



WHEN TRUMPETS BLARE

A Fictional Tale Of WWI

“Sound trumpets! Let our bloody colors wave! And either victory, or else a grave...” – Shakespeare

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Welcome to the 12th A.I.M.E.D. and to beautiful sunny France. By the way, that stands for Allied Infantry Mixed Equipment Detachment. That'd short for there aren't enough volunteers. We have 115 Americans, 56 Imperial Chinese Guardsmen, 45 Sikhs, 36 Gurkhas, 21 Russians, 18 Checks and 12 Portuguese. For the British, aimed is simply another way to spell insane.

The Americans came to France so they could film live combat. Which is the one thing our British cousins have absolutely forbidden. You know, can't have the cinema showing flickers of allied boys dying. It wouldn't be good for morale and absolutely terrible for recruiting. This left American ingenuity fighting British determination which, in this place, resembles two mangy dogs fighting over the same bone. Technically, the United States was neutral, so the Americans had to join the Canadian army to get into France. That put them under British command. But the crew was determined. They were going to come out with a film of combat in the trenches, court-marshaled, or dead.

The Imperial Chinese guardsmen wore tiger suits. Yep, you read that right, tiger suits. They looked like costumes or perhaps kid's pajamas right out of the Sears catalog. They even have little ears sewn into the hoods they wore over their heads. These guys came armed with curved Dao swords and full-size, round shields. No, I'm not kidding. I told you, it was insane. The British did provide them with modern .303 Pattern 1914 Enfield service rifles. Although, in the trenches, they preferred to use their swords.

The Sikhs also came equipped with shields. Although these were smaller ones strapped to their wrists. It's not as crazy as it sounds. Since steel helmets don't come in a size that fits over your average turban, the Sikhs used the shield to cover their heads. Which turns out to be handy in our neck of the woods where the Germans took pleasure in shelling us twice a day.

The Gurkhas, Russians, and the Checks were excellent shots. Although the Gurkhas, like the Chinese, had these bent knives they preferred to use in the trenches. The Gurkhas were like wild west Indians. Unbelievably brave, but when they went out on patrol, they liked to bring back a souvenir or two. A finger, a piece for a forehead, or perhaps an ear. The Russians looked almost as insane as the Chinese, what with their ultra-clean all-white uniforms. Which, of course, didn't stay that way for more than five minutes.

The Portuguese, well that's where the term mixed applies in spades. They brought their own cannon. Yes, we have our own artillery piece, right on the front line. They were our mixed equipment alright... more like mixed up equipment. It's an old 12-pounder that must be loaded from the front. The Portuguese absolutely refused to abandon it, even when offered a modern replacement. The language being a barrier, the British officers simply let them keep it.

There you have it, 303 enlisted men, 18 British officers, seven languages and enough insanity to keep a team of doctors busy back in the states for years. Oh, and the beautiful sunny France part? That's what we call an exaggerated lie. It's been pouring rain here, every day, for the last three months. Ever since it stopped snowing. So, if it wasn't the British stopping us from filming, it certainly was the rain.

"Frankie, Frankie, where are we hiding the main camera today?"

Frank Anderson was a cameraman from the Bronx. He was our expert at hiding the film camera. The British had already confiscated six and we were down to our last three. "It's in bunker number three. The camera is in the boxes marked seventeen pounder ammunition."

“What are they doing in there?”

“Those boxes are usually pretty heavy, so the officers steer clear of them. They prefer to order us to pick them up.”

“Where’s the film?”

“In the tins marked cheese.”

“That’ll never work. What happens when the boys get hungry?”

“Charlie smeared the outside with rotting Limburger cheese. Even the rats won’t go near it.”

We’d had a real problem with the rats. Who knew rats didn’t mind eating celluloid coated with silver nitrate? They’ve already eaten four cans of the stuff. As if the limeys didn’t cause us enough headaches.

“So, where’s the last camera?”

“This week, it’s at the aid station.”

“Where?”

“You know the old bucket Doc Morgan uses to wash all the blood off the tables?”

“Yea.”

“It’s got a false bottom.”

In a disturbing show of... well, I’m not sure what it was a show of... but the Chinese started jumping up and down excitedly, screaming gibberish. Since nobody knew how to speak their lingo, everyone had to run to their firing positions. This involved lots of rushing, jumping over guys who were still sleeping in the bottom of the trench, and two or three guys slipping and falling in the mud. Invariably, the last part always involved one of the Russians. From the sounds of the Slavic cursing, I could tell we were right on schedule.

