



The Cameraman who filmed the Western Front: Reviewing the contribution of Geoffrey Malins 90 years on

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'If a picture is worth a thousand words, how can we value a moving picture?'

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1) Modern communications and the 90th anniversary of the First of July 1916

The application of communications technology has revolutionised the projection of national and global events. Governments now well understand the art of public relations in seeking support from those they govern. Their skilful marketing of their strategic objectives can be used to allay fears and concerns. A key weapon in their communications armoury is visual imagery. The development of high speed emulsions and now digital electronics has given versatility to where and when the required images can be obtained. This applies especially to sustaining public support for military operations. However this versatility cannot easily be controlled. Union Jack covered coffins of dead British soldiers being carried out of the back of transport planes, the slow march of American military corteges into the Arlington National Cemetery, the shattered bodies of the victims of Iraqi suicide bombers, these show the human cost of governmental decisions. Public support, once strong, can wither away under the impact of these images.

The evolution in camera technology during the past ninety years has driven the dramatic increase in the ability of cine and 'stills' photographers to film the battle field. Light weight cine cameras and digital cameras mean that cinematographers can now bring moving images of military conflict rapidly into people's homes. Viewers became used to seeing films taken that day of events during the Vietnam War and the First Gulf War. Today the images are of military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Yet ninety years ago was filmed an iconic sequence that Strachan (1998) has suggested continues to remain 'an enduring image of war'. The film of the explosion of the British mine



under the Hawthorn Ridge Redoubt, above Beaumont Hamel, on the First of July 1916, still help set the scene in television broadcasts for programmes on the Battle of the Somme. This sequence was filmed by Geoffrey Malins from his stand on the bank opposite the hillside on which the Redoubt was built (see also Appendix 3).

Taking cine and 'stills' images has for some 150 years required photographers to have clear lines of sight to their subjects. Studio portraits, family snapshots and landscape photographs have rarely presented any risk to the photographers. But more unusual subjects can do so, the 'live' battlefield being the most risky. During the late Nineteenth Century, photographers began to wish to portray to the newspaper readers what a real battle was like. American Civil War photographs showed dead soldiers and campaign events. Newsreels from the Boer War (Pakenham, 1979) and stills from the Russo-Japanese War began to show what might be possible. But the camera technology based on the slow emulsion speeds then available meant that images of movement were inevitably blurred.

By the start of the First World War, the technological development of cameras and films meant that for the first time photographers could think of getting so close to the battlefield that they were almost part of the battle. Their film spools, with the quicker emulsion speeds now available, meant that photographing movement become feasible. But in order to film 'live' actions on the Western Front the cinematographers such as Malins were required to expose their heads and chests above the parapets of the sand-bagged trenches. Furthermore their heavy hand-cranked cameras and tripods were difficult to set up and use in the confined spaces of the front line trenches. With the increase in firepower, especially of machine-guns, sniper rifles and heavy artillery, their risk of being injured or killed increased greatly. It would take men of unusual personalities to accept that risk.

2) Malins the 'volunteer' cinematographer

Malins was the British pioneer in filming moving images of the battlefield that were not blurred, doing so from early after the start of the First World War. In his book 'How I Filmed The War: a record of the extraordinary experiences of the man who filmed the great Somme battles, etc.', first published in 1920, Lieut. Geoffrey H. Malins O.B.E. (as he styled himself) described how, from October 1914, he filmed the Western Front from the North Sea to the Vosges mountains, trench sectors occupied by Belgian, French and British Empire troops. He was regularly filming under conditions where battle-hardened officers and soldiers were hesitant to expose themselves. With the passage of time he got closer to the epicentres of the military actions. The personal risk to Malins of filming trench warfare over a period of some four years is relevant to the analysis of courage made by Lord Moran (1945) in his book, 'The Anatomy of Courage'. He suggested that courageous performance had an effective span of some six months before it declined unless proper rest was provided. Though Malins was filming in positions of extreme danger during these years he did have time away from the trenches when editing and publicising his films.

It is important not to over-dramatise the strain on him. Malins was in essence a volunteer though he was filming under close military supervision through being conducted around the British sector by Army Intelligence Officers such as Captain Faunthorpe. When he was in the trenches he had a degree of choice as to when and where to film and would seek permission from the officers serving there. For example, he took the unexpected opportunity on the First



of July to wriggle along the earth tunnel through to the Sunken Road, in No Man's Land, there to record the historic scene of infantrymen waiting to go into battle.

