handle*, and as operated for real by such as Arthur Menken of Paramount News, covering the aerial bombardment of Shanghai and Nanking. But while we of the fledgling British Army Film and Photographic Unit were making our lengthy and laborious six-week voyage in a troopship to the Middle East the Japanese had gone on to bomb Pearl Harbor. One immediate outcome of this was the requisitioning of all Eyemos for the United States Army Signal Corps, as a direct result now also expanding and preparing to film their second World War as well. The only British portable camera was the still too heavy single-lens mounting hand-built magazine-loading Newman Sinclair, and there were only a few of these very solid jobs available anyhow. We were still twenty years away from the development, and complete acceptance of sophisticated 16mm equipment and film really needed for the get up and go, smash-and-grab nature of news and combat reporting.

For we British, now to become increasingly the poor relations of our richer and more powerful ally, it was to be De Vry cameras, very much the poor man's Eyemo. These were little better than sardine cans, hinging in half to be charged with only a hundred feet of 35 millimetre film in daylight loading spools, mounting only one of their three separate lenses at a time on a single socket in front, on the same principle as clipping in an electric light bulb (and only a little more secure); their clockwork motors wound up by a separate crank one was always in danger of losing. None the less, these mechanical lightweights were soon to shoot most of the material for the film which James Agee put highest of all of World War Two. *Desert Victory*, Awarded the Oscar for Feature Length Documentary that year of 1943.

Apart from one eighteen inch lens mounted on a very carefully rationed and rarely operated Newman Sinclair camera, the longest focal length lens we had on our De Vrys was a six inch.

World War Two



Desert battle



Desert victory

Forty years on from the Spanish-American war, we had still only halved our distance from the action – and Rommel fought from far further off than Teddy Roosevelt. So we were still little, if at all, better off than our forbears in Cuba. And it is this, apart from the nature of the fighting, which distinguishes the material shot in Vietnam a quarter of a century later from that older coverage of World War Two. We could never get close enough to the action, in any case dispersed all over the place in that Egyptian Desert in which was fought out such as the Battle of Alamein. With what are nowadays regarded as virtually wide angle lenses, if we ever got close enough for a genuine close-up, then we were dead. As indeed not a few of the more gallant of our little gang were to go on to prove to be the case.

The Second World War produced many a misconception of the popular image of war. Filming the British 2nd Army's assault crossing of the Albert Canal into Belgium, cameraman Jock Gordon was pinned down by crossfire in what little protection he could find underneath a railroad truck. From this restricted position he was at least able to point his camera in the general direction of infantry plunging forth in assault boats from the canal bank below. For his pains he was rewarded with a report from the armchair viewing committee back in England that 'you really must try and get more action and a greater variety of angles – looks like a Sunday afternoon on the river.'

Gordon's armchair critics had viewed his material from the isolated comfort of a projection theatre at Pinewood, now doing its duty as Britain's foremost propaganda film factory. Both Denham and Pinewood Studios had been acquired by the Rank Organisation. Of the two, they decided early in the war to concentrate all feature film production at Denham ('Korda's folly') leasing Pinewood as a base for both the Army and RAF Film Units. Here too was established the Crown Film Unit, now able to make full use of all the artifice available at this major film studio with which to embellish the realism of its documentary tradition. For a tribute to the Merchant Navy called *Western Approaches*, director Pat Jackson, who had previously seldom been able to work with more than a clockwork camera and a few rolls of

black-and-white, was now able to construct interior sets of the inside of an enemy submarine, flood, and film its sinking in Technicolor no less. To Pinewood had also been evacuated for safety from the bombed City of London the headquarters of the Royal Mint. (And no one has so far accused Korda of trying to get his hands on that.)

In the North African desert, and the mountains and river valleys of Italy, the Second World War never even remotely resembled the spectacular blood and thunder of the Hollywood reconstructions that cinemagoers had been brought up to believe in as the real thing. 'Viewed as a drama, the war is disappointing' D.W. Griffith is reported as saying when visiting France in 1918. Eisenstein's epic reconstruction of the mass storming of St. Petersburg's Winter Palace in his film *October*, ten years after the event, has now, thanks to its use again and again as a clip in television compilation programmes on the Russian Revolution, become accepted as a visual reality, how it was. In point of fact, the premises were actually occupied by a handful of sailors, few stone-cold sober.

