

D-DAY LANDINGS IN FRANCE

by Canadian Ciné Photographers

by Robert Lansdale

The story of ciné photography of the D-Day landings by Canadian troops, June 6th 1944, is repeated, it seems, every 10 years as new information and analysis becomes available. We hope with this presentation we will understand the truth. Cameramen of the Canadian Army Film and Photo Unit daringly scooped all others with their footage of the first-wave landings at Bernières-sur-Mer.



Depiction of Canadian troops landing on the beaches of Bernières-sur-Mer on June 6th 1944.

I first heard of this story when I interviewed friend Ken Bell in 1994. He was part of the Film and Photo Unit that came ashore during the D-Day landings coming in with the second wave.

He related: “It’s about time the real story was told of the D-Day landing film clips. ...too many people are wrongly given credit for the photography. The first honours must go to Captain Colin McDougall who was in charge of photographers for the Canadian Film and Photo Unit. It seemed improbable to insert a photographer into the section of 22 highly trained soldiers (per boat) who had been intensely trained as a unit. No photography would record the historic moments. But ingeniously, Captain McDougall came up with an idea to statically position 35mm Eyemo cameras near the back of several boats and have Navy personnel trigger the shutters. Six cameras were so installed.”

The Bell & Howell Eyemo camera is powered by a clock-work motor which runs approximately 22 feet of film on one

winding (under 15 seconds). M. (Sammy) Jackson-Samuels CSC of Toronto who used an Eyemo for years undertook tests for us to see how much film could be eked out during a run. He found it would amount to a maximum of 20 seconds at 24 frames per second. Cameras could be adjusted to run at 18 fps giving a maximum run of 30 seconds (not normal practice) providing a longer run but with jerkier action. Sammy pointed out that there is a small thumb lever at the side of the camera just above the tripod mounting plate. Once that lever was pushed the camera would run continuously unless shut off by returning the lever again to the OFF position. Such does not prove valid when we analyze the film footage.

Mr. Bell related: “With all the distractions, chances were slim that the film would capture key action of the invasion. After the landings Captain Jack McDougall hit the beaches and made a very dangerous search to retrieve the cameras. Two landing craft were completely destroyed but out of the rest came the historic

footage.” Dispatch Rider Brian O’Regan is also credited with the same dangerous rescue of the film and cameras.

But then Royal Canadian Navy photographer Bill Poulis, in a speech before the Photographic Historical Society of Canada in 1995, indicated the film could very well be his own coverage as he accompanied the first wave of Canadian troops to hit the beaches then returned with the second wave in a larger landing craft. He pointed out that ten Navy photographers were assigned to the invasion. He found no problem inserting himself into the smaller LCA landing craft as it was under control of the Navy. As to the idea of unmanned cameras being used he thought it not plausible. The low light level of early morning combined with slow film (Plus-X ASA 64), and the unmanned cameras to be started by busy sailors – made it unbelievable in his estimation. Cameras were scarce at the best of times so gambling with six units would be questionable.

It was regulation for both Army and Navy photographers to shoot all scenes mounted on a very heavy tripod... no matter how dire the situation. Hand-held cameras resulted in jitters when projected. Photographers soon learned that the use of the tripod meant more frequent acceptance by the editors. Mr. Poulis said he ditched the heavy tripod for a lighter civilian tripod bought in London but resorted to handheld shooting for most action. He would slate (identify) a reel of new film by writing RCN or POULIS with chalk on a rock or the side of a landing craft – not all film was slated. To keep the films dry he would enclose them in a condom. The biggest problem was keeping the camera clean, inside and out – he used the oil from the side of his nose to keep the pressure plate lubricated. He was equipped with Kodachrome colour film in a 16mm ciné camera, but it was so slow he had to wait until noon to shoot it. On the beach Bill remembered it was very noisy. He covered only the beaches seeking naval activities while “inland” was Army territory.

The newsreel coverage of troops exiting the landing craft seldom gets credit as to who are disembarking or who took the photographs. Since no other film of the first-wave landings survived the day, it has become symbolic of all those who risked their lives to storm the beaches.

John Eckersley of Vancouver, a military history buff, took up the challenge in the 90s to find answers to the D-Day footage. He’s constantly kept me aware of any progresses as he reviewed all videos he could lay his hands on. He analyzed various treatments of the film – different videos include varying lengths and different portions. “I’ve concluded,” writes Mr. Eckersley, “that all the Eyemo footage in those that I have seen come from three boats. *D-Day Plus Fifty* by the CBC with Knowlton Nash has spliced together footage from two boats with both boats unloading in roughly

the same position, based on the location of prominent buildings. Roughly the same footage appears in *Crusade in Europe, Volume IV; D-Day - The Turning Point*.

