

OFFICIAL CAMERAMEN AND THE MAKING OF NEWS

GEORGE IMASHEV

Australian War Memorial, Canberra

The topic of my paper is 'Official Cameramen and the making of news'. In the short time available to me today I would like to examine three issues that confront a person who sets out to film war and war related activities.

The first is the degree to which a cameraman can remain untouched by the events he is witnessing; the second is the ongoing debate of objectivity versus subjectivity; and the third is the dynamic relationship between the cameraman as an individual and the organisation that employs him. These three issues affect the quality and quantity of the footage that becomes our common legacy and in many instances is the only visual image we have of the war events.

My discussion of these three issues will centre on a particular official cameraman called James Francis Hurley who was appointed by the Australian Government of the day to capture on still and moving film the activities of Australian soldiers. I have chosen Frank Hurley because he had the rare if not unique distinction of having covered both world wars and was filming for the first sixty years of this century. Because you may not be familiar with this extraordinary cameraman I will relate some biographical details concerning his life's work.

Hurley was born on 15 October 1885 in Sydney, Australia. By the age of 22 he was a partner in a picture postcard business and never stopped filming until he died in 1962 at the age of 77¹. Hurley was exceptional in many ways. Through his entire life he used still and movie cameras. His reputation is based on his photographs and his films. Many cameramen start out using both but as they mature, one format is usually favoured over the other. This versatility, however, seems to be more prevalent with official war cameramen. Hurley was also an extremely robust individual. When appointed in 1917 at the age of 32 to be the official war cameraman for the Australian War Records Office, he had already completed two expeditions to the Antarctica, one with Douglas Mawson and the other with Ernest Shackleton. After world war one he filmed throughout Australia and Papua and New Guinea and was part of a third expedition to the Antarctica. Then, in 1940 at the age of 55 he was appointed chief of the Australian Photographic Unit in the Middle East. In 1943 he resigned to become the Director of the British Ministry of Information for the Middle East². In 1946 he arrived back in Australia to rejoin his long neglected family. Aged 61 and broke, he resumed his love affair with the Australian landscape and continued to photograph and film it until his death on 16 January 1962. By then he had become a wealthy man.

It is not easy to encapsulate in a few short phrases the career of any person and Hurley's incredible versatility and output makes it even harder to do so. David Millar a recent biographer comes as close as anyone when he points out that Hurley was always looking for the most spectacular and dramatic image. The Hurley hallmark would have been,

A dramatic picture taken at considerable risk, carefully planned, finely composed, and subsequently promoted with skill.

Imagination, dogged determination and spectacular results³.

Because of Hurley's position in the history of photography and cinematography he was one of the first cameramen to wrestle with the three issues I mentioned previously. These issues are still relevant today.

The first one, the degree to which a cameraman can remain untouched by the events he is witnessing emerged when Hurley was in Flanders at the Third Battle of Ypres, also known as Passchendaele. He recorded the following in his diary of 12 October 1917,

Nearing Zonnebeke we got into the Boche barrage...

This shelled embankment of mud was a terrible sight.

Every twenty paces...lay a body. Some frightfully mutilated, without legs, arms and heads and half covered in mud and slime...

We pushed on through

the old Zonnebeke station and up to Broodsende and entered the railway cutting near the ridge crest...

Under a questionably sheltered bank lay a group of dead men. Sitting by them in a little scooped out recess sat a few living; so emaciated by fatigue and shell shock that it was hard to differentiate.⁴

Hurley captured this scene with his camera but then got his assistant Hubert Wilkins to shoot it again as he posed with his camera⁵. So here we have contrasted the moving diary entry of that evening with the macabre filming of the day. We can only speculate over Hurley's motivation in this instance. Was it because the place was so terrible he needed to have a permanent image of it with him in it, to remind him that he had been there, or had he that day become so desensitised to the horror of war that the suffering soldiers had for the moment ceased to be human? After all many a soldier then and in subsequent wars has become equally desensitised. The moral question is, at what point should a cameraman lay down his camera and take direct action. Hurley I suspect, would have responded by retreating behind the shield of professionalism by emphasising the need to record the events. In other words, at no point is the role of the cameraman to be abandoned for some other role. Whatever the individual response, the moral dilemma remains for the events of world war one, and have remained for all cameramen who have gone to film the events of war this century.