War, like the death it brings and celebrates, is so huge and total an experience in all its entirety, that its genuine and grisly essence can rarely, if ever, be encompassed in a single shot; and only and rarely caught, fleetingly, in a passionate overall view of the pity of it all.

For a twenty-two-year-old combat cameraman in the Second World War, determined to be a film maker, this was another kind of torment. The cranking up of my De Vry, and its aiming at – so far as its angle of view was concerned – distant bangs and crashes as we were bombed and shelled by day, was in no sense a capturing of the image of war. The real hand-to-hand, gut-to-gut fighting almost always happened at night, so it was unfilmable. All the camera could see by daylight were separated holes in the ground, into which victors and vanquished had scratched themselves hurriedly before dawn; blobs, humps, and smudges in a calcined arena of otherwise emptiness. Tank battles were fought out in much the same way, with much the same tactics,

and over as relatively as wide an horizon as the naval encounters of the previous world war. Not alone, I despaired.

Others were more realistic. Before our arrival in the Middle East Pathe Newsreel's cameraman had already started to stage his own actions. A team of our own Army Film and Photographic Unit was permitted to follow this example. At the height of the Battle of Alamein they shot the most famous still picture of that desert campaign, the storming of an enemy position through smoke. Its location – back of the cookhouse at Rear Headquarters 9th Australian Division, five miles behind the actual front line. The most dramatic sequence of the film *Desert Victory* is the tremendous barrage of gunfire which precedes the British attack, and then the Scots Highland Division assault through the German minefield defences, bagpipes playing – seen as well as heard to be played – as they battle their way through. And all, as of course it was, in the darkness of the middle of the night of 23rd October 1942. Did anyone in audiences around the world ask themselves, or anyone else, how those scenes had been shot, in the distant desert, at night? A technical impossibility, of course. The sequence was set up, and shot, back in England, at Pinewood.

But did this matter, does this matter? Does it diminish, or invalidate *Desert Victory*? Those Highlanders did storm those minefields, their piper did play them through. It was not for want of courage on our part that they were not filmed in the desert, in the act of doing so. Optical photographic film cannot, by its nature, capture an image in darkness. Some amongst us even failed to get the gunflashes. I was one myself. The barrage was so colossal that it appeared to one's own eyes as one continual ripple of flashing light. But the movie camera turns at 24 pictures a second, its shutter revolving as the film is pulled down at this speed cutting the individual exposures by a further half, to all but a fiftieth of a second. It only needed the gunflash to take place in the other forty-nine fiftieths of a second for nothing to go on the film at all. This had not occurred to me.

Of the opening of the historic Battle of El Alamein I proudly turned in a hundred feet of perfectly blank film.

By the time we had crossed over the Mediterranean by way of Sicily, and were stuck in the mud of the mountains south of Rome, this inability to supply our masters in the distant War Office with the type of film they envisaged as bursting and blazing from the battlefield had reached a crisis. In Naples we were shown the American Signal Corps films *With the Marines at Tarawa* and *To the Shores of Iwo Jima*, staggering in their impact.

Iwo Jima. The strategic linch pin in the island chain outpost guarding the home islands of Japan itself. On to just three thousand yards of beach, five hundred landing craft had put ten waves of American marines ashore – in broad daylight. They endured seventy-two hours of continuous pounding on the beach before they were able to move forward. With them there were cameramen of the United States Navy, the Marine Corps, and the Coast Guard. Dominating everything was Mount Surabachi. In the words of one of the marines 'they chased us off there five times. We came back six ...' It took them twenty-six days to secure the island – in due course to become the airbase for the nuclear strikes against Hiroshima and Nagasaki. How could cameramen in such a setup miss, we asked ourselves? But to Pinewood all wars, anywhere, in whatever terrain, should have appeared just as horrifically spectacular.

Led by one of the few Hollywood stars to see real combat – Louis Hayward, now a Marine Captain and formerly *Son of Monte Cristo* – those American cameramen just could not go wrong. There they had been, flung down on a postage stamp-sized beach, with all hell happening all around them in broad Pacific daylight. In Italy we were now confronted with widely dispersed and now mountain warfare, in which virtually all of what little action there was at that time still took place at night. Was reconstruction – faking if you like – to be the answer, our solution? The enemy had never had any qualms about it.