The officers' usual *caveats* were "*It's your own responsibility if you get killed*" and "*Do not attract enemy gunfire on to our position*" – both reasonable requirements. Nevertheless there was no being told to go 'over the top' into a hail of machine-gun fire. He was not subject to military discipline if he took a decision that 'discretion was the wiser part of valour'. However by seeking to enter the epicentres, he was deliberately exposing himself to the randomness of falling and bursting shells. His unusual equipment was a magnet for vigilant German snipers. German machine-gunners and artillery observers considered him a legitimate target. Hence it is reasonable to conclude that his likelihood of being wounded or killed whilst getting to suitable vantage points and filming from these was for extended periods of time as high or even higher than for the troops moving around the front line trenches.

Taking these factors into account this essay reviews his contribution to his and subsequent generations gaining a clearer understanding of trench warfare on the Western Front. Besides his autobiography, his film trilogy has been viewed at the Imperial War Museum, London, to assess whether the criticisms made of his approach to filming were acceptable. Though the essay focuses on Malins because of what he wrote and what was written about him, it is recognised that other cinematographers such as John "Mac" McDowell also made important contributions, especially in 1917 and 1918 when Malins was suffering poor health and experiencing post traumatic stress disorder.

3) Filming the First of July

The First of July 1916, the day the infantry assaults began, is the significant day in his overall contribution to battlefield photography. Attached the evening before to the 29th Division he went to the British trenches in front of the strongly fortified village of Beaumont Hamel. At around 06.20 that morning he, and the soldier instructed to help him, carried his equipment through the narrow earth tunnel to the Sunken Road where he filmed the infantrymen of the 1st Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers, waiting patiently for their advance to begin at 07.30 on that bright summer day. This 'road' was and still is a farm track leading up from the Auchonvillers-Beaumont Hamel valley road on to the Redan Ridge. When later these soldiers left their shelter behind the roadside hedge to advance towards the village they were delayed by an undiscovered bank in the field and then slaughtered by machine-gun fire. Their bodies now lie in the "*small but dignified Beaumont-Hamel Cemetery*" (Coombs, 1994) sited between the bank and the village wood from where the German machine-guns fired.

Malins and the soldier then returned by the tunnel to 'White City' before moving to trenches known as 'Jacob's Ladder' overlooking the valley road. German shells had just fallen on the Ladder obliterating his prepared stand so he had to find a new vantage point from where to film. This was some distance from Jacob's Ladder and on the side of a small bank behind the British firing trenches (see Appendix 3). Hand cranking his cine camera from 07.19 and 30 seconds, he began filming the historic explosion that destroyed the Hawthorn Ridge Redoubt across the valley. Today the deep craters remain a testament to the skills of the British miners who spent months digging towards the Redoubt and twice filled the mine head chambers with explosives for blowing on the First of July and the 13th of November, when Beaumont Hamel was finally captured by the 51st Division.



The bravery of Malins and his colleague, John “Mac” McDowell, filming during the first ten days of the Battle of the Somme infantry assaults can too easily be under-estimated. In fact they had already been filming for several days following the start of the preliminary British bombardment on the 24th of June. In reply, German shells were falling on the British trenches during this bombardment. Malins had been using his cumbersome Aeroscope, a camera powered by a motor driven by compressed air stored in cylinders within the camera, the cylinders being charged by a foot or hand pump. Finding the motor tended to jam, he instead used his French designed Debie Parvo camera. Unlike modern cine cameras this camera had to be hand-cranked at a steady 2 revolutions per second, or 120 revolutions per minute – even whilst German shells were exploding nearby, sometimes within feet! Panning the camera whilst hand-cranking was even more tricky. In addition the heavy tripod had to be carried to the position, rigidly set in place so that camera shake did not lead to a ‘jumpy’ film. Malins recorded that this tripod did suffer occasional damage, bits being torn off by bullets and shell fragments and also legs being broken so that the parts had to be splinted to return some rigidity.