“The Norman Summer episode of the NFB series *Canada at War* has the most footage from boat ‘A’. It starts earlier and shows the first two men reacting to fire from the left. Spliced on, to this footage, at the point the third man is standing in the door, is footage from boat ‘C’, without the two distinctive buildings, so apparently at a different location on the beach. *No Price Too High – Canadians in the Second World War; Episode V Liberation 1944* has the longest and best quality footage from boat ‘C’. It begins with a crewman in the left front opening the left door with his left hand and then looking at (or past) the camera and smiling. *World War II, The War Chronicles - Volume 2* has footage from ‘C’ and ‘A’ (including the ‘back slap’ which can be identified as later footage from ‘A’).

“In all three clips, the camera is in the same position - on the left gunwale, aimed slightly to the right. That seems to support the ‘clamped Eyemo’ explanation.” A tripod-mounted camera would be subject to the buffeting seas and the rough grounding of the boat as it neared shore.

In the meantime Dan Conlin in 1986 was working on his Bachelor of Journalism degree with a concentration in History at Carleton University in Ottawa. His Honours Research Paper was a history of the Canadian Army Film and Photo Unit. While working as a researcher at the National Archives of Canada he was introduced to the work of the Army Photo Unit. Eventually he was encouraged to turn his thesis into a book and thus *War Through the Lens: The Canadian Army Film and Photo Unit 1941–1945* was published in 2015. Mr. Conlin gives much credit to others who assisted in adding to the overall data. We owe much to this history of the D-Day landings with revealing interviews by many of the participants.

The Canadian Army Film and Photo Unit were given permission to insert both still and ciné photographers into the invasion crafts. A special harness was created of leather to brace the Eyemo camera close to the cameraman’s chin and neck. According to Conlin Jack McDougall obtained 15 automatic “stick-on” cameras from the Americans. Cameramen could attach these to the side of their own assault craft to record the critical moments of the landings from a fixed point as well as attaching them to other assault craft in their regiment. Nothing is offered about the make or model of these “automatic” cameras.

As Dan Conlin reveals in his book: “Dave Reynolds from the Canadian Film Unit was credited as the first Allied cameraman to land on French soil when he parachuted with the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion with a stills camera and a 16mm motion picture camera. His 35mm camera and film

were sent in with a different glider which crashed on landing. His film provided the first Allied coverage to get back from the airborne landings.”

“Bud Roos was the first Canadian cameraman to hit the beach with D Company of the Regina Rifles. Roos relived experiences of explosions as his boat was lifted on a wave and came down on a mine. He was wondering where his ‘stick-on’ camera was flying to when a Navy fellow yelled ‘For Christ sake, jump.’ As he waded ashore other barges suffered the same fate with explosions. Roos carried his camera and tripod in his struggle to shore. Of the 30 men in his landing craft only Ross and two others made it to land alive.”

Stills photographer Don Grant arriving with the Royal Winnipeg Rifles fell into deep water just as German machine guns raked the landing craft killing a dozen men. His Speed Graphic was drowned but his waterproofed Leica survived so he began shooting still photographs.

“Sgt. Bill Grant came ashore with the Queen’s Own Rifles. A Bren gun carrier beside his landing craft blew up and sent a torrent of water all over Grant and men beside him. ‘I was busy shooting everything – shooting the guys jumping out the landing craft and hoisting of the first signal flag.’ Grant gathered up his film cans from his own camera and from the ‘stick-on’ camera on the other landing craft he had equipped. Grant’s film reels went into a specially marked PRESS bag that were picked up off the beach and dispatched to London by the fastest means. Since Grant implanted and rescued the “stick-on” cameras, that puts the credit for the D-Day footage with Grant and the Canadian Film and Photo Unit.”

“In London when the processed film was reviewed, Jack McDougall remembers officers and censors sitting through three or four thousand feet of rather dull stuff, mostly of preparations for embarkation. Then came Sgt. Grant’s material and it was ‘damned good.’ There was much excitement getting the film to the United States as newsreels in the quickest way possible.

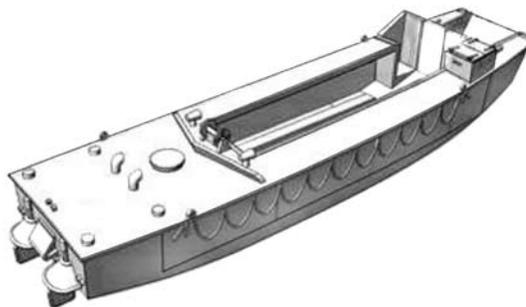
“The films were edited and printed as 16mm distribution prints. Such survive today but all original negatives were destroyed in a blazing hangar fire at Beaconsfield, Que. (suburb of Montreal) where the flammable nitrate film had been stored as a safety measure.

On D-Day Conlin concludes: “Sgt. Bill Grant is singled out as the man who took the actual coverage. But Grant is reluctant to claim ownership of the coverage. ‘I don’t honestly know whether it is or not. I see a lot of shots but when I understand that the other two guys didn’t get any stuff, so it must be me. I don’t know.’”