Right from the beginning, the Germans had artfully and carefully staged and cut scenes and incidents into the mass of genuine combat material which made up *Baptism of Fire* and *Victory in the West*, their films of the invasion of Poland and conquest of France. The Russians' *Defeat of the Germans near Moscow* has

previously knocked out German tanks blown up again more thoroughly for the benefit of one of the fifteen cameramen concerned, as well as a restaged mass charge by ski troops to build up real but inevitably sporadic and uncoordinated coverage of the recapture of a village.

At the end of the war with Japan I was in Saigon, and came upon the vast store of film which the Japanese had been distributing throughout South East Asia. I screened this treasure trove, amongst which was *Marei Senki* (Malayan War Record), which featured the sinking of the British battleships *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*. Sent to the bottom of the South China Sea, this ensured British defeat in Malaya and Singapore. The two ships on the screen were obvious models, settling down slowly in a studio tank. The *Battle of Santiago Bay* all over again.

In Italy, in early 1944, we continued in our attempts to catch the image of war, the hard way, losing lives and limbs in the endeavour. But we were never able to satisfy our armchair critics back in London, ensconced in the comfortable isolation of their viewing theatres. I held long talks about all this with our own chief in the field, Geoffrey Keating, one time Fleet Street photographer, Rifle Brigade Major, Officer Commanding Number Two Army Film and Photographic Section. In the relative sanctuary of a drain on the road to Rome, which I was sharing with an American rifle company, on the 2nd March 1944, I wrote to him my views on the subject:

‘During any feature of the existing campaign, or as an entirety in future operations (a Production Unit) would shoot a coherent and complete document of operations, for Pinewood use only, which would serve as a framework to any film of that operation. Thus, and only thus, would the previous charge of the Pinewood Editors that the material of the Section lacks continuity and imaginative treatment be overcome ... Instead of attempts at making feature documentaries of campaigns from existing, miscellaneous material, each item of which shot as an end in itself, a complete framework to such a work would be in existence, designed by one mind, viewing and interpreting cinematographically the operation as a whole, in the creative terms

of the cinema. It is thus that films are made, and only thus can documentaries of the army in action in the field be satisfactorily produced. The miscellaneous material from the other cine operators in the unit, with whom close liaison would be maintained, would be cut into this existing framework, and a balanced documentary of the entire operation result. The need for such an approach is admirably summed up by a quotation from the Nazi brochure on the German propaganda film *Victory in the West*: 'You get no documentary by joining together documentary stills. You get no history by joining together historical events. It is ORDER, the showing up of relations which turns chronology into history. And thus it is the WILL, the IDEA behind the film which turns dead celluloid into a living documentary.'

What I was trying to do of course was usurp the prerogatives of the producers back at Pinewood Studios. David Macdonald and Roy Boulting *Desert Victory*; Frank Capra and Hugh Stewart *Tunisian Victory*; the following year Garson Kanin and Carol Reed *The True Glory*, as was to be believed and entitled the liberation of France and the downfall of Germany; and finally David Macdonald once again repeating success with *Burma Victory*, the defeat of Japan at the gateway to India. What a hope! I was, after all, at that time of writing, just a twenty-three-year-old wartime sergeant who had been issued with a camera instead of a gun. It was only with my joining and filming the resistance movements across the Adriatic in Albania, Greece, and Yugoslavia later that same year that I finally came to terms with myself as a cameraman in World War Two.

What I was not to know when I wrote that memorandum to the man in charge of British Army cameramen in Italy is that only a few miles away, and a few months before, an American had approached the filming of the war in just that way. Considering that not so long ago in Hollywood he had directed with conspicuous skill *The Maltese Falcon*. This was not so very surprising.