4) Editing his career; the path to the Somme offensive

From what is known of his early life history, what experience did Malins bring to his four years on the Western Front? His early years and his later filming along the Western Front before June 1916 can be summarised. Born in Hastings on November 18th, 1886, he was christened Arthur Herbert Malins. Learning his trade as a portrait photographer he was fortunate to take a job with the Clarendon Film Company in 1910, becoming their chief cameraman before he left at the start of the War to be a freelance war photographer.

As both the British and French militaries banned photography (note the forbidden photographs taken by Private Fyfe, previously a press photographer, with his pocket camera up against the German wire near Hooze on 16 June 1915 – see Simkins, 1991), Malins spent some five months visiting and filming the Belgian army entrenched between Ypres and the North Sea. His first film was first shown to Gaumont cinema audiences on the 14th of December. He then infiltrated into eastern France to film in the Vosges mountains in February and March 1915 which was first shown to British cinema audiences on the 22nd of March as the ‘Brilliant French Victory in the Vosges’.

Finally the British military were compelled to concede, with their ban being lifted in October 1915. Malins left for the British sector on the 2nd of November with Edward “Teddy” Tong, who was invalided out a month later. During that first year of filming Malins was wounded twice, deafened innumerable times by exploding shells and gassed three times. It was an introspective and isolated life, observing the soldiers as potential ‘screen actors’ but by not being part of them losing out on the camaraderie which for most made the conditions bearable. The photographs of Malins in his book are of a man with sunken eyes rimmed deep black by fatigue.

Hiley (1993, Page xv) does note that his critics commented that they were unable to make out what sort of man Malins was from his writings. Though his book gives little away he did show a normal understanding of fear and horror despite his training to observe and record events dispassionately. When not attempting to film ‘live’ battle scenes, he filmed the sites of



former battles such as Neuve-Chapelle using his Aeroscope camera. But filming was never simply pressing the shutter. Meticulous records had to be kept of aperture settings for each 'shot', together with the dates and locations of the shots for later developing of the negatives and writing the subtitles to accompany the silent films.

His filming was not just from the ground. In April 1916, he took a ride in a British BE2C aircraft and filmed, by hand-cranking his Debie Parvo camera, most of the British and Belgian trench systems. At one point he forgot where he was and nearly fell out of the plane! British G.H.Q. then stopped the aerial film being shown for two years, presumably believing that German spies might be sitting with the British audiences!

Thus by June 1916, Malins had become 'battle-hardened' and was ready for probably the most important assignment he undertook, the filming of the Big Push that was to eat up the volunteer New Armies in wearing down the German field army. The after effect was that later offensives generally used Canadian and Australian formations as the 'shock troops' because of their remaining offensive capabilities – such as on the 8th of August 1918. (*And people accuse me of being provocative! Editor*)

5) The Malins feature-length film trilogy

When the 'Battle of the Somme' film was released in August 1916, it was a box office success. 20 million of Britain's 43 million citizens bought tickets at the 5,000 cinemas to see the five reels projected over 80 minutes at silent speed. For the first time the British and Allied audiences were able to see moving pictures showing what 'real' battles were like. But being silent films the audiences could not hear the sound of battle, having instead to listen to the music played on pianos or organs accompanying the films.

His next film that was shown in British cinemas had a running time of 40 minutes at silent speed. It was of King George V visiting the Somme battlefield and inspecting the conditions of the captured German trenches and the broken ground. With 'The King Visits His Armies in the Great Advance', British audiences saw for the first time the King separated from his regal duties. He was filmed laughing whilst deliberately posing for the camera. Later Malins filmed him gently caressing a small puppy at a casualty clearing station - suggesting his genuine love of animals. He was filmed being hauled out of a trench by his son, the Prince of Wales, and another officer after finding it was easier to climb down than clamber out. The King even allowed himself to be filmed exchanging kisses with his son as a father, not as a king. Malins was grateful when the King even helped organise the sequence at the French chateau with himself, M. Poincaré the President of France, the French Generals Joffre and Foch and Sir Douglas Haig. Haig was the most difficult to organise as he was rather shy of being filmed, a shyness observed elsewhere in his relationships with his G.H.Q. colleagues and the British troops.

The King was filmed smoking cigarettes, whilst the surrounding generals did not. His smoking linked him to the British 'Tommy' and his cigarette, permanently hanging from between his lips. The image of the King as a soldier-king with a human face was solidified – as the continuing presence of King George VI and his Queen Elizabeth in Buckingham Palace during London's Blitz in 1940 helped solidify the image of a king sharing the dangers with his people.



