

## Violence

Combat Film Report — No. 722

U.S.A. *Production:* Signal Corps, Army Air Forces, *Print:* 35mm, silent, b&w, 8 min., 1944.

This is one of the more curious cinematic artifacts of the war period; it could be described as a film memo circulated only at the highest levels of the military. This particular report describes the activities of a field hospital somewhere in the Pacific.

The Signal Corps cameramen were shooting the war at every front, and their footage constantly converged on New York. Of the estimated 200,000 feet of film that arrived weekly, selections were edited into *Staff Film Reports*, and their less classified counterparts, *Combat Film Reports*. Prints were distributed to service commands, training schools, and commanding officers in both theaters. These are documents from the front, and are as close to objective as one could imagine. On the other hand, as this sample shows, the reports are clearly structured and infused with a discernible point of view.

*Combat Film Report — No. 722* begins with a line of ox carts on a country road; the passengers are wounded Americans being evacuated from the front. Upon their arrival at a field hospital, the staff unloads them and chooses who goes to surgery first. Inside the surgery tents, instruments are arranged and bodies are prepped. Surgery is performed on a head and a leg with bullet wounds. Some of the soldiers are evacuated by plane. Another is read his last rites as a hole is dug and a cross is constructed of bamboo. The body is lowered into the hole, and after a funeral, covered with dirt.

Watching this silent film memo, one has the feeling of watching unedited rushes. There are extraneous shots of grimacing faces and planes flying overhead. Poor lighting and details like the soldiers' dirty, ragged clothing contrast with the well-worked images of films like *Jap Zero*. Upon closer examination, however, a clear structure follows the processing of wounded soldiers and their two options after surgery: evacuation or death. Furthermore, the latter half of the report is packed with religious images. Posture slightly bent, a priest reads a man his last rites. Soldiers pray during his funeral, and the last shot of the film is a close-up of a make-shift bamboo cross. This imagery conjures a religious voice within the film, and envelops the fact of this death in an aura of Christian sacrifice, a trope typical of the American war documentary.

— *Abé Mark Nornes*

## Jap Zero

U.S.A. Production: First Motion Picture Unit, Army Air Forces, Distribution: Office of War Information, Print: 16mm, sd., English, b&w, 20 min., circa 1943.

"Dedicated to the fliers who are helping to make the total number of zeros...zero."

The "training film" for Japanese meant endless scenes of exercises at boot camp. On the American side of the lines, it meant thinking of film as a *means of training*. *Jap Zero* teaches pilots how to identify enemy planes. Ronald Reagan makes an appearance as a cocky flier who, despite his confidence, has a tough time distinguishing between the American P-40 and the Japanese Zero. If spectators enjoy the irony of Reagan shooting — *and missing* — his own man, they'll groan when, after being chewed out by his commander, he tells his commander (with a painfully familiar smugness) about downing a real zero. Needless to say, he is promptly forgiven.

A few training films were shot during World War I, but nowhere near as many as World War II. The military was producing training films at all levels and branches of the service. The larger units, such as the Army Air Force's First Motion Picture Unit and the Signal Corps, were bureaucratic rivals, and most units cooperated with Hollywood in one way or another. They farmed out work to established studios. Marine Corps and Navy recruits assigned to camera-duty were trained by *March of Time* staff; Louis de Rochemont swapped know-how for war footage. The Signal Corps and the First Motion Picture Unit both bought out and moved into old Hollywood lots. The latter, for example, moved their production facilities from Ohio to Hollywood and took over the facilities of the old Hal Roach Studios in Culver City. Among their 228 films, the most noteworthy are William Wyler's *Memphis Belle* and *Jap Zero*.

The premise of *Jap Zero* hinges upon a practice new to cinema: taking footage from planes for surveillance, bombing surveys, training, checking accuracy, and even propaganda. During the war, new cameras were designed which could be fitted into airplanes. Sometimes, entire planes were modified into flying cameras, such as the Lockheed Lightning F-5 (a stripped down P-38). This plane's pilots were known as "Focus Cats" and Gen. Arnold, the chief of the Army Air Forces, once remarked, "Our photo-reconnaissance pilots are instructed to fly on the theory that fighter planes win battles, while camera planes win wars."<sup>1</sup>

More interesting is the story of the camera machine gun, which starts with Wallace Beery's 1932 film *Hell Divers*. Beery used an early version of the Navy's camera machine gun, shooting mostly sea gulls by mistake (at least they weren't his fellow countrymen). When the film played in Brazil, officials were so impressed that they hired Fairchild, a Los Angeles camera maker, to design a new one (the Navy camera was classified). The resulting 16mm camera looked like a machine gun, ran at the same rate as a machine gun (16 shots per second), and even left crosshairs on each frame of film. Soon most Western air forces were using the Fairchild cameras. By the time *Jap Zero* was filmed, they abandoned the machine gun look for a rugged camera the size of a cigar box, its shutter connected to the real gun's trigger.<sup>2</sup>

At a more metaphorical level, the camera was often likened to the gun. Bell & Howell's ads for the Eyemo camera used catchy phrases like, "The camera is a weapon," and "We're shooting Japanazi's." Ironically, Japanese cameramen also packed Eyemos when they went to the battlefield. In *Jap Zero*, Reagan returns to base after mistakenly attacking an American plane, and his officer roughly commands him to "develop his film." We are then offered spectacular footage of dog fights from the point of view of his machine gun.



Fig. 22. Ronald Reagan hunting his own in *Jap Zero*.

Violence is glamorized by every aspect of filmmaking here. Besides the unusually star studded cast, this is a training film with impeccable costumes, chiaroscuro lighting, and a rousing musical score. The battle scenes are a cleverly edited mixture of Hollywood special effects and camera-gun documentary footage. Patrol is likened to hunting, a frequently deployed metaphor in films and writing about the Pacific front. The hunt evokes images of the Old West and good, rural life. It directly or implicitly compares the enemy to an animal, and most people find it easier to kill animals (especially predatory ones) than sentient men and women.<sup>3</sup> *Jap Zero* further dehumanizes the enemy by only obliquely referring to the human being piloting the plane. Narrator and characters usually talk about "knocking down" the machine. In one of the few references to the pilot, the narrator asks (in a disturbingly light tone), "See that plane, climbing to heaven like a skyrocket? Heaven's the wrong destination for that baby. That's a zero, the real McCoy. It was shot down over Alaska, and as luck would have it, the only thing that got really damaged was the pilot. Swell, eh?" For all its animated detail teaching the features of the Japanese Zero, this film also trains its viewers to adopt a necessarily casual attitude about killing (a way of thinking that Ronald Reagan learned all too well).

#### NOTES

1. "Camera Planes Win Wars," *American Cinematographer* (December 1941): 115.
2. Bailey, R. H. "Movies of Bullets," *American Cinematographer* (April 1944): 114.
3. For a discussion of the hunting metaphor, see Dower, John W. *War Without Mercy: Race & Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 89-93.

— Abé Mark Nornes