This emphasis on the need to keep filming leads to the second issue of objectivity versus subjectivity. J. Lewinski in his book **The Camera at War** titled the chapter on World War I «The dispassionate observer» and thereby implied some sense of neutrality or objectivity on behalf of the cameraman. It is now realised that the human being is not a mere receiver of information, is not a passive recorder. Humans are in fact continuously projecting their own feelings, emotions and knowledge and the state of those at any one time affects how the new information is received. These are great philosophical issues which time precludes us from discussing in detail today. Nevertheless the problems of authenticity, fact, fiction and fakes are of great concern here. My view is that despite these dynamic forces being part of the cameraman's working environment, objective truth can still be obtained. Clive James put it succinctly when he said,

The contention that there is no such thing as objective truth is self-refuting. If there were no such thing as objective truth, the contention that there is no such thing as objective truth would not be objectively true.⁶

Hurley would have had little patience for such philosophising but he was aware of the difficulty in maintaining objectivity when recording events of the war. Resourceful as ever he constructed composite images. Hurley felt that only by combining images would the viewer fully appreciate the mud, courage, magnitude and horror of fighting at the front. He said,

I am thoroughly convinced that it is impossible to secure effects without resorting to combination pictures.⁷

Whether or not we like Hurley's solution to this issue his images continue to represent and shape our view of World War I. His insistence on using composite images whenever necessary, brought him in conflict with the authorities who employed him. This demonstrated how fragile the dynamic relationship between the individual cameraman and his employers was - the third issue I have identified.

When Hurley was appointed official cameraman in world war one his task was to supply images for the Australian War Records Section which controlled the written records (war diaries, etc.), the material records (war trophies and relics) and pictorial records (works of art, films and photographs)⁸. All this material was to be used by the official historian whose task was to write the official history of Australians in world war one. Hurley fell foul of the authorities because the official historian considered his composite images to be fakes. Hurley's documentary style was not considered to be appropriate for record gathering. Hurley wanted to document the experience and the atmosphere of the events he was participating in and to best reflect for the future the realities of those events. The authorities lamented that there was not enough objective uncontaminated film footage and too much Frank Hurley! When finally taken to task

over this Hurley threatened to resign. At that point the authorities backed down and Hurley continued to photograph and film in Europe and in the Middle East. It must be remembered however, that initially in Australia, there was little attempt at censorship or concern with image building that was suitable for the public. The official cameraman's task was to merely record events that he had no control over, and not provide newspapers with pictures.

In World War II that attitude had changed. Hurley is again the official cameraman and is again in the Middle East. He is again at loggerheads with the authorities who have now become the Military History Section incorporating a Department of Information. Hurley continued to film the way he always had done - to document spectacular scenes and atmosphere. But times had changed. The cameraman's task now was to move away from obtaining an historical record to that of capturing 'action of war', to developing a picture essay for quick release for news⁹. News items with movement and action and dramatic angles were required, not pictorial artistry¹⁰. Hurley would have none of this and after two frustrating years resigned to take up the position of Director of the British Army Film Unit in the Middle East. He stayed with the British for three years travelling 250,000 miles from the Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea and from Tripoli to Baghdad. In 1944 he was present at the historic Teheran conference where he filmed Churchill, Roosevelt, Chiang Kai Shek and Stalin¹¹.

Hurley's frustrating years with the Department of Information have highlighted, I believe, the shift in emphasis of the role of the official cameraman as it was at the beginning of this century to that what it is now. This certainly happened in Australia and most probably in other countries also.

In World War I the emphasis was on the gathering of records and the compilation of primary source material for future generations to interpret and write about. In world war two this was initially continued but soon overwhelmed by the Department of Information function of supplying selected news items to the public. In the post-World War II conflicts, information became propaganda when the Department of Information was replaced by the Department of Defence Public Relations. The official cameraman had now become a weapon - one of many - in the war machine.

Hurley's frustration would have become despair if he had lived in the Vietnam-Gulf War era. Images for public relations, like images for newspapers must be saleable. The tendency is to respond to the current political pressures and for the development of high finance media conglomerations. The destruction of the individual cameraman's autonomy is complete. As the press is the main medium through which most people experience war, the lasting experience of the public will be determined by current, temporary, political expediency and the media barons¹². The end point can be seen in the reporting of the recent Gulf War. Here we had corporate journalists and cameramen relating their limited experiences to each other while confined to the office. Even the breathtaking energy and resource fulness of Hurley would have been challenged here.