The stimulation was even enough to bring the British out of their bunkers. “What all the excitement?” one of them demanded.

“It’s the Gurkhas, sir. They are coming back from patrol.”

“What the devil were they doing in no man’s land in the first place?”

“Souvenir hunting, I expect.” Lt. Covington was one of the few British officers were respected. In general, his nose was in the right place. Meaning that it wasn’t stuck up in the air constantly. He also tended to look the other way... most of the time.

“Well, get them back in here, damn it.” One of the British officers waved his swagger stick in the air. “Covering fire. Make sure everyone fires over their heads. You Americans take it easy on the ammunition. This isn’t a wild west show, you know.”

The firing line exploded into a series of loud cracks and pops. Even the Chinese joined in, although no one knew if they were shooting over anyone’s heads or not. Not long after that, the Gurkhas started

descending into our trench line. Most of them knew how to do a good impression of sliding into second base and slid right under the last roll of wire.

Eddie McCoy pulled Frank over to the side. Eddie was our Cinematographer, a native of Fort Lee, New Jersey no less. “What were they really doing out there?”

“Cutting wire.”

“Who’s wire? Ours or theirs?”

“Both,” Eddie replied, “Roger says they were getting in the way of the camera shots.”

Roger De Frees was our director. He’d worked with D.W. Griffith, William Randolph Hearst, and Tomas Edison himself and he hated them all. But Roger despised Edison with a passion. “Anything to screw Edison” was his favorite phrase. Our producer got Roger out in the trenches just by telling him he could beat the old inventor to the punch.

De Frees was a professional, through and through. On day one, he realized that we couldn’t risk the cameramen peering over the trenches to film. They’d get shot. So, he made Stu Rosher, our special effects man, build a fake tree. Both the cameraman and the film could hide in the trunk of the tree and not be seen by the Germans. Stu had just finished the second one last week, so now we could roll with two cameras.

Everyone was astounded the fake tree stumps fooled the Germans. But the real trick was hiding them from the British officers. Capt. Parkhurst almost knocked one over leaning on it while smoking a cigarette. You’d think he’d notice something was wrong when ten Americans started sweating in freezing cold.

Two weeks ago, Capt. Parkhurst surprised Eddie as he was cleaning one of the camera lenses. Of course, he shouldn’t have been doing it out in the open, but you need to be able to see what going on when you’re cleaning a lens. The captain came right up to him. “What have you got there, private?”

Eddie stammered in reply, unable to come up with a good story. Capt. Parkhurst took the lens right out of Eddie’s hands. “This appears to be a lens, private. Now, what are you doing with a lens and where did this come from?”

“I found it, sir.”

The captain was starting to get a bit suspicious. “You found it?”

“Out in no man’s land. I think it belonged to a Bosch officer’s binoculars, sir. Just doing a bit of cleaning. I thought I might send it home to my mother.”

“Good thinking, private.” He remarked, passing the lens back to Eddie. “We have to keep the spirits up on the home front, eh? It’s good to send them a little trinket now and then. Keeps up morale, eh?”

“Yes, sir.”

He was under the impression that a good chat with the troops now and again allows the unit to bond. In reality, it simply made the captain seem like a Nosy Parker. The other problem with Capt. Parkhurst was

he kept trying to get everyone killed. Insisting the unit send out a patrol every other day or so and try to capture one of the Germans for questioning.

A Russian started giving one of the Imperial Chinese Guardsman trouble. The two babbled at each other incoherently. Apparently, the Russian was demanding the man wash his uniform. Everyone's heard of Chinese laundries, but the whole scene was getting pathetic. This gave Parkhurst an idea.

"Get the monkeys to straighten things up around here, would you? The place is starting to look like my mother-in-law's cottage. I'm sure the cowboy can explain it to them. There's a good fellow now."

The captain frequently used the term monkeys to refer to the Chinese, when he wasn't using more derogatory terms. For some reason, he was under the impression that Stu Rosher was able to communicate with them. Stu was a native of Bedford-Stuyvesant. For some reason, he associated the New Yorkers accent with Texas and constantly referred to Stu as the "cowboy." This naturally drove Stu nuts. Stu always maintained that Jews from Brooklyn and cows don't mix.

Stu was also the brilliant character that came up with the idea of building the tunnel. It ran from bunker number five all the way out to the middle of no man's land. This is where he'd set up the fake second tree. The object was to be able to film people advancing out of our trenches from the front, so you could see their faces. Trouble was where the tunnel popped up. It was right in front of a broken wagon wheel, stuck in the mud. It took most of the Gurkhas and even a few of the Chinese to dig the damn thing out. We didn't have a lot of time to do it either.

