DONALD THOMPSON: PHOTOGRAPHER AT WAR

DAVID MOULD

DONALD THOMPSON didn’t look much like a war hero. His less than imposing frame—he was five feet four and weighed 120 pounds—looked ill-suited to the rigors of trench warfare. His khaki uniform bore no decorations. He alternately puffed and chewed a huge cigar. When he described his war experiences, it was with disarming nonchalance.

World War I produced a new breed of hero—the war photographer. They were non-combatants; yet they shared the dangers and privations of the common soldier. They received few of the courtesies that today’s television crews enjoy; they were often regarded as spies, or at least dangerous nuisances. They were arrested and imprisoned and their cameras confiscated. Their film was censored by nervous military authorities and cautious exhibitors.

But it was exciting, demanding work, and Thompson revelled in it. If he had an image of a war photographer, it was of a born adventurer, a maverick who defied death, danger, and censorship to get the film. It was an image he tried hard to emulate. To the film industry magazine *Motion Picture News*, he was an “expert photographer and globe trotter.” 1

The war correspondent Edward Alexander Powell thought he had “more chilled-steel nerve than any man I know.” 2 To his hometown newspaper, the Topeka *Daily Capital*, he was simply “the photographic hero of the war.” 3

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Donald Thompson, born in Topeka about 1884, was a born adventurer. As a pioneer combat photographer in World War I he revelled in the excitement of his work, defying death, danger, and censorship to get his film. To his hometown newspaper, the Topeka Daily Capital, he was “the photographic hero of the war.” War correspondent Edward Alexander Powell of the New York World said he had “more chilled-steel nerve than any man I know.” Gen. Max von Boehn, commander of the Ninth German army, allowed Thompson to film German troop columns marching toward Antwerp, and a German officer serving as the photographer’s guide even ordered the column halted so that after the dust settled Thompson could take his pictures. The sketch of Thompson, right, was in the Topeka Daily Capital, September 25, 1917. Gen. von Boehn and Powell are pictured, left, and the photograph below is one made by Thompson of German troops on the march.

An Adventurer Extraordinary

No One But an American Would Have Attempted It

“Of all the hordes of adventurous charlatans, who were drawn to the Continent on the outbreak of the war as iron filing are attracted to a magnet, I doubt if there was a more picturesque figure than a little photographer from Kansas named Donald Thompson. I saw him first while paying a flying visit to England. He breezed into the mountains wearing an American army shirt, a pair of British officer’s riding breeches, French picture, and a little-people’s forage cap and carrying a camera the size of a carton phonograph. No one but an American could have accomplished what he had and no American but one from Kansas. He had not only seen war, all military prohibitions to the contrary, but he had actually photographed it.”

—Edward Alexander Powell in “Fighting in Flanders.”
THOMPSON was born about 1884, and brought up in Topeka. He was an undistinguished student at Harrison school, but not because of lack of ability. Thompson's intelligence was street-wise, rather than academic—the skill to argue, persuade, charm, and otherwise get his way. He also had a sharp sense of what made news.

In 1903 the Kansas river burst its banks, flooding low-lying areas of Topeka. Thompson's eyewitness account of the rescue operations was printed in the Capital and for several years he freelanced for the paper, submitting copy and photographs.

Respect for the law was not Thompson's strong point, and he was often in trouble. In 1910 he was arrested for impersonating an army officer and passing worthless checks. He served part of his sentence in Leavenworth but was pardoned by Pres. William Howard Taft.

It is probably no coincidence that Thompson went to work for his benefactor; he was hired by the Taft press bureau in Washington. In 1912 he shot stills and motion pictures at the Democratic national convention in Baltimore. The next year he was covering strikes in Colorado for the Pueblo Chieftain and the Associated Press.

In 1914, when war broke out in Europe, Thompson was in Canada, where he secured permission from the minister of militia, Gen. Sam Hughes, to film the Canadian contingent. As a representative of a Montreal newspaper, the Cartier Centenary, he sailed for Europe on a troop ship. He arrived in England with an overcoat, a toothbrush, two clean handkerchiefs, an American passport, three large cameras—and an irrepressible desire to reach the front in Belgium.

