Within the Looking Glass:
How a War Photographer Became a Hero during World War I

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When faced with the brutality of war, many individuals often see this violent conflict as an opportunity for adventure. During World War I, many young men felt that it was their duty to protect and fight for their country which was becoming increasingly nationalistic. They also saw this as proving their masculinity, bravery, and loyalty to their country. Furthermore, just as many soldiers felt a sense of adventure and excitement when dreaming about war, war photographers such as Donald Thompson were also struck with this excitement and wanderlust. The First World War shook the world and it left many individuals feeling extreme curiosity, especially those in The United States like Thompson, due to the fact that they did not feel many of the physical effects of the war. American civilians were not able to see firsthand the destruction and chaos of the war, nor could they comprehend the terrible conditions that Europeans were forced to deal with as many of them were left poor and often died as a result of starvation.[1] However, photography allowed these American civilians to at least get a glimpse into the war and into European society as well, and war photographers such as Thompson

[1] Bonnie G. Smith, *Europe in the Contemporary World: 1900 to Present* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007), 140.

were able to present these photographs to them. Likewise, these photographs also offer historians a look into this time period as well and, as a result, they can get a better understanding visually just how catastrophic the First World War was and just how much it hurt many who felt its wrath.

Donald Thompson wanted to experience these adventures and to witness and capture, "the greatest story in history" and he experienced the brutality and chaos in the trenches.[2] While soldiers fought their enemy, Thompson fought to get the shot he needed, all the while trying to shield himself from bullets. He also witnessed many young men perish in many of the battles that he was covering, and according to Thompson, he had even witnessed the Russian Revolution break out right before his eyes in 1917.[3] Just as soldiers were seen as daring, brave, and heroic, Thompson was held in high esteem by the public as well. Americans back at home proclaimed that Thompson was a "Topekan hero photographer" who did everything it took to get the shots that he needed, despite dangers on the battlefront.[4] Consequently, he was seen as a reckless dare-devil and Americans and Europeans alike were fascinated by him.

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[2] Donald C. Thompson, *Donald Thompson in Russia* (New York: Century, 1918), vii.
[3] Thompson, *Thompson in Russia*, 41.
[4] "Somewhere In France Tells Real Story of War: Don Thompson and Pictures Come Next Week," *Topeka Daily Capital*, December 21, 1915.

During World War I, war photography was often problematic and it was highly censored by the press and by the government. Furthermore, although the photographers at this time are largely considered "war photographers," in reality photographs of actual combat were scarce and are suspected of being staged, and it was not until World War II that we begin to see publicized photographs of the American dead.[5] This censorship greatly affected Thompson's work because most of his published photographs are not of actual combat. Instead, most of his published works feature staged photographs of soldiers, of individuals within their collapsing society, and of the aftermath of battle and the destruction it caused many cities in Europe.

Born in Topeka, Kansas, in 1885, Donald Thompson was born a free-spirit who let nothing stand between him and his success as a war photographer. He was clever, charming, and knew how to get his way and get himself out of trouble, no matter how difficult the situation. He was a smooth talker and a quick thinker, manipulating and deceiving many in order to cover battle after battle on the front.[6] Thompson craved adventure and was constantly driven by adrenaline and at a time such as the beginning of the century where there seemed to be little guidance and

[5] PBS Online, "American Photography: A Century of Images," *Photography and War*, (accessed 8 April 2014).
[6] David Mould, "Donald Thompson: Photographer at War," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains*, (Autumn 1982): 154.

direction, he often times roamed wherever the war took him next. In 1914 after World War I began, Thompson knew that this was unlike any other war preceding it:

> When Austria declared war on Serbia July 28, 1914, I was working on a newspaper in Canada. My first impulse was to go to Europe, though I did not dream at that time what the war would mean. On August 1, when Germany declared war on Russia, and I heard that Luxemburg had been invaded, I knew that the war of nations, that we had read so much about but never dreamed would come true, had started. As a newspaper photographer, I knew it would be the greatest story in history, and I determined that I was going to cover it.[7]

He immediately sold all of his possessions, bought a steamboat ticket to England, and was on his way to Europe to capture the war from the beginning[8] -- and at that time in 1914, he had begun traveling all around Europe before many American soldiers were able to do so, as The United States did not officially become involved in war until April of 1917 on the sides of the Allies.[9]

On the battlefront, soldiers fought in trenches which attempted to protect these men from enemy fire. "When men in the trenches engaged in combat," writes historian Bonnie G. Smith, "they experienced a veritable hell of shelling and sniping, flying body parts, rotting cadavers, and blinding gas – weapons resulting from breakthroughs in the chemical