The third film of the trilogy was 'Battle of the Ancre and the Advance of the Tanks'. Malins filmed the battle scenes at Martinpuich on the first day that tanks were used in action, 15 September 1916. He wrote of his awe at seeing the 'Hush! Hush!' wonder weapon, HMLS 'Daphne', emerging out of the early morning mist, manoeuvring towards the German trenches, and shooting down the inquisitive German soldiers. Opposite the demolished windmill at Pozieres, close to Martinpuich, is the memorial to this attack, where one of the bronze scale model tanks still has bullet damage from another world war. Appendix 5 records a later use of the secret term 'Hush Hush'.

Malins was bowled over by an exploding shell whilst filming at Martinpuich, resulting in a loss of continuity within the sequence being filmed, and he was left very shaken. As he recorded he was lucky to survive the attacks on Morval and Lesboeuifs ten days later because a bursting shell rendered him unconscious. He awoke with what he described as "shell shock" (Malins, photograph facing Page 224) from which it took him time to recover. He was also experiencing a lack of sleep. After three weeks of rest in London he returned to continue filming until the 28th of November.

In addition to the continuing assaults he recorded the sites of the battlefield ground won by the British and Dominion soldiers during the previous months. By then, to reach his vantage points, he was having to wade through the infamous Somme mud, sometimes well above his knees. When Malins returned to England in late November, Henry Tomlinson, a journalist, noticed a profound change in him from six months earlier: "*his nerves had worn a trifle*" (Hiley, 1993, Page xxix) and he was now reluctant to speak about what he had faced. This is understandable as he had witnessed the charnel house of Trones Wood, the military debris left behind at Pozieres and Contalmaison with their surfeit of soldiers' bodies and body parts, the ruins of Guillemont village and the German fortifications that had been Mouquet Farm.

He recognised that improving on his first battle film would be difficult, instinctively understanding that British audiences would want more than the many scenes of marching Tommies and pulverised trenches they had willingly accepted some months before. He was proved correct. When the British audiences saw the film, it became clear that the battle scenes were falling out of favour with the audiences, who had bought tickets for one specific purpose. They wished to see the new wonder weapon smashing its way through the German barbed wire defences. However the increasingly sanitised scenes now beginning to be required by the G.H.Q. censors such as Brig.Gen John Charteris (1931) seemed unrealistic when related to the earlier destruction of the volunteer Pals' Battalions, the limited ground captured during the previous two months, and the horrendously long lists of the fallen being printed in the national and local papers.

Malins wrote of the problems of trying to capture 'thrills' for the British audiences as the filming became more repetitive with the changing nature of the Somme fighting. Because the 'nibbling' attacks were now localised, he found it difficult to hear of them before the individual attacks began. So for many sequences during the August, he was reduced to filming in the afternoons as the attackers returned, to be followed by the bringing in of the wounded, the dead and the German prisoners.



6) The last full-feature film

After 'The Battle of the Ancre and the Advance of the Tanks', the next film with its running time of 75 minutes at silent speed was 'The German Retreat and the Battle of Arras'. Before starting to make this film Malins had rested to partially recuperate from the full effects of his filming between September and November. During the filming of the German retreat in early 1917 he and a 'stills' photographer succeeded in driving their car beyond the advancing British troops after the capture of Peronne (Appendix 4). Having completed in early April the filming of what became the first reel of 'The German Retreat and the Battle of Arras', he was forced to take sick leave suffering from a slight wound and what is now thought to be amoebic dysentery. Other cinematographers such as "Mac" McDowell filmed the remaining reels. Though still suffering from insomnia, Malins was able to return to work in June but was not fit enough to continue writing his descriptions of what he was experiencing.

When shown in 1917, this fourth film became a box-office failure (Bond, 2002) but not necessarily due to the cinematographers. As Reeves (1999) points out there had been a significant shift in the mood of the British population. The war had become much nastier for them. Food shortages brought about by the U-boat blockade, rising prices, the suspicions that wealthier people were profiteering from selling the limited supplies, the 'forced' conscription of men into the armed forces, the continuing high casualty rates, the numbers of badly wounded soldiers returning to Britain, increasing aerial attacks resulting in civilian deaths from German bombing; audiences now knew the reality of 'total war' was much darker than they previously thought possible.