CONCLUSION

From my research it would seem that Hurley's faults when judged against the three issues mentioned above, ie. his occasional insensitivity to the suffering of others, his use of composite images and his disregard for the authorities that were after all paying him, are minor when compared to the potential mass manipulation of the public's perception of what war is all about.

To illustrate this visually I would like to conclude by showing three short segments of film. The first is from a Hurley documentary **With the Light Horse in Palestine 1918**. The second is from a fiction film **Forty Thousand Horsemen** produced by Charles Chauvel in 1940. Chauvel was the nephew of Harry Chauvel who commanded the light horse in Palestine in World War I. Hurley, with others, filmed the exterior scenes. The third is from a news report from the Gulf War in early 1991. In the first few days of the start of the United Nations-sanctioned bombing raid all television stations in Australia provided twenty four hours a day non stop coverage of the conflict. This segment is a taste of what was presented. Of the three film segments, the ones that give you the best indication about what happened, and give you some idea of what it was like to be there, are Frank Hurley's.

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

- (1) MILLAR, David, *From Snowdrift to Shellfire*. Sydney: David Ell Press, 1984, p. 14.
- BICKEL, Lennard, *In Search of Frank Hurley*. Melbourne: MacMillan, 1980, p. 14.
- (2) BICKEL, Lennard, *Op. cit.*, p. 117.
- (3) MILLAR, David, *Op. cit.*, p. 19.
- (4) HURLEY, Frank, *Diary*, 12 October 1917, National Library of Australia, Canberra, MS 883/5.
- (5) The original 1/2 plate glass negative of the photograph Hurley took is in the Australian War Memorial collection. Hurley is holding a small roll film camera in the posed shot.
- (6) JAMES, Clive, *From the Land of Shadows*. London: Picador, 1983, p. 11.
- (7) Frank Hurley, *Diary*, 26 September, 1917.
- (8) BEAN, C.E.W. *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*. Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1923, Vol. XII, pp. i-x.
- (9) LEWINSKI, Jorge, *The Camera at War*. London: W H Allen, 1978, p. 222.
- (10) MILLAR, D. *Op. cit.*, p. 120.
- (11) O'KEEFE, Daniel, *Hurley at War*. Sydney: The Fairfax Library, 1986, p. 7.
- (12) WILKINSON, Glenn, «There is no more stirring story: the press depiction and images of war, Tibet expedition 1903-1904», *War and Society*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (1991): 13.

Bibliography:**PHOTOGRAPH AND FILM COLLECTIONS**

The Australian War Memorial, Canberra.

The National Library of Australia, Canberra.

HURLEY MANUSCRIPTS

My Diary, Official War Photographer, Commonwealth Military Forces, 21 August 1917 to 31 August 1918. Typescript, MS 883/5.

BOOKS:

BEAN, C.E.W. *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*. Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1923, vol. XII

BICKEL, L. *In Search of Frank Hurley*. Melbourne: MacMillan, 1980.

JAMES, C. *From the Land of Shadows*. London: Picador, 1983.

LEWINSKI, J. *The Camera at War*. Sydney: W.H. Allen, 1984.

MILLAR, D. *From Snowdrift to Shellfire*. Sydney: David Ell Press, 1984.

O'KEEFE, D. *Hurley at War*. Sydney: The Fairfax Library, 1986.

SPECHT, Jim. & FIELDS, John. *Frank Hurley in Papua*. Australia: Robert Brown & Associates, 1984.

WILKINSON, Glenn «There is no more stirring story: the press depiction and images of war, Tibet expedition 1903-1904», *War and Society*, vol. 9, No.2 (1991).

VIDEO [1/2" VHS Pal]

1. **With the Light Horse in Palestine 1918**. 2 min. [Acc. No. 42]

2. **Forty Thousand Horsemen**. 3 min.

3. **Gulf War news reporting ABC network (USA)**. 5 min.

Acknowledgements

My colleagues at the Australian War Memorial and especially Ian Affleck with whom I have spent many an hour discussing 'Hurley'.