[7] Thompson, *Thompson in Russia*, vii.
[8] Ibid, vii.
[9] Smith, *Europe in the Contemporary World*, 129.

industry."[10] Life in the trenches was worse than anyone could have imagined. Smith continues, stating "The average life span of a machine gunner during an attack was thirty minutes, and under these conditions soldiers were often reduced to hysteria or succumbed to shell shock through the sheer stress and violence of battle."[11] In contrast to these soldiers' preconceptions about the war being a wonderful adventure and a chance to prove their loyalty and masculinity, they suddenly began discovering the realities of it all. In the middle of these violent realities was Thompson, who shared these experiences with the soldiers as he captured them both through film and photographs. In Thompson's silent film, *Fighting the War* he captures various shots of concentrated artillery attacks in Verdun, France featuring cannons with orchestrated violent music playing throughout the scene, as well as exploding mines and aircraft guns. At night, one can only see the flashing of artillery penetrating through the darkness.[12] For the most part, this film shows its audience what daily life was like for the soldier including warfare, walking from place to place (and in some circumstances through their enemy's abandoned trenches), and war preparation.

[10] Ibid, 138.
[11] Ibid, 138.
[12] *Fighting the War*, directed by Donald C. Thompson, Flicker Alley, 1916.

In November of 1914, while Thompson dined with some German officers in Dixmude, Belgium "a shell from a British warship fell into the party. He escaped with a nicked nose and a face that was badly cut by flying bits of shell, but four of the officers were killed or mortally wounded."[13] He also covered the siege of Antwerp in which Germans bombarded Fort Waelhem. According to the *New York Times*, "The shelling started as he was dining with three Belgian officers on the ground floor of a house in the upper stories of which eighty Belgian soldiers were quartered. A shell hit the roof of the house and destroyed the upper part of the building."[14] When looking back at this siege, Thompson states to the *New York Times*:

> The ceiling went to pieces. And through the holes in it dead bodies fell down on the dinner table. All that night they kept firing 42-centimeter shells at the forts…when about midnight I sat down on the curbstone and saw shells dropping all around I decided it was time to write a farewell note to my wife. But just as I had finished it a Belgian officer came along and said that he had found a boat in which we could get across the river. There were five of us—one, an officer desperately wounded; and when he saw that the boat was only big enough for four he ordered the other officers to throw him overboard. The rest of us got away.[15]

These two examples of the battles in Belgium show that Thompson was just as vulnerable as the soldiers he covered. As one could imagine, that

[13] "Paid A War Bribe In Cigar Coupons: D.C. Thompson Says Russian Woman Hid Films for Him for "$1,000," *New York Times,* November 16, 1914.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.

was not the last of the horrors that Thompson would witness. Thompson at times struggled to stay alive in a world where violence and death was all around him. War photographers, like Thompson, not only shared the physical dangers of a soldier during combat—he also was often in danger politically and was constantly being arrested and beaten up by authorities and having his film confiscated.[16] However, as Donald Thompson was a man to think on his feet, he often devised schemes that would end with his release from jail.

He always seemed to find a way to retrieve his film back while in Europe and smuggled them into the United States where they were secure. For example, when German officials threatened Thompson with arrest for obtaining photographic evidence of German atrocities in Belgium, he made his way to Germany anyway in order to pursue a request from Lord Northcliffe of the *London Times*. When detained by German officials, he showed them a false newspaper clipping that he wrote stating that he was not responsible for the photos. The German officials believed him and he was released.[17] Thompson's book, *Donald Thompson in Russia*, he cried, "The great German Secret Service had been fooled by a fake newspaper clipping!"[18] Another scheme

[16] Mould, "Donald Thompson: Photographer at War," 154.
[17] Thompson, *Thompson in Russia*, xii.
[18] Ibid, xii.

orchestrated by Thompson includes telling a French officer who was about to arrest him, that "he was trying to rescue his wife and children, who were stranded in the battle zone. The officer was moved by this fiction and took Thompson part of the way in his car."[19] Alas, Thompson faced many dangers during his career as a war photographer both physically and politically throughout war-torn Europe. He shared these dangerous situations with the soldiers, and was similarly vulnerable as he gambled with death.