British audiences no longer wanted to see smiling faces of soldiers marching up to the Front and scenes now sanitised by G.H.Q. censors to avoid the sights of corpses and wounded men. The British population increasingly saw the war as a grim conflict that they had to make personal sacrifices to help win. The propagandists recognised this change in mood so the Arras film was the last full-feature film released for public showing.

Malins also fell out of favour because of his self-publicity leading to newspaper headings such as 'The Real Film Hero' and descriptions of him as 'Malins of No Man's Land'. Although partially justified by the bravery of the cinematographers, British G.H.Q. wanted British audiences to see the British 'Tommy' as the real hero. Brig. Gen. Charteris, the Head of Intelligence, criticised Malins' "misstatements and exaggerations" (Hiley, 1993, Page xxxi) though in his book (1931, Page 166) he recognised the success of the first film. However providing some evidence against the claim of misstatements, Malins did give an accurate account of the geographical sites he and the 'stills' photographer visited during their following up of the retreating Germans in early 1917 (Appendix 4).

Lord Beaverbrook, the Canadian press baron, appointed him to the Canadian militia with the rank of Temp. Hon. Lieutenant. But continuing illness, suffering from the effects of influenza and dysentery, meant that his last official tour of duty was from January to March 1918. His health broke down during the Kaiser's Offensive and one of the cinema trade papers 'The Cinema' reported that Malins had suffered "*a bad nervous breakdown*". Another, the 'Bioscope' commented on the length of his service by writing "*not surprising that he had felt*



the strain” (Hiley, Page xxxv). Malins resigned his commission as of 31 May 1918 “*on the grounds of ill health*” (IWM information courtesy of the London Gazette).

7) Malins after the Western Front

His nervous disability continued for at least another 18 months after his discharge although he was able to resume scripting and directing films in the studio. In May 1922 he flew as the photographer in the British attempt at the first circumnavigation of the world by air. The expedition ended unsuccessfully, the seaplane crash landing in the Bay of Bengal from where Malins and the pilot, Norman MacMillan, had to be rescued. In 1926 and 1927 he was able to travel around the world, but on a motor-bike. By 1930 his photographic career was over as technological developments such as the “talkies” left him unhappy. The next year he became part of the overland expedition to Cape Town. With no reason to return to Britain he lived in South Africa until his death from cancer in 1940 at the age of 54.

His relentless self-promotion as a “showman” (Hiley, Page xxxvii) during the Great War was considered an unpleasant personality trait which angered senior officers at British G.H.Q. such as Brig. Gen. Charteris. The authenticity of some of the sequences began to be questioned (Appendix 2). Nevertheless his book does give a realistic insight into what it was actually like to film during battles on the Western Front. He acknowledged the times when personal stupidity should have killed him, when he had to overcome his own fear to get his stunning cine sequences, and what he felt when shells exploded within feet of him. Recognised by Kelly (1997, Page 60) as “*the most famous of the war cinematographers*”, Reeves (1999) argues that ‘Battle of the Somme’ was in terms of audience numbers the most successful British film ever made.

It is remarkable that his personality was sufficiently robust to withstand the strain of filming trench warfare for so long. Though he may not have been much liked, without that personality he might not have been able to achieve so much. As with many others, the after-effects of the mental punishment he took appear to have remained, exerting a high price on him, both personally and professionally. However, to his credit, in his book he recorded his continuing pride in the British Tommies he had talked to, seen ready to advance across No Man’s Land which he then filmed as they disappeared for ever into the ‘fog of battle’. That is why the Western Front film trilogy remains his memorial.

‘They filmed that we might know.’



Appendix 1: Personal impressions of the films

The Film and Video Archive at the Imperial War Museum kindly arranged for me to see the trilogy of films as well as other spools taken by Malins. Quite rightly I was advised to keep an open mind as to how much of the ‘Battle of the Somme’ was actually filmed by Malins and how much by McDowell (photographs of both cinematographers now hang in the corridor of the Archive).

