

Heroes All

By Gerry Veeder, Ph.D.

“Heroes All” was produced in 1919 by the Red Cross’ in-house unit, the Bureau of Pictures, hastily set up in 1917 as the U.S. entered World War I so that the Red Cross could make its own films for publicity and fundraising (although they had no experience in this). In its short life—1917-1921—the Bureau of Pictures produced almost 100 short films of an amazing variety. After several false starts, William Waddell, experienced in both production and distribution, was hired to run the Bureau. Initially he was limited to Signal Corps footage doled out by the Committee for Public Information, which kept the most exciting material for themselves, but when the war ended, the Red Cross was free from the CPI and could produce what it wanted. Movies seemed an entertaining way to publicize Red Cross efforts as interest in the war and relief projects waned. Teams of cinematographers and publicists were sent to Europe and the Balkans to document post-war projects, while others focused on building enthusiasm for the work with returning veterans here at home. The goal of “Heroes All” was to present the sobering problems posed by the return of thousands of disfigured, blind, and seriously disabled soldiers in a positive and reassuring light

A quasi-documentary about Walter Reed Army hospital, the film has the professional polish of good camerawork and editing. The opening title card states the theme: “In peace and war, every soldier who follows the American Flag receives the finest medical care Uncle Sam can give him.” The movie celebrates the medical work done at the hospital while also artfully establishing the role the Red Cross played in rehabilitation. The cheerful message is that no matter how damaged these men may be, they will be successfully returned to civilian life, even if equipped with artificial limbs. If there were a sound track, it would be a Sousa march, upbeat and uplifting.

The narrative begins with the wounded arriving at the train station and then follows them to Walter Reed Hospital, where it emphasizes the state-of-the-art medical treatments available to them. Viewers watch a soldier being x-rayed, then see a close-up of



This frame enlargement shows a 1920 operating room at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington D.C. where World War I veterans were treated and the Red Cross aided in their rehabilitation. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection .

the film locating shrapnel that can now be removed surgically. An array of post-surgery treatments is featured and the movie proclaims: “Muscles wasted away from nerve injury or disease are toned up by Physio-Therapy, or treatment by massage, and natural forces such as electricity, water, heat and light.” The public can see for themselves what these modern treatments look like.

The image of the Red Cross, always present to provide help and comfort, is seamlessly woven into the narrative beginning with the opening shots where volunteers hand out candy and cigarettes to the soldiers at the station. The Red Cross activities serve as a counterpoint to the clinical atmosphere and medical treatments at Walter Reed. After surgery and often painful treatments, smiling men are shown relaxing on the sunny porch of the Red Cross House, playing with birds, a parrot, and a monkey. Later some are shown smoking as they cluster around a fireplace, enjoying a moment of comradery.

Scenes of physiotherapy treatments are followed by sightseeing jaunts, including a trip to Keith’s Vaudeville Theater and an outing to a ballgame. While the hospital heals their bodies, the Red Cross helps heal their spirits by getting them back into society. To facilitate this, occupational therapy in the Red Cross “Reconstruction Department” promises “A complete mental and physical ‘comeback’” for every Yank” by providing them with “vocational courses” like wood-

working and basket weaving.

Perhaps the most uncomfortable aspect of the film for viewers today is its unabashed emphasis on the amputees. The loss of limbs is presented to the audience as no more than an inconvenience which the men accept and learn to live with. In a clay-modeling class, a wounded soldier makes a bust of a legless, armless torso titled "A Little Bit of Yank," recalling the rhyme: "I've fought a bit, I've lost a bit, I've left a bit in France. I'm smilin' yet, I'm glad you bet, They've left a bit to dance." This bravado is depicted also in field day scenes of one-legged men using their crutches to bounce over low hurdles or to run in an actual "One Legged Race". The female "Reconstruction aides" play softball against the "Amputation Team," the amputees tossing aside crutches to hop between bases. Everyone smiles and seems to be having a grand time, encouraging viewers to be more pleased than shocked by the sight of men missing legs.

The title "Medical Science aims to restore or substitute through artificial means that which the soldier has lost in his country's service" is followed by a legless man on a "skateboard" propelling himself along with his hands. Next he wears short metal stilts on each leg to learn to balance before finally walking toward us on his new "legs." The camera's close-up of his big grin suggests he now feels ready to return to civilian life.

The closing shots of a medal presentation, the waving American flag and the Statue of Liberty leave no doubt about the sense of national pride the film

seeks to evoke. The U.S. government honors the sacrifices these men have made and treats them as heroes by providing excellent medical care and rehabilitation, returning them to their homes almost as good as new.

The relentlessly positive tone of the film seems unrealistic today, knowing what we do about the long-term effects of physical and mental injuries from war, but it accurately reflects the exuberant mood of the time: the war was over and now the country could get back to normal. Society is encouraged to welcome the wounded heroes back despite their limitations. Finally, the medical staff and Red Cross volunteers at Walter Reed also presented as heroes, since through their dedicated work, a "complete mental and physical 'comeback' for every Yank" is absolutely possible.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Now retired from the faculty of the University of North Texas, Gerry Veeder earned her Ph.D. at Wayne State University. She has conducted extensive research on the early use of film by industries and organizations, like Caterpillar Tractor, the Union Pacific Railroad and the American Red Cross. Much of Dr. Veeder's scholarship has focused on the Red Cross Travel Series (1919-1921) which used footage shot by Merl LaVoy, Farciot Edouart, and Ernest Schoedsack to make shorts like "Apple Blossom Time in Normandy" which featured peasant life and scenic views in Europe and the Balkans.