He needed it, for he soon ran into official roadblocks. The British said he needed permission from the French authorities; when he arrived in Paris, the French told him to ask the British. Undaunted, Thompson set out anyway.

He made nine attempts to reach the front from Paris—and eight times he was arrested. On one occasion, he told the French officer who stopped him that he was trying to rescue his wife and children, who were stranded in the battle zone. The officer was moved by this

5. Ibid. See, also, Kansas City Star, September 6, 1914; Powell, Fighting in Flanders, op. cit. 15-16.
6. Topeka Daily Capital, September 5, 1914; Kansas City Star, September 6, 1914; Powell, Fighting in Flanders, p. 16.
He had a quick answer when asked how many languages he spoke. "Three," he would say, "English, American and Yankee."  

When he was arrested for the eighth time, he was tried by a military tribunal and told he would be shot if he was not out of France in 24 hours. Two gendarmes took him to Paris and made sure he bought a through ticket to London. But Thompson got off at Amiens, in northern France, where he knew he could pick up a troop train to the front.  

Shortly after midnight a train carrying wounded prisoners pulled into the station. Thompson caused a general alarm by scrambling to the top of the train to take a picture of an American refugee train on the next track. His flashlight caused alarm; people on the station thought a German bomb had exploded. The police arrested him, but let him go after some British soldiers said he belonged to their regiment. Later that night a train carrying artillery to the front pulled in; Thompson slipped under a tarpaulin covering a field gun and fell asleep. When he awoke the next morning, he was at Mons in southern Belgium.  

A regiment of Highlanders was passing; Thompson exchanged a chocolate bar for a forage cap and fell in with them. After a two-hour march, they went into the trenches.  

"'As soon as I got there,'" Thompson later told the New York Times, "'the Germans began to open up on us. For eighteen hours they pounded us with the biggest part of their artillery, and I don't want to see anything hotter.'"  

Thompson braved the barrage for seven days and nights, staying in the trenches until the German advance. That night he bivouacked with a French line regiment, but the next morning he was arrested again—by a French officer who had paid Thompson that courtesy once before. He was sent back to Amiens under guard, with orders to leave for England. The train for the French port Boulogne was packed with refugees, but as it pulled out he saw a first-class compartment occupied by a young woman. Thompson, in his melodramatic style, dived through the open window.

The woman was a Russian countess who was returning to Petrograd via England. She had lost her maid and all her money, so she and Thompson made a deal. Thompson knew his films would be confiscated if he was searched, and he asked the woman to carry them in her baggage. She agreed, on condition he gave her 1,000 francs as a gesture of trust. Having only 250 francs, he made up the difference with cigar coupons, which he claimed were American war currency. At Boulogne, Thompson was arrested, stripped, and searched; nothing was found, so he was allowed to continue to London. At the countess’s hotel, he recovered his films, his money and cigar coupons. 10

Thompson’s motion pictures of the Mons battle were well received; the American Moving Picture World described them as “some of the most remarkable pictures of the entire war.” 11 In London he sold his still pictures to the highest bidder for $5,000, and was hired by a newspaper syndicate for the then exorbitant fee of $800 a week plus expenses. 12 By October, 1914, he was back at the front.

THOMPSON arrived at Ostend, in northwest Belgium, and went by train to Ma- lines. From there he began to walk the 25 miles to Brussels, carrying his camera, an overcoat, field glasses, a revolver, and 300 films. When a German Uhlan cavalry patrol surprised him, he pulled a small silk American flag from his pocket and shouted “Hoch der Kaiser” and “Auf wiedersehen,” the only German phrases he knew. He was brought before an officer to whom he explained that his Canadian credentials were merely a ruse to allow him to pass through the Allied lines; he claimed to represent a syndicate of German newspapers in Milwaukee. He was released and given a seat in an ambulance going to Brussels. 13

The next day he was arrested again outside a cafe. A German officer smashed Thompson’s camera with his sword and destroyed his films. He was told he would be shot as a spy if he stayed in Brussels, so he walked the 30 miles to Ghent and caught a train back to Ostend, where he had stored his other cameras. At the American consulate in Ostend he met Edward Alexander Powell, the New York World’s war correspondent—an encounter Powell vividly recalled in his book, Fighting in Flanders.