The ‘Battle of the Somme’ is strangely disjointed. This suggests that Malins and McDowell were unconcerned about chronology when editing their spools to be made up into the five 1,000 feet length reels for cinema projection. For instance, the scene at the Sunken Road, filmed at 06.20 on the First of July, is shown in Part 3 whilst the Hawthorn Ridge Redoubt sequence, filmed at 07.20 that morning, is shown in Part 2. Sadly that sequence is anti-climatic, as the earth beginning to convulse follows immediately on from a very different scene and the sequence ends before the explosion is complete. In other words, there is no film of the Redoubt in the seconds leading up to the earth beginning to move, and so no build-up in tension (though Malins wrote of beginning to film 30 seconds before the mine was timed to be blown). The IWM advised me that in 35mm format their version is some 150 feet shorter than the original version so the missing 30 seconds may have been in the original version but discarded later before they received it. A scene of the roll call probably taken at the White City has no link to the earlier filming at the Sunken Road – and could have been anywhere along the British front.

Because no officer or soldier is personally identified, the film comes across as being of an army rather than of individuals making up an army. This may not have been deliberately intended by the two cinematographers but could explain why it brought much comfort to British civilians. Thus the bereaved could choose to believe their husbands, sons, brothers, etc., were there just ‘out of the frame’.

Viewing copies of ‘The King Visits his Armies in the Great Advance’ (IWM 192) were seen, including two versions of Part One. These versions unexpectedly were found to show different scenes. The overall impression is of superb composition under tricky conditions - bearing in mind the King and his party were not acting to a script - which is also unintentionally illuminating as a study in human behaviour. In the ‘truncated’ version, Queen Mary follows the King on leaving the ship in the French port and chats to various people, revealing the same radiant smile for which her grand-daughter is renowned. A very different image from that of the 1940s and 1950s when the public impression of Queen Mary was of an austere, unsmiling person - perhaps reflecting her many years as a widow.

In Part Two, the King is occasionally seen smoothing his moustache with his finger. He is filmed taking out a box of matches and striking them to light his cigarette. The Prince of Wales is also seen smoking a cigarette. When the King waits to get out of a German trench, he laughs uproariously as one officer grips another officer firmly by the buttocks to push him up and out of the trench. The King is not subjected to this ignominy and offers his hands to the Prince of Wales and an officer to pull him up as his climb ‘runs out of steam’. The Prince



is shown as an inquisitive young puppy, prodding stones to examine them as he follows behind the party when it leaves.

The five reels of 'The Battle of the Ancre and Advance of the Tanks' have a running time of 76 minutes at silent speed. Much of the film is of military logistics, such as bringing up supplies, kitting out the soldiers in rubber thigh boots to prevent frost-bite, ponies pulling sleighs, German prisoners being brought in, the wounded being tended, soldiers fusing Mills bombs and loading Lewis gun drums, numerous sequences of marching soldiers – thus confirming the difficulties Malins wrote about in finding new ways of filming the logistics already covered in the first film. Of interest however was the sign at a casualty clearing station saying 'patients must be kept under cover' but with too many being there so that they had to be laid outside in the open and tended there. A sequence taken at night showed the gun flashes lighting up the sky. Of three senior German officers being offered cigarettes, one was casually cleaning his boots with his penknife.

The dramatic difference is the presence of the tanks. Three were positively identified by numbers and names painted onto the front of their sides; the female tank HMLS "A17" "Oh I say!", the male tank "D20", and HMLS "Dodo" with the tankmen celebrating their successful mission. Three others could not be identified, a female tank having its tarpaulin (hiding it from enemy observation) removed, a male tank beginning with a D and a female tank showing just an A. "D20" is filmed in two sequences, first when one of its officers enters the tank carrying his pet young black cat and then the tank moving forward into action. The sequence with "A17" crushing barbed wire after crossing a light railway track unfortunately looks as if filmed on a training ground - the surrounding vegetation is in surprisingly robust health unlike another sequence where the shattered trees of High Wood can be seen in the background. Though Malins wrote of being bowled over by an exploding shell at Martinpuich, there was no evidence of this in terms of a loss of continuity.

Malins was only involved in filming some 20 per cent of 'The German Retreat and Battle of Arras'. The sequences roughly match the description about driving ahead of the advancing British troops and filming French villagers. The film has many of the military logistics sequences characteristic of the earlier films thus explaining why it was a box-office failure. The only 'new' scenes filmed by other cinematographers were of a 0-6-0 locomotive with its 19 wagons steaming into Arras station after a lapse of 2 years, a pontoon carrying artillery shells being rowed up the Scarpe river, and a traction engine gun tractor partially in a ditch. There is one unusual sequence of a shell exploding near British soldiers, the vivid flash lasting just over one frame (say, 0.1 of a second) before the smoke billows forth.