Captain John Huston had arrived in Italy with a Signal Corps camera team led by his friend Jules Buck, commissioned a lieutenant. As the Mediterranean area was an Anglo-American thea-

tre of military operation, with them to make up the balance was the British author-screenwriter Eric ('Mask of Dimitrios') Ambler who, with Peter Ustinov, had recently scripted Carol Reed's *The Way Ahead*. In just the same way as the *March of Time* had personalised the immense American home front war effort on just one small factory in Ohio, so they decided to concentrate their efforts on a single battle, and just one infantry regiment, the 143rd of the 36th Texas Division. North of Naples, the way to Rome lay up the Liri Valley. Commanding its approaches was a little township, typical of the tens of thousands which cling to the hills and mountainsides of the Italian peninsular, and which were seemingly identical and never-ending bloody stepping stones the American and British armies had to take and fight over to get to Rome. This one was called San Pietro.

The night of 15th December, 1943, the Texans were ordered to take it. Dug into the mountain slopes all around, the Germans fought back like fiends. Concentrated on the narrow regimental front, with ten or more inch long-focus lenses on their Eyemos, up there with the infantry, mortared in what should have been the serene surroundings of olive groves, hanging on while counter-attacked by intensive and heavy shellfire, Huston's cameramen got the closest and most vivid combat coverage of the Italian campaign. Huston wrote, and spoke, his own commentary. 'The price paid for the ground gained was at the rate of a man a yard.' Out of sixteen tanks sent forward to take out the enemy strong-points, only three got through into the village, and none of these even survived. The 143rd, like the other regiments in the Division, was decimated; reduced to the strength of less than a rifle company before they finally succeeded in pushing the Germans just five miles further back along the road to Rome. 'The lives lost were precious lives. Precious to their loved ones. Precious to themselves.' Huston's film ends with the burial of the American dead. One after another the bodies are lowered into hastily-dug graves. And as these dead men finish their war, and lives, in holes in the ground, so we are shown living people emerging from other holes in the ground. Out from cellars and shelters beneath their battered buildings emerge the inhabitants,



Author 'cleaned up' outside Cassino

the Italian peasants for whom was presumably fought *The Battle of San Pietro*.

When they had at first succeeded in getting into the ruins of San Pietro with the surviving forward elements of the 143rd, Huston and his companions had been shelled out before they had been able to shoot even a foot of film. Ambler later had this to say:

'Captious critics of war documentaries, too, should have rules: for every gallant fighting man peering over the top of a slit trench as the barrage flickers, we ought to remember a camera operator with his buttocks in the air and his back to the enemy. Unless, of course, the critic prefers straight newsreel coverage.'

Only finally shown fifteen months later, the United States Army Pictorial Service tacked a final title on this film which comes close to conveying what Hemingway called the ultimate loneliness of what is known as combat. 'All scenes in this picture were photographed within range of enemy small arms or artillery

fire. For purposes of continuity a few of these scenes were shot before and after the actual battle of San Pietro.'

Even that cookhouse back at the division's rear headquarters at the Battle of Alamein could, at a stretch, have been defined as being within range of enemy artillery fire. But all reconstruction, of whatever nature, however close to the firing line, was soon to be totally prohibited to the British Army Film and Photographic Unit; and by the time they went ashore in Normandy the following year, they at last had cameras, with lenses, made for the job. The Germans all along had had their Arriflexes, originally designed in the first place as combat cameras for this war.

Only the Americans had colour on any practical scale. That ancient mariner manqué, John Ford, covered in this way *The Battle of Midway*. Under the direction of Edward Steichen, United States Navy cameramen shot a mint of sixteen millimetre Kodachrome on an Essex class aircraft carrier in action in the Pacific. Louis de Rochemont produced and edited. Robert Taylor spoke the commentary. All concerned deserved the Oscar they earned for *The Fighting Lady*.

Directed by Harry Watt and Humphrey Jennings, *London Can Take It* had demonstrated this to be only too true during the Blitz of 1940, but fifty years on there are now very mixed feelings about that war as waged from the air. *The Battle of Britain*, refought on the screen in 1969, was more tactfully retitled for German audiences *Achtung Spitfeuer*, but it has to be remembered that for years the only way the British could hit back at the enemy heartland was from the air. Soon after Pearl Harbor had brought the United States into the war, and forsaking such as Donald Duck and Goofy for the cause, the Walt Disney studios combined live action with animation to argue the case for *Victory through Air Power*.