Well, I thought there must be another way to confirm our research. Often with my other research I have to take a “screen-shot” off the face of my computer. “Command-Shift 3” on my Mac records a png file of the image as seen on the screen. I was wondering if this also might be done while viewing videos of the D-Day invasion clips. Tests found such files could be opened with Photoshop and improved in sharpness and density. After cropping and improvement I could compare the frames at leisure for their differentness.

I chose to review a video by **Critical Past** which has one of the largest online collections of historic, royalty-free film footage and still images in the world. You may view it on YouTube as <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=DAxwFIH6AsA>.

My captured images show three distinct boats and on the next page is the introductory images (large image) from the beginning of each clip. Clip “A” establishes the scene at Bernière-sur-Mer and appears to be from a camera mounted on the left decking of the landing craft. Schematics of a LCA shows compartments/shelters at the front of the boat – to the



right in a protected cubicle for the boatswain and left for an assistant/observer. There is no similar opening at the back of the boat where a photographer might position himself to get this exact view showing the top of the decking.

This clip is 124 seconds long which defies the test by Sammy Samuels on his Eyemo camera which showed one winding of the clock-work motor would only last 20 seconds. So the “automatic” cameras obtained from the Americans must have been some other camera which could run longer and continuous.

The landing craft in clip “A” sways and lurches with the waves as it nears the beach but the camera remains absolute steady to the horizontal-top of the doors. The camera surely was securely fixed to the deck. Anomalies seen in image “A” and “C” are: no square portals in the front doors that are seen in clip “C”. The compass in front of the driver in “A” is completely round while that in “C” has a ring added to the top. The storage area just behind the driver in “C” has a round something stored there... not so in “A”.

This clip “A” in its later stages has one of the soldiers pat his friend on the back for good luck. The man turns to the side so that two veterans of the regiment have verified that this is Private Baker of A Company of the North Shore (N.B.) Regiment. This Regiment was supposed to land at and is credited with the capture of St. Aubin-sur-Mer on the eastern flank of Nan Red beach. This would show that one of their boats got lost and went ashore at the seaside community of La Rive Plage which is part of Bernière-sur-Mer.

The second clip “B” is 119 seconds long and has a different view devoid of the usual houses but with Photoshop one lone ghostly building crosses the scene as the boat swings to the right. The driver sits low and can’t really be seen while the observer at the left turns and smiles to the camera. He pushes the left door open. The camera is mounted also on the deck relatively in the same position.

The third clip is the longest at 151 seconds long. We again

Clip Sequence from three different boats....

"A" film clip 124 seconds



Identified as the North Shore (N.B.) Regt. The LCA approaches the community of La Rive Plage part of Bernières-sur-Mer. The soldier getting the "pat on the back" is identified as Private Baker of A Company. No port-holes are open on doors.

"B" film clip 119 seconds



Different fogbound background. Photoshop brings forth a single building that swings across the scene to the left. Steady image. Radio equipment is seen on the back of soldiers. Group of soldiers wades towards the shore.

"C" film clip 151 seconds



Bernières is again in the background with what should be Queen's Own Rifles disembarking. Second image shows (North-shore?) soldiers moving in from right from another landing craft. Last seconds proves camera is also mounted to deck.

see the buildings at Bernière-sur-Mer but much closer. The port-holes in the door are open. The clip starts with soldiers already advancing out the craft. Censors might have eliminated the first men being cut down by German machine gunfire. The Queen's Own history records that the first three soldiers were killed. It is not until the last 5 seconds that haversacks are removed from the left portion of the image and the decking can be seen. So this camera too was mounted on top of the deck and was not recorded by a photographer but by one of the automatic "stick-on" cameras.

Now this is not to say that there was not film coverage contributed by photographers who had to endure the perils of the day. Their hand-held film clips probably were full of blurred action and had the "jitters" from not being mounted on tripods (impossible under the circumstance). The film editors were always looking for sharp steady images and always recommended the use of a tripod. In the rush to get the Invasion images out to the newsreels the editors would pounce on the sharp film clips and not bother with any other.

It is unfortunate that we can't go back to the archives and search for other films by actual photographers. All the nitrate films were concentrated in a building in Quebec that was destroyed by fire. So credit must be offered to the photographers – both Army and Navy photographers who were there.

My search will continue to find that elusive "stick-on" automatic camera that was obtained from the Americans.

We commend the personnel of the Canadian Army Film and Photo Unit for their diligence in pursuing their task of recording history of the Canadian Army which was not without risk of death. On more than one occasion they scooped other units with invasion coverage. But the D-Day films will remain the epitome of newsreel coverage even though credit is rarely given to the Canadian Army Film and Photo Unit or to Canadian troops who are the subjects in the images. ♣



War Through the Lens:

The Canadian Army Film and Photo Unit 1941-1945

by author Dan Colin

This well written and well illustrated history book is at Amazon.ca, now discounted to \$21.95. It explores the experiences with unique first person accounts combined with images of Canada at war. Documenting both front line and a behind the scenes view of the war, *War Through the Lens* provides important insights into how the war was covered.

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