In conclusion, these are my personal impressions of the four films. It was fascinating to have viewed them in their 35mm positive print format. The information is based on notes taken when viewing and on my personal recollections but I recognise that further viewing might well improve the accuracy of the information given about individual sequences, such as the identification numbers of the tanks.



Appendix 2: Authenticity and battlefield films

Dr. Nicholas Hiley in his introduction to ‘How I Filmed The War’ mentioned the controversial matter of authenticity. Both Malins and “Mac” McDowell did stage scenes to fill in between authentic sequences, such as British troops marching up to the trenches – seemingly for the First of July but filmed a few days later. A short scene of British troops going ‘over the top’ has a ‘dead’ soldier moving his leg. The sequence is generally recognised to have been filmed at a training camp (and seen in the context of the whole film it does look false). Malins’s film taken in the Vosges mountains in early 1915 again had a supposedly killed Frenchman miraculously arising from the dead. The Imperial War Museum has no copy of this film (nor of the Belgium front and the BE2C aircraft trip). Whether they still exist is not known.

However there are aspects worth considering in the context of war photography. It is too easy to say that fallen soldiers moving limbs shows the scene has been staged. Bullets do not always cleanly kill. A man may be hit, become temporarily stunned and fall to the ground. On regaining consciousness he may get up again, or move limbs despite being mortally wounded. At Borodino in 1812 (Duffy, 1972), during the severe fighting for the Raevsky Redoubt, Russian soldiers falling into the trenches below, and thought to be dead by the French, came too sufficiently to continue fighting with whatever weapons they still had even whilst lying mortally wounded on the ground.

As Reeves (1999) points out, ‘Battle of the Somme’ was for audiences in 1916. The audiences believed they were seeing real attacks and reacted accordingly to the individual soldier collapsing wounded or killed on the hillside below the Hawthorn Ridge Redoubt. For the bereaved in the audiences the scenes gave insights into what their dead men folk had experienced in their last hours of life, thus bringing them the comfort of being able to believe they knew. Especially if they believed their men folk had died instantaneously from single bullets, not torn apart as too often was the reality. One such bereaved woman who acknowledged being comforted by seeing the film was Frances Stevenson, the secretary and mistress of the British Prime Minister, who had lost her brother.

Furthermore, as Sorlin (1999) identifies, the audiences in 1916 had not been exposed to the sophisticated continuity seen in modern films using their complex technology and increasingly digital imaging. As already pointed out, the scenes in the film do lack chronological cohesion. Nevertheless the audiences were able to mentally link the scenes to gain an overall impression of what was happening on the Western Front. Authenticity such as that of Robert Capa’s once controversial 1936 Spanish Civil War photograph of the death of the Loyalist Militiaman, Federico Borrell Garcia, has long plagued the recordings of battle. The ‘fog of war’ is an appropriate term to describe the actual conditions under which filming has to take place if the cameraman or photographer wishes to survive (Capa was killed by a land mine in Indo-China, his camera still in his hand). Thus it is wiser to keep an open mind about such scenes unless there is known evidence supporting the claim that the scenes were merely staged as on a Hollywood film set.

During the Somme battle up to the Tenth of July, both cameramen each shot off four thousand feet of film. After developing and editing in London, some 5,075 feet were left as suitable to



be shown, having been taken back to G.H.Q. in France for approval before being first shown to the British cinema audiences as 'Battle of the Somme' on the 21st of August.

Appendix 3: The filming stand for the Hawthorn Ridge Redoubt explosion

A source of interest to historians over the years has been the position from where Malins actually filmed the explosion that destroyed the Hawthorn Ridge Redoubt. Various sites have been suggested along the bank opposite overlooking the Auchonvillers-Beaumont Hamel valley road. I suggest that a careful analysis of the individual photographic frames clearly shows its position (see Strachan, 1998). What has to be examined are the lines along the ground denoting the ridges on the hillside leading up to the Redoubt. They show clearly that the stand was at the end of the bank at the far end from the Memorial to the 8th Battalion, Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, before the bank turns away from the valley towards where the 'White City' was located.