In Britain Bomber Command, and its controversial Chief Air Marshall Arthur Harris, were pledged to this concept, and its execution. Climaxed in February 1945 with the aerial assault on Dresden which killed at least 35,000 people and destroyed most of the city. The argument rumbles on. In 1991 the RAF's 'Bomber Command Association' set out to erect in the heart of

London, which had known very well its own Blitz, a memorial statue to their former Commander in Chief, 'Bomber' Harris. The mayor of Pforzheim, a German city which suffered 20,000 dead in this way, pleaded please don't.

Two by now legendary documentary films of World War Two featured, and in one case actually flew with bombing aircraft and their crews at that time. The one British and the other American.

Having restaged a tithe war for the *March of Time*, Harry Watt, and now with the Crown Film Unit, came up with *Target for Tonight*. Although genuine Royal Air Force pilots and personnel performed their actual combat roles, all the scenes inside the aircraft fighting off flak and unloading its bombs on to an oil storage depot down river from Hamburg had to be mocked up on a sound stage at Denham. This is not to belittle the director, or his crew. There just was no room to spare for any passenger with a movie camera inside that cramped Wellington bomber code-named in the film 'F for Freddie'. For the director of *Wuthering Heights* and *Mrs Miniver* there was no such inhibition or necessary subterfuge. William Wyler and his cameraman William Clothier did it the hard way. What made this possible was the more than twice as large and daylight-flown B17, the aptly named 'Flying Fortress'.

In 1938, and soon after official objection to Clark Gable starring in MGM's proposed British feature *Shadow of the Wing*, the future Rhett Butler had safely landed in *Test Pilot* the prototype of a new Boeing long range intercontinental bomber, the B17. For the same studio, six years later, and with the United States by then three years into the war, King Vidor climaxed his own *American Romance* of an immigrant turned tycoon with his hero's mass production of these same Flying Fortresses. And as Wyler's actual wartime combat film of a single crew's final mission in one of these aerial behemoths came to be reinvented and restaged by David ('Chariots of Fire') Puttnam as recently as 1990, lets take a look at how they made and flew the original *Memphis Belle*.

It was to be some time before the RAF came up with anything comparable to the B17, the *Lancaster*, and in any case they had believed in bombing by night. The United States Air Force preferred to do it by day, confident at first in what they believed to be the protection of the all round arcs of fire possible from B17's flying together in mass formations. So if you could squeeze aboard a B17 with a hand-held sixteen millimetre camera, you too could shoot more or less whatever happened. During five different combat missions over Germany, this is just what Wyler and cameraman William Clothier set out to do, and indeed did. In his own description of himself as a twenty-four-year-old kid, Clothier had been one of upwards of twenty youngsters like himself armed with hand-held cameras filming 'anything and everything' that flew for William Wellman's silent epic of World War One, *Wings*. Years later he was to photograph in Cinemascope, for the same director, *The High and the Mighty*, together with no less than eight pictures for John Wayne, including *The Alamo*.

But as he was airborne from a base in East Anglia in the autumn of 1942, all this lay in the future – if they got back. On this first flight, over the enemy target of Vegesack, for Lieutenant Colonel Wyler, Major Clothier shot the first aerial motion picture of an actual bombing attack in the Second World War. At an altitude of 28,000 feet, the temperature was sixty-five degrees below zero. All the guns in the aircraft froze – and so did his camera. Finally, and with the help of the bomb aimer, Clothier was able to get it to turn, and shot through the open bomb doors. The meagre footage he was able to bring back was the beginning of the 16,000 feet that he and Wyler were then able to bring back in mission after mission over the next few months. And make no mistake about it – this *was* in colour. Sixteen millimetre Kodachrome. Just as Louis de Rochemont's *Fighting Lady*, to be enlarged after Wyler's final edit into 35 millimetre Technicolor, for theatrical release, in this case by Paramount.

The Memphis Belle was the name one crew had given to their Fortress, and Wyler saw that this whole story of the American air assault on Germany from Britain could be focused on the

crew of just such an aircraft. And this of course he did. His material edited into and around their final mission, their twenty-fifth, before relocation back home to the United States. The drama and the tension transferred in this way into audience identification as well as participation. Would they survive this final raid over the U Boat pens at Wilhelmshaven, to live on in movie history, these twelve young men of the original *Memphis Belle*?