Although it wasn't the Germans who caused the problems. They could have cared less. You see we have this deal going where no one shoots at each other before tea time. It's a gentleman's agreement. Funny how we get along better with the Bosch than the Limey officers. But we had to get it done before Lt. Colthurst made his hourly check of Jerry's lines through the periscope. Fortunately, no one likes Colthurst. One of the Check soldiers volunteered to keep him busy. He blathered at him in Check for ten minutes straight. We almost didn't make it.

The entrance to the tunnel is hidden under some duckboards in bunker five. They are located under the cook's mess table. So, you have to crawl under there and lift the boards to get into the tunnel. Of course, with the high water table, we're constantly pumping out the water from the tunnel. It was a fight to keep the tunnel from flooding. Stu outdid himself here. The pumps are run by bellows hidden underneath the loose floorboards in the trenches. Every time someone walks on the boards it pumps some of the water out of the tunnel.

Roger almost panicked when Charlie organized a foot race in the trenches during a huge storm back in April. He was sure the Limeys would catch on. Fortunately for us, they chalked it up to the strange habits those "Crazy Americans."

By late June, it looked as if we were going to see some action. The second anniversary of the start of the war was fast approaching. We'd been in his same stretch of trenches since December 1915. The brits had been shelling the German lines for a week. This naturally ended the gentleman's agreement and they'd been busy shelling us back for the last three days. It had been a struggle to keep the camera equipment intact. At one point they buried the hiding place of the third camera when they landed a direct hit on bunker number four, collapsing the dugout. It took us two days to dig the camera back out.

The Germans had been moving in mortars into the area and were now dropping bombs down directly over our heads. The only good thing about it was it kept the Limey officers in the bunkers. Something was up, you could make book on it. We just didn't know when it was going to happen.

The night of June 30th, it finally stopped raining. Frank took out one of the cameras and snuck it into the false tree in the middle of no man's land. It took him all night to crawl out there. He was still stuck out there when Capt. Parkhurst got us all together in the trenches. The dawn's light was barely making itself felt. It was cold, even for the 1st of July.

"Alright lads," He announced, "today's the day of the big push. We'll be climbing out of the trenches in just about..." he glanced down at his wristwatch, "...five minutes now."

"Shouldn't we be going back to get our equipment? What about our packs? Our bayonets?" Charlie Sampson asked anxiously. He was looking for a chance to retrieve the second camera from its hiding place.

"I shouldn't think so. This is going to be a cakewalk. Our artillery should have leveled Jerry's defenses. It should be, as you fellow in New York say, a walk in the park."

"But, sir."

In the distance, we could hear other officers blowing their whistles. Capt. Parkhurst picked up his whistle and blew in response. "Alright boys, that's the signal. Over the top. That's good lads." He seemed determined.

The Chinese seemed to get the message without even knowing the language. They climbed out of the trenches screaming. To our right, the Portuguese fired the cannon. No to be outdone the Sikhs and Gurkhas followed the Chinese. We'd hired one of the Sikhs to hold his shield over the second camera as we brought it up into position, but as the camera wasn't in sight, he when off with his fellows.

In no man's land, Frank put the film in the camera. On the tape cannister, he scratched "July 1, 1916, the River Somme" in pencil. Then he started turning the crank. Looking through the lens he could see Capt. Parkhurst prodding Roger De Frees along with his pistol. Roger seemed extremely unwilling. Frank kept the camera rolling. He was getting some great shots. This as actual combat. They were going to go down in history.

A machine gun started to chatter in the distance. Peeking through the eyepiece, frank could see both Roger and Capt. Parkhurst go down. In the next moment, one of the Chinese sprouted red dots all over his tiger costume. The man slowly spun around in a circle and then fell to the ground, right in front of the camera. But Frank was a professional and kept the handle cranking. He saw Eddie and Charlie go down next. They were soon followed by Lt. Colthurst and Stu.

Now the Germans started to rain down shells all over no man's land. Frank kept the film running as an explosion blew one of the Russians into the air. The man waved his arms and legs in the air as his uniform changed from white to black.

There was mayhem everywhere. Bullets flying, explosions bursting like raindrops on a pond. Frank decided he needed to save the footage he'd already shot. He lifted the camera off the stand and began

working his way down the ladder back into the tunnel. Just then, he felt something hot and wet slam into his back...

Somewhere, buried in a tunnel in France is a film. The first film of men dying in combat.