For the most part, soldiers are praised, especially those who share the soldiers' country of origin. Similar to that of the World War I soldier, Donald Thompson was also very much regarded as a heroic figure during the war. For example, the *Topeka Daily Capital* states:

> Thompson is the photographic hero of the war. He is known on every front as the reckless Kansan with his movie camera is familiar to thousands of men who have stood in the trenches and faced the fire of the enemy. Thompson they know because he has been into the trenches with them while they were under fire.[20]

Clearly the *Topeka Daily Capital* newspaper had regarded Thompson as an extraordinary individual, and they seemed quite proud of the fact that Thompson was born and raised in their beloved city. Likewise, war correspondent E. Alexander Powell who had accompanied Thompson

[19] Mould, "Donald Thompson: Photographer at War," 156.
[20] "Somewhere In France," *Topeka Daily Capital*, December 21, 1915.

during many of the battles described Thompson in his book, *Fighting in Flanders*:

> Thompson is a little man, built like Harry Lauder; hard as nails, tough as raw-hide, his skin tanned to the color of a well-smoked meerschaum, and his face perpetually wreathed in what he called his "sunflower smile."…He has more chilled-steel nerve than any man I know, and before he had been in Belgium a month his name became a synonym throughout the army for coolness and daring.[21]

When reading this particular quote, one might be prone to think of Thompson as a soldier due to the way that Powell describes him as "hard as nails, tough as raw-hide" with "more chill-steel nerve than any man I know."[22] In other sources Donald Thompson is referred to as "Captain Donald C. Thompson." In another instance of similar praise, when returning to Kansas from Europe, many of his photographs and films received praised by many, claiming that "Thompson's nerve and daring had written the state of Kansas into the history of the war."[23] Also, according to David Mould, "He was becoming something of a local folk hero. He had witnessed 32 battles, carried 72 passes and permits, and was credited with shooting 16000 feet of motion pictures and more than 2700 stills in the war zone."[24] Similarly, a *New York Times* article states,

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[21] Edward Alexander Powell, *Fighting in Flanders* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914), 14.
[22] Ibid, 14.
[23] Mould, "Donald Thompson: Photographer at War," 162.
[24] Ibid, 162.

"In his steamer truck and handbags he brought with him some sixty-odd passes, permits, and official O.K's, any number of trophies and souvenirs, a medal from the Belgian War Office, and a mass of cheerful recollections of twenty-six battles of which he has been a spectator."[25] Donald Thompson received praise from Americans and Europeans alike who thought of him as a hero photographer who did anything that it took to get the film and photographs he needed while in battle.

It is easy to see why Americans would be fascinated and amazed by Donald Thompson—although much of his photographs did not show actual combat, he was still able to give them a small glimpse of what was going on during the war. Also, despite the fact that Thompson's films had been confiscated numerous times while in Europe, Thompson managed to retrieve his work by smuggling it into the United States. For example, while Thompson was traveling to England by train, all alien passengers were searched. Knowing that the officers would surely confiscate his films, he bribed a Russian woman sitting beside him to hide his films for him. He was sure that she would be exempt from this search being that she "was treated with the greatest consideration and received ceremonial visits from officers at every stop."[26] She demanded

[25] "Paid A War Bribe In Cigar Coupons," *New York Times,* November 16, 1914.
[26] Ibid.

that he pay her 1000 francs and, because Thompson did not have enough, instead, he paid her with 250 francs and then asked her if American notes would suffice for the remainder. She agreed and hid his films before he was searched. However, what she did not realize at the time was that Thompson actually paid her with cigarette coupons, not American notes. When speaking with the *New York Times*, Thompson reportedly states, "Believe me, I wanted to get them [films] back before she tried to cash those cigarette coupons."[27] The fact that Thompson seemed to protect his films at all cost made him all the more fascinating to his fellow Americans, who felt privileged to be able to see his films for themselves in the theater.

Consequently, just as many soldiers felt the sting of adventure during times of war, Donald Thompson left his homeland in order to embark on the "greatest story in history."[28] He yearned for adventure, excitement, and adrenaline just as many young soldiers. Furthermore, like that of a soldier, Donald Thompson experienced much of the same horrible realities in the trenches. He had been injured many times and was very vulnerable on the front. Inevitably, he had seen many young soldiers die on the battlefield, and many of these soldiers became his

[27] Ibid.
[28] Thompson, *Thompson in Russia*, vii.

friend. Due to the nature of his career which involved taking risks and landing in dangerous vulnerable positions, many individuals from America as well as Europe held Donald Thompson in high esteem. Just as soldiers were often regarded as brave and heroic, Thompson was received in much of the same way. Ultimately, although war photographers like Thompson could not relate completely with soldiers during World War I, they certainly shared many similarities and connections with them on and off the battlefield. When looking back at many of the extraordinary things that Thompson has seen and done, it is clear that he indeed had many stories to tell throughout his life and he will forever be etched into history as the "Topekan hero photographer" during the First World War. [29]

[29] "Somewhere In France," *Topeka Daily Capital*, December 21, 1915.

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