In his book Malins pinpointed where Jacob's Ladder was located. However the vantage point eventually used for the filming was some distance behind it because of the German shelling. To a certain extent that position was protected from German machine-guns firing towards the Sunken Road and up the valley towards Auchonvillers because the bank runs parallel to the valley road into Beaumont Hamel. However the filming stand was exposed to a direct line of fire from the Hawthorn Ridge Redoubt and any German trenches between the Redoubt and the valley below.

Malins recorded his use of film. From starting the filming of the Redoubt at 07.19 and 30 seconds, he noticed he had used 1,000 feet of film with no sign of the explosion. Continuing to hand-crank whilst wondering if the mine had failed to go off, another 250 feet was used up before the earth began to convulse. His book shows photographs of the various stages as the earth rose high into the sky and then collapsed back, the image that Strachan (1998) uses being probably the most famous. Yet later in the book he mentioned that 5,000 feet of film was projected during an 80-minute cinema show (approximately 1 foot per second). Clearly that 1,000 feet would have taken some 16 minutes to hand-crank, the other 250 feet some 4 minutes and historical records show the mine exploding at about 07.20, the set time. Either Malins was employing 'artistic licence' to dramatise that filming or else much of that 1,000 feet had been used up previously at the Sunken Road and perhaps elsewhere. The spools used in these cameras are not known to have had a capacity of more than 400 feet so he could not have begun filming the Hawthorn Ridge Redoubt sequence using a new spool of film with the footage counter set to zero. Though the 1,250 feet will remain a mystery, he did record that he had to change the spool whilst filming infantrymen going 'over the top' to attack Beaumont Hamel and used up four spools of film that morning.



Appendix 4: Following up the retreating Germans

At the end of his book Malins recounts driving a 'stills' photographer to record villages recently relinquished by the retreating Germans. By chance I was able to visit most when preparing photographs to illustrate the French attack on the First of July north and south of the river Somme.

The villages and sites recorded in a logical order are as follows, proceeding on the road east from Amiens (the names spelt as in the 2006 edition of the Michelin France road atlas):

First day; Foucaucourt-en-Santerre, Estrees-Denicourt, Villers-Carbonnel, then north to the Chateau de la Maissonette (now only a site) and Biaches. Finding the Somme bridges into Peronne blown down, Malins crossed the Somme to Brie, Estrees-Mons, Estrees-en-Chaussee, Bouvincourt-en-Vermandois, before returning to their base.

Next day; passing Brie and Bouvincourt-en-Vermandois, Vraignes-en-Vermandois, Hancourt, before returning.

Another two days; on to Poeuilly, Caulaincourt and Savy.

Most of the time Malins was driving along roads in front of the British lines, still subject to Uhlan patrols, and having to witness scenes of both great sadness and jubilation among the freed French villagers.

Appendix 5: Another occasion the term 'Hush Hush' was used

Of interest to historians of engineering is that the term 'Hush Hush' was used again. In 1924, Nigel Gresley (later Sir Nigel), Chief Mechanical Engineer of the LNER railway, began designing in secret a new and larger locomotive than his very successful 'Pacific' 4-6-2 class. With rumours circulating about what was being built, the locomotive became known in the engineering magazines as the 'Hush Hush'. Rolled out in December 1929 and painted dark battleship grey, it caused a sensation. Unfortunately its performance was a disappointment and only one of the class was built (Harescape, 1981). Despite this failure, Sir Nigel Gresley remains Britain's most renowned locomotive engineer. His masterpiece, the A4 No.4468 'Mallard' still holds the world speed record for steam-driven locomotives at 126 miles per hour achieved on 3 July 1938. One of the six A4s preserved here and abroad, Mallard is the star exhibit at the National Railway Museum in York.

Perhaps remembrances of the rumours surrounding the designing and building of the first tanks led to the term once again being used by engineers for another innovative machine. Railway enthusiasts still refer to this locomotive as the 'Hush Hush'.



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Films viewed at the Imperial War Museum, London:

- IWM 191: "Battle of the Somme",
- IWM192: "The King visits His Armies",
- IWM 116: "The Battle of the Ancre and Advance of the Tanks",
- IWM 113: "The German Retreat and Battle of Arras".

Internet search engines were accessed to seek additional information on Geoffrey Malins, where photographs of him taken before the 1922 and 1926/7 expeditions can be seen.

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