

## ‘ACTION!’

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WITH THE SECOND BATTALION of the Post Office Rifles now en route to France, a new reserve battalion had been formed in England, ready to train up recruits for the front. By the end of the war, this third battalion had drafted over 5,000 men to the other two, but the traffic was not only one-way – many soldiers injured in France and Flanders were transferred back to ‘Blighty’ as instructors.

Among them was Lance Corporal John McIntyre, a former messenger boy and assistant postman from Newcastle. McIntyre had been wounded in the attack on High Wood in the Somme, and joined the Third Battalion in January 1917, following three months recovering from his injuries in hospital. Coming back from the front line trenches, he would have been forgiven for expecting a spell with the training battalion to be relatively free of danger – but as it turned out, even in the bucolic English countryside the Post Office Rifles were not entirely out of harm’s way.

At this time Lance Corporal McIntyre joined them, the Third Battalion were based at Blackdown Camp just north of Aldershot, where they were training on a set of authentic German trenches, built by the inmates of the local prisoner of war camp at Frith Hill. McIntyre’s job was to train his fresh recruits – many of them volunteer ‘A4 boys’ (too young to be sent out to the front line yet) in

the technique of lobbing bombs into the trenches to clear them of enemy soldiers.

Aldershot was a popular destination for touring VIPs – not least King George V, who put in regular appearances inspecting the troops there – and when they arrived at Blackdown Camp, guests were often shown the Post Office Rifles at work in the German trench system. When the celebrated American film director D.W. Griffith came to the area looking for some soldiers to perform in his latest movie, the Third Battalion were the obvious choice to assist him.

At 42, Griffith was already a Hollywood sensation. Only two years before, his three-hour epic *Birth of a Nation* had become the first commercial blockbuster of the silent-film era, breaking all box-office records. Despite attempts by the NAACP to ban it for its heroic portrayal of the Ku Klux Klan, it had become the first film ever screened in the White House, where President Woodrow Wilson described it as ‘like writing history with lightning’.

Griffith had recently signed a deal with a Hollywood producer, Adolph Zukor, to work exclusively with his new Arcraft production company. In exchange for producing a series of smaller features costing no more than \$175,000 each, Zukor was prepared to offer Griffith the chance to direct another of his trademark ‘big pictures’. The director had been transfixed by the subject of the great European war for over two years now, ever since the first shots had been fired, but unlike many of his contemporaries he had yet to commit his own vision of it to celluloid. As the world’s leading producer of battlefield spectacle, he was beginning to feel a sense of obligation.

In late 1916, the British War Office made Griffith an

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offer he couldn't refuse. If he would agree to make a film about the war that might encourage American participation, they would put both men and equipment at his disposal to help him film it. This was where the Post Office Rifles came in.

By the time Griffith and his seventeen-strong crew rolled up at Aldershot in August 1917, America had declared war on Germany and US soldiers were beginning to arrive in Europe, although none had actually participated in battle. Meanwhile, the director had been busy cementing his reputation in Britain. At Drury Lane, the premiere of his new film *Intolerance* had been met with a seven-minute ovation and seen the highest ever UK gross for an opening night. Off the back of this, Griffith had breakfasted with Prime Minister Lloyd George in Downing Street and shared lunch with George Bernard Shaw. He had even tempted King George V's mother, the Dowager Queen Alexandra, into filming a short cameo for his movie, although sadly she failed to make the final cut.

At Blackdown Camp, Griffith arrived with an air of mystery and Hollywood glamour. Amongst the Post Office Rifles who had been volunteered to assist him, rumours abounded about the project the great director was working on, a sweeping drama entitled *Hearts of the World*. Some claimed that he had already tried filming his battle scenes elsewhere without success – a reconstruction using actors in America had been deemed inauthentic, while his attempt to shoot footage on the front lines in France had been hindered by genuine German shelling. Hence his decision to employ real-life soldiers, but in the relative safety of a British training camp.

## MEN OF LETTERS

Since the story Griffith was making concerned an American soldier in the French Army, the Post Office Rifles were to play the part of average Poilus. (In France, the 'Poilu' was the equivalent of the British Tommy, the word literally meaning 'the hairy ones', a reference to the fabulous beards and moustaches the French soldiers traditionally sported.) The British men swapped their khaki battledress for the light blue of the French infantry and awaited orders from the director's megaphone. With his bow tie and smart tweed suit – a recent acquisition from London that he had rather fallen in love with – Mr Griffith cut a very different figure to the usual Army authority figures.