He blew into the Consulate there wearing an American army shirt, a pair of British officer’s riding-breeches, French puttees, and a Highlander’s forage-cap, and carrying a camera the size of a parlour phonograph. No one but an American could have accomplished what he had, and no American but one from Kansas.

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.” 14

Thompson and Powell traveled to Antwerp, which was under siege by the German army. The Belgium military authorities were trying to keep photographers away from the front, but Thompson didn’t give up easily. He sought an audience with King Albert of Belgium; after roughing up a guard and arguing with a private secretary, he got his way. Perhaps the King realized Thompson would cause even more trouble if he refused; he gave him an unlimited pass to work at the front. 15

The pass didn’t prevent official harassment. Thompson, Powell, and an American army captain were arrested while observing the German artillery barrage on the forts near Willebroek. Thompson infuriated the interrogating officer by smoking a large cigar and by grinning when told to look serious. Their papers were in order but they were not allowed to return to the front. 16

10. Ibid. See, also, Topeka Daily Capital, September 5, 1914, September 25, 1927; Kansas City Star, September 6, 1914, Powell, Fighting in Flanders, pp. 16-20.
16. Powell, Fighting in Flanders, pp. 46-47.
Allied propaganda in the United States in 1914 and 1915 dwelt at length on reported German atrocities in Belgium, and Powell repeated some of the stories in his articles for the New York World. The Germans denied the allegations, and Gen. Max von Boehn, the commander of the Ninth German army, wanted to set the record straight. He invited Powell to dinner; while they discussed the atrocity reports, Thompson, with a senior officer as guide, filmed the German columns marching toward Antwerp.

Thompson expected the German army to wait for him. When he saw a picture opportunity, he told his guide; the officer blew a whistle, and the whole column halted.

"Just wait a few minutes until the dust settles," Thompson would say, as he nonchalantly lit a cigar. The advance was halted until the dust settled, and Thompson took his picture.

"In all the annals of modern war," Powell wrote later, "I do not believe there is a parallel to this little Kansas photographer halting, with peremptory hand, an advancing army and leisurely photographing it, regiment by regiment." 17

"Le Capitaine Thompson," as he liked to be called, obviously enjoyed his flamboyant reputation, and it may have led him to embroider accounts of his exploits for dramatic effect. Speaking to a businessmen's luncheon in Topeka in December, 1915, he described the battle for the Belgian town of Weerde near Malines, a strategic place on the Antwerp-Brussels railroad. If Thompson is to be believed, he was indirectly responsible for the death of 7,000 Belgian soldiers.

17. Ibid., pp. 129-130.

Donald Thompson, five feet four inches tall and weighing 120 pounds, did not look like a war hero. His khaki uniform bore no decorations. But he often puffed and chewed a huge cigar and when he described his war experiences, it was with disarming nonchalance. He was part of that new breed of hero produced by World War I—the war photographer. Although he enjoyed his daredevil reputation, he would candidly admit he did not take unnecessary risks. The Kansas City Star, January 23, 1916, carried this picture and quoted him as saying: "Of course, it was dangerous work, but I'm a fatalist anyway and I didn't take any foolish chances. When I found a bad spot I'd move."
This photograph of Donald Thompson and an assistant in field uniforms appeared in the Topeka Daily Capital, December 23, 1915. With an accompanying article about the photographer's war experiences, it promoted the showing in Topeka of his 90-minute film, Somewhere in France. "It is war—horrid, bloody war that Donald C. Thompson, called by Leslie's Magazine 'most successful of war photographers' will next week bring to Topeka..." said the Capital. Topekanes were urged to get their tickets in advance to see the "awful, terrifying" pictures which Thompson "with dare-devil recklessness" took under fire.

Thompson and Powell were watching the battle from the roof of a farmhouse. "I had my cinematograph in good action, trained on a town in the wood where the Germans seemed the more strongly entrenched, when some Belgian staff officers brought up some telephone instruments," said Thompson.