'Pilot Captain Robert Morgan, industrial engineer from Asheville, North Carolina... Second Pilot Captain Jim Varinis, business administration student at the University of Connecticut.. Radio Operator and Gunner Sergeant Bob Hanson, construction worker from Spokane, Washington... Navigator Captain Chuck Layton, chemistry student at Ohio University... Engineer and Top Turret Gunner Sergeant Harold Locke, from Greenbay, Wisconsin, used to be a stevedore... Tail Gunner Sergeant John Quinlan, of Yonkers, New York, clerk for a carpet company... Ball Turret Gunner Sergeant Cecil Scott, pressman for a rubber company in New Jersey... Bombadier Captain Vincent Evans, operated a fleet of trucks in Fort Worth, Texas... Waist Gunners Sergeant Bill Winchell chemist for a paint company in Chicago and Sergeant Tony Nostale, nineteen years old and used to repair washing machines in Detroit...' The original combat crew of *The Memphis Belle*.

And of course Lieutenant Colonel William Wyler and Major William Clothier. Originally there was to have been a third member of this Hollywood contingent, Sound Recordist Lieutenant Harold Tannenbaum, like Clothier also from RKO Studios. But sent across to follow them from the United States by sea, all their equipment had been sunk. Wyler was able to scrounge camera equipment from Lieutenant Commander John Ford of the United States Navy – but no sound. Forty-seven-year-old Tannenbaum volunteered to fly none the less, and Clothier showed him how to use a camera. On an earlier raid and over enemy coastline, this veteran of Astaire-Rogers musicals had been reported missing, his Fortress shot down over St Nazaire. Not so lucky as the twelve men crew of the original *Memphis Belle*.

How did these films of World War Two look to a later generation whose battle scars were spelt Vietnam? To mark the thirtieth anniversary of what the then victorious still call VE Day, in the United States WNET TV Channel 13 mounted a massive retrospective. Reviewing the programme in the New York Times of May 8th, 1975, John O'Connor wrote of *San Pietro* that, apart from its closing sequence still 'dazzling', it 'is less a masterpiece than a historical – and thoroughly absorbing – curiosity'. Of Frank Capra's *Prelude to War* (the first of seven in the *Why We Fight* series) he was less than kind. 'The distortions are glaring. The emotional accuracy and justification are startling.' The entire programme, which also included Wyler's *Memphis Belle* and outstanding episodes from the NBC compilation series *Victory at Sea*, was summed up as a 'first-rate source of image manipulation and bemused nostalgia ... The films are innocent, naive and righteous, and they have every reason to be an accurate reflections of the nation at that particular moment in history. The lines between right and wrong, between good and evil were clearly drawn – and 'we' were on the right, the angelic side. The rare unanimity of opinion may never be recaptured.'

All very true. Naive we certainly were. Filming the opposed landing on the beaches at Salerno back in September 1943, when the Anglo American 5th Corps invaded Mussolini's Italy, was British Army Film Unit and formerly Paul Rotha's cameraman Harry Rignold. He was killed, and of him someone [Alan Moorehead] wrote this elegy:

'He saw for those at home who could not see,
And banished distance for a million eyes,
Through him they gazed beneath strange foreign skies
Where exiled father, husband, son might be.
He helped those lonely hearts to understand,
Comfort he brought, then war's realities
Which stirred a thousand factories
Till lathes worked faster for his steady hand.
Steady amidst the thundering crash of war,
Steady to hold the world's eye of his lens –

His only weapon. Here was work well done,
To face the ultimate that he might pour
Fresh inspiration out to everyone.
For those who mourn, there is no recompense.'

It is not only our attitudes which have changed. Like the equipment with which it is now filmed, war too has changed its ways and its means. Lightweight 16 millimetre and electronic video cameras with super telephoto lenses and soft on the feet guerilla raids by 'freedom fighters' is the contemporary combination of tactics. But for quite a while after the Second World War those bulky old 35 millimetre film cameras, still often on tripods, were humped into action.



Author as World War Two combat cameraman using camera with which he filmed Yugoslav, Albanian and Greek resistance fighters