Like many engagements on the Western Front, the mock battle Griffith was orchestrating would be preceded by an artillery bombardment, and for this Lance Corporal McIntyre and the other bombing instructors were required to bring their expertise to bear. The plan, devised by an American bombing officer, was to lay a series of charges under the ground, with gunpowder packed into light containers that would simulate the effect of a barrage when they exploded at the appropriate moment. Fuses were carefully measured to make sure the timing would be in sync. Meanwhile, fake shrapnel blasts would be generated by hurling ammonal balls filled with gunpowder from a row of trench catapults, with fuses primed to detonate in mid-air.

These specialist bombs were to be assembled by a team of non-commissioned officers led by Sergeant George Kennedy, a 35-year-old former postman from St Helier in Jersey. Several lorry loads of explosives were delivered from the batteries depot and were stored in the magazine

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or 'bomb-hut', while five barrels of gunpowder were placed in a compound nearby. Sergeant Kennedy and his ten NCOs set off to prepare the explosives.

But before Mr Griffith had even called 'Action!', tragedy struck. Something caused the gunpowder in the store to ignite – a Court of Enquiry later ruled that it could have been a spark from one of the men's boot tips – and when it went up, the fire soon spread to the bomb-hut next door, with the eleven men still working inside.

Moments later, the bomb-hut exploded, sending bomb casings, picks and shovels flying in all directions, and causing the ground to shudder five hundred yards away. There were anxious shouts from the German POWs who were being held nearby, who had presumably assumed that in an English POW camp they would be safe from the terrors of the front lines, and a number of riflemen dashed forward to assess the damage.

Given the size of the explosion, it was a wonder the outcome wasn't worse. Sergeant Kennedy and two of his NCOs were killed, with four more men badly burned from the chest upwards.

Remarkably, the horrific incident had little impact on the shooting schedule. The Battalion soon reorganised and replacement explosives were sent for from Battersea, and assembled by a replacement team of NCOs. With the cameras rolling, the timed explosions went off just as planned, creating an impressive approximation of a military barrage. The fake shrapnel was fired from the catapults, detonating satisfyingly in mid-air, and Lance Corporal McIntyre and some fellow bombers in the German trench hurled bombs with two-and-a-half second fuses into the air for good measure. Although some of

these rolled dangerously close to the young riflemen who were playing the role of the French Poilus, there were no further serious accidents – just a couple of minor injuries caused by flying stones. No-one took much notice of these, since they did not disrupt the filming, and if anything lent an air of authenticity to the show.

In fact, D.W. Griffith was so pleased with how the battle was shaping up that he set the bombers a further challenge. His attention had been caught by a magnificent old oak tree nearby and, with the natural instincts of a master of Hollywood spectacle, he decided that it must be blown sky high.

The bombers primed the ancient oak with slabs of guncotton (a form of nitrocellulose) and retired to a safe distance. But when they lit the fuse and Mr Griffith called 'Action!', the explosives mysteriously failed to go off.

'Cut!' the director yelled through his megaphone, and the bombers cautiously returned to the tree to investigate. They went for a second take, and then a third, but the tree resolutely refused to explode. By this point everyone was getting impatient and the bombers' fellow soldiers were beginning to rib them.

Finally, on the fourth take, the guncotton did its job. As the explosive detonated, the vast oak tree was heaved up into the air, before coming back down to earth with a heavy thump. It landed, perfectly upright, only feet away its own blasted stump, and for a moment everyone held their breath, wondering if the shot would once again be a dismal failure. Then after a few moments, the tree began to totter, and with a great crash it fell to the ground.

'Gee boys, that was great!' Mr Griffith called out excitedly, and the bombers breathed a sigh of relief.

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The director left the camp with a spring in his step, confident that he had secured the footage he needed for his movie. But the riflemen who had heroically performed the role of the French infantry were not accorded movie-star status. Their pay came in the shape of 10 woodbines each, plus enough cash to buy a couple of pints in the pub.

There were no complaints, however. Despite the horrific accident in the bomb-hut, the riflemen were happy knowing that they'd done a good job for their temporary American commanding officer, and excited to think that they had played a small part in Hollywood history.

As it turned out, the Post Office Rifles never made it into Griffith's 'big picture', despite its two-and-a-half-hour running time. Like the Dowager Queen's brief cameo, they ended up on the cutting room floor. But fortunately for the riflemen, as part of his contract with Adolph Zucker, Griffith was required to make a further six movies, on a much smaller budget, in the space of just a year, and he soon found himself desperately trying to come up with storylines that could make use of his reels of unused material.

So it was that the riflemen made their silver-screen debut in a much more modest Griffith feature, a romantic war-time melodrama by the name of *The Great Love*. Sadly, unlike the celebrated *Hearts of The World*, no print of the latter film survives.