"Telling us that they were short of men, I was asked to direct the line of fire of the artillery. I consented, took up a receiver, and told the gunners in the rear how their shots were falling, particularly on the houses in the town. When the range was too short, I told them to lengthen out, on all but one house, a big white affair. I knew the girl who lived in that house, so I didn't direct any fire toward it.

"When the town was sufficiently in ruins, an attack was ordered. Powell and I followed the infantry. We got down into the ruined town and out of that big white house that I had spared poured German machine guns and pom poms and other pieces of artillery by the hundreds it seemed.

The Belgians were overwhelmed and 7,000 died in a fifteen-minute battle in the wreck strewn streets."

Powell confirms Thompson's account in some respects, but on several important points they differ. He says they observed the battle from the farmhouse roof but does not say Thompson helped to direct the artillery fire. He points out that the Belgian infantry, firing from trenches, could not see the Germans, whose positions were in the woods, and did not know how effective their fire was. He agrees that the Belgians advanced into a trap, but does not say that he and Thompson went into the town. An experienced observer, Powell offers no count of the casualties.

According to Thompson, he and Powell were caught in the crossfire as they tried to escape, but a German officer recognized the photographer and directed the fire away from them. Powell recalls a hurried, but less hair-raising, retreat. However, Powell corroborates Thompson's account of another incident when he was lucky to escape with his life.

Thompson was filming the German bombardment of the Belgian village of Waelhem, and was billeted in a house with Belgian soldiers. He was at dinner with officers while 80 men slept upstairs when a shell hit the roof, destroying the upper part of the building. The ceiling gave way, and corpses fell down into the room. Thompson ran out into the street and, with a Belgian officer, tried to flee from the town. A shell whistled a few feet above their heads, and the blast of air threw them to the ground. As shells fell around, Thompson decided it was time to write a farewell note to his wife.

"But just as I had finished it," he told the New York Times, "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, his subordinates, to throw him overboard. The rest of us got away." 20

Thompson's luck on the Belgian front ran out at Dinxmude, near Zeebrugge. He had again crossed the lines, and was dining with German officers when a shell from the British artillery hit the house. Two of the officers were killed outright, and another died later in the hospital; shell splinters hit Thompson's nose and back.

"I felt as though I had been struck by a thunderbolt," he said, "and that I was being whisked into the air. Then I knew no more.

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Somewhere in France premiered in Chicago and then came to Topeka for a five-day run at the Grand Theater. Monday was usually a poor day for theaters, but on Monday, December 27, 1915, the Grand had the largest male audience in its history for Thompson's film and lecture. This advertisement for the film was in the Capital, December 27, 1915.
until I found myself in a field hospital, lying among a batch of German wounded with a bandage strapped across my face and my whole body a mass of bruises." 21

Thompson returned to Antwerp, now under German occupation, on an ammunition cart, and made his way to London. The New York Times reported his arrival home in mid-November, but he was soon back in London again. 22

THOMPSON was a freelancer; he sold his photographs and motion pictures to the highest bidder. In Belgium he worked for Powell's paper, the New York World, the Chicago Tribune, the London Daily Mail, and the Illustrated London News. He became briefly notorious in British trade circles when two Belgians brought a court case against him. They had commissioned him to obtain front-line pictures; his camera was seized, but he held onto 5,000 feet of film and conveniently disappeared. A London court fined him 146 pounds and 10 shillings plus costs. 23

His principal patron in London was Lord Northcliffe, the publisher of the London Daily Mail. Thompson said Northcliffe personally hired him, and authorized him to spend what he needed; he was not asked to itemize his expense account. Thompson liked to travel in style, and once found it necessary to hire a special train to travel across Holland. When the Mail's business manager saw the bill he almost had apoplexy, and he fired Thompson on the spot. But Northcliffe overruled the order, and Thompson stayed. 24

It was Northcliffe who, according to Thompson, helped concoct a ruse to allow him to travel to Germany. Thompson learned that notices had been posted ordering his arrest on sight. Northcliffe and Thompson made up a fake newspaper clipping from the nonexistent Brooklyn Observer; it purported to be an interview in which Thompson lavishly praised the German occupation of Belgium.

At first, the ruse worked. At the German border, he was beaten up and thrown into jail; when the clipping was found in his billfold, he was released and allowed to go on to Berlin. But a spy at the Mail tipped off the German secret service, pointing out the English type face in the story.

Thompson, warned by a hotel chambermaid, slid down the fire escape—he probably could have used the stairs, but that wasn't his style—looked up a girl friend, and proposed they elope. She obtained a passport for her "brother" and they drove to the border. There, the un gallant Thompson confessed that he wasn't in love after all and left her. 25

THOMPSON returned to Topeka in January, 1915, to visit his family and to show his front-line footage. He was becoming something of a local folk hero. He had witnessed 32 battles, carried 72 passes and permits, and was credited with shooting 16,000 feet of motion pictures and more than 2,700 stills in the war zone. The Topeka Capital quoted a war correspondent as saying that "Thompson's nerve and daring had written the state of Kansas into the history of the war." 26 To the Topeka State Journal, he was undeniably "America's sensation in the European war." 27

On January 30, 1,000 feet of Thompson's film was shown at the Novelty theater, to an invited audience of Kansas editors. Thompson also took the opportunity to assess the progress of the war. He thought the German army was the most efficient, and said he could not support the atrocity allegations. "The German soldier is too well disciplined to break loose like that. . . ." he said. "In all of my experience I did not see one atrocity committed by Germans." 28

While Thompson was never reluctant to talk about the perils of the war photographer's life, his tone sometimes seemed flippant. Watching a battle, he suggested, was like going to a baseball game. "Honest, it's just like going to

25. Ibid., December 30, 1915.
28. Ibid. American newspapermen who toured behind the German lines also found no evidence of atrocities. Their famous telegram to the Associated Press read: "After spending two weeks with German army accompanying troops upward hundred miles we unable report single instance unprompted reprisal. Also unable confirm rumors mistreatment prisoners or non-combatants. Discipline German soldiers excellent as observed. No drunkenness. To truth these statements we pledge personal professional word."—Quoted in Horace G. Peterson, Propaganda for War: The Campaign Against American Neutrality, 1914-1917 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1939), p. 59.
see the Cubs or White Sox play," he said. "The oftener you see the sight the more you want to. I’d go without sleep for twenty-four hours rather than miss a battle." 29

Thompson said he believed the Russian army, which had been mobilizing for six months, could change the course of the war. And the eastern front was his next destination. In February he left New York on the steamship Adriatic with Robert R. McCormick, the Chicago Tribune publisher. McCormick had decided to see the war first hand, and Thompson’s photographs would accompany his reports. 30

McCormick and Thompson were with the Russian army at the siege of the Polish fortress town of Przemysl, which ended with the surrender of the Austrian garrison in March, 1915. McCormick remarked that Thompson “was only too glad to risk his neck on the Eastern Front.” Later they traveled to the forward positions below Gorlice on the southern border of Poland, in the Carpathian mountains. “There Thompson, the fearless cameraman, took what McCormick thought to be the first 360 degree panoramic sweep of a battle front ever put on film.” 31

Thompson supplied most of the footage for a 1915 Tribune film, With the Russians at the Front. 32 By modern standards, the film appears slow-paced, with long, static shots. Most scenes were shot behind the front line: Russian soldiers pose self-consciously beside field guns, and the Czar and Grand Duke Nicholas are shown at troop reviews. The front-line scene at Lomza in Poland may have been staged, because Thompson was able to take a position where the Russian troops ran towards his camera; the scenes on board a Russian destroyer shelling Turkish villages seem genuine. But Thompson’s achievement should not be underestimated; burdened by heavy equipment and obstructed by suspicious military officials, he deserves credit for showing American audiences a faraway war they had read about, but not seen. However, there was more fire in the publicity material than on the screen as the Tribune hyped the film to exhibitors:

32. There is a print in the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Donald Thompson, left, was a freelancer; he sold his photographs and motion pictures to the highest bidder. One newspaper he worked for in Belgium was the New York World, represented by war correspondent Edward Alexander Powell, right. In his book, Fighting in Flanders (New York, Grosset & Dunlap, 1914), Powell described his first meeting with Thompson. “I met him first while paying a flying visit to Ostend. He blew into the Consulate there wearing an American army shirt, a pair of British officer’s riding-breeches, French puttees, and a Highlander’s forage-cap, and carrying a camera the size of a parlor phonograph. No one but an American could have accomplished what he had, and no American but one from Kansas.”
Don Thompson, a Globe Trotter and Erstwhile Topekan, Under Arrest

War Photographer Is Charged With Impersonating Naval Officers and Passing Worthless Checks.

Chicago, June 5 — Donald C. Thompson, war photographer, was arrested here last night by agents of the department of justice on charges of impersonating naval officers and passing worthless checks.

Thompson has been arrested on similar charges twice previously, federal agents said. Thompson and his wife left Kansas during the war, he as a photographer for a magazine, and she as a Red Cross worker. It was understood here. Mrs. Thompson now is said to be on the Pacific coast.

Thompson’s pictures and films of war scenes, including glimpses of the Kaiser and the German and Russian armies, commanded attention in magazines and newspapers, and later he talked before clubs and other organizations.

He is said to be wanted by the New York or the bureau of investigation of the department of justice for having posed as “Commander Frederick E. Pierson, U. S. N.,” and also as “Lieutenant Commander Weather,” and to have passed several worthless checks.

Thompson was found at one of the most prominent hotels, where he had a suite of three rooms, a young woman secretary and photographic lens said to be valued at several thousand dollars.

Don Thompson, globe trotter and war photographer, was born and reared in Topeka.

Respect for the law was not Donald Thompson’s strong suit, and he was often in trouble. In 1910 he was arrested for impersonating an army officer and passing worthless checks. He served part of his sentence in Leavenworth, but was pardoned by Pres. William Howard Taft. Again in 1923 the war photographer was arrested by federal agents in Chicago and charged with impersonating a naval officer to pass worthless checks. This picture and article about his trouble with the law was on the front page of the Topeka State Journal, June 5, 1923.

Russian Soldiers fighting in the trenches! Russian Big Guns in Action on the Battle Front! Russian Cossacks madly charging! Russian Warship Bombarding Turkish Villages on the Bosporus Front! 33

Thompson was evidently pleased with his footage. In May he wrote to the Topeka State Journal from Moscow: “Now on my way to join Servian army. Russian trip a great success. Took 12,000 feet of film and 70 pictures. All turned out good. Look for the Tribune show . . . and judge for yourself.” 34

In August, 1915, Thompson returned to New York on the liner Cunarder Orduna from Liverpool; on the crossing, his baggage was ransacked and his passport stolen. He said he had photographic evidence of atrocities committed by Austrian soldiers on Serbian civilians, but doubted it would pass the censors. 35

Thompson spent the next three months editing his footage into a 90-minute film, Somewhere in France (the title is an allusion to the censors’ ban on revealing place names). It was premiered in Chicago, and then came to Topeka for a five-day run at the Grand Theater.

33. Advertisement, Motion Picture News, November 13, 1915, p. 177.
36. There is a print in the Library of Congress, motion picture division.
Thompson came too, to add commentary at the screenings. The Topeka Daily Capital, which, as the sponsor of the show had more than a journalistic interest in the event, featured lengthy interviews with the “Topekan globetrotter and daredevil war photographer.”

In the week preceding Thompson’s arrival, hardly a day went by without a story in the Capital. He would tell audiences “just how it felt to be standing up turning a movie machine crank with the bullets whisking about him.”

“Really good war pictures,” noted the Capital, “are unusually scarce. Of pictures that equal Thompson’s there are none. . . . They are hair-raising from start to finish and at times almost terrifying.”

Monday was usually a poor day for theaters, but on Monday, December 27, 1915, the Grand had the largest matinee audience in its history for Somewhere in France and Thompson’s lecture. The photographer dressed in his “working kit”—the khaki uniform he wore in Europe—and impressed the audience by his coolness.

“Thompson does not ‘lecture’ about his pictures,” reported the Capital. “He talks to the audience about them as casually as if he had wandered into someone’s office and were chatting with a friend.”

Two scenes in Somewhere in France attracted specific comments from reviewers. A trench engagement “where the men stood only 30 yards apart” was reportedly filmed at the battle of Champagne in France; by the middle of the week, the Capital had managed to reduce the distance between the trenches to 20 yards. The second is an aerial battle over Flanders which Thompson filmed from a third machine. “Circling, darting, now the Frenchman, now the German above his opponent, the two huge birds fight to the finish, the German, defeated, finally forced to land behind the French lines.”

One difficulty in judging Somewhere in France stems from Thompson’s claim that he omitted or shortened some potentially shocking scenes. “Dead lying in winnows as the result of charges and counter charges will be thrown on the screen,” promised the Capital.

“I am going to cut those scenes rather short, however,” said Thompson. “They are too awful to dwell upon.”

Thompson’s return to his home town was not an unmitigated success. His former wife, then living in New York, took him to court for arrears on the alimony payments. But such domestic inconveniences did not trouble the Capital, which regarded the visit as the most exciting event of the season.

“Thompson is the photographic hero of the war,” said the newspaper. “He is known on every front and the reckless Kansan with his movie camera is familiar to thousands of men who have stood in the trenches. . . . If Thompson could talk freely, which he dares not do, he probably could tell more of the inside story of the war than any other man in America. . . .”

Early in 1916, Thompson traveled to Saloniki in northern Greece, where the Allies had opened a new front in the Balkan campaign. A few months later, he joined the French army, and was appointed an official cinematographer. While his official status was useful in gaining access to the front, he was also obliged to submit his film for censorship. Thompson claimed the French authorities seized 70 percent of his footage.

Thompson’s hopes of covering the Allied offensive of 1916 were dashed when he was wounded in France at the battle of the Somme. Nevertheless, he had enough footage for a seven-reel feature—with the rather pretentious title of War as It Really Is—which was released in the United States in November, 1916. Although most of the footage appears to have been taken behind the lines, it shows some aspects of trench warfare: soldiers are seen clearing gas from a trench, infantry go over the top, and engineers tunnel under the German lines to lay mines. The first public screening was at the famous Rialto Theater in New York City. The film broke the box office record.

In January, 1917, Thompson left for Russia, accompanied by Florence Harper, a staff correspondent of Leslie’s Weekly. Traveling

38. Ibid., December 23, 1915.
40. Ibid., December 30, 1915.
41. Ibid., December 27, 1915.
42. Ibid.
43. Topeka State Journal, December 31, 1915.
44. Topeka Daily Capital, December 21, 1915.
46. Ibid.
Donald Thompson’s place in the history of war photography should not be underestimated. If the films that led his contemporaries to heap superlatives on him seem slow and undramatic to modern eyes, it is because our expectations of the war film have been raised by coverage of World War II and later conflicts, particularly Vietnam. In Thompson’s day it was a considerable achievement to reach the war zone and secure footage. His films helped to educate American audiences about the war the country was to enter. This collage of his pictures was in the Topeka Daily Capital, September 25, 1927.
across Europe was impossible, so they sailed to China and crossed Russia on the Trans-Siberian railroad. They stayed in Petrograd until July, with periodic trips to Moscow and the front line. Thompson filmed the demonstrations and street-fighting that preceded the Russian October revolution.

Thompson admired revolutionist Alexander Kerensky, but thought that Communist leaders Nikolai Lenin and Leon Trotsky were rabble-rousers, hired by the Germans to incite the people. His views were explicit in the title of his film, *The German Curse in Russia*, released in New York in December, 1917. Russia had recently withdrawn from the war, and the Germans had occupied the Ukraine. Thompson’s film may have reinforced popular feelings that the October revolution was not a popular uprising, but a coup engineered by the Germans. As *Motion Picture News* remarked:

> Every foot of the film that is shown helps, it is claimed, to visualize for the American people the means that the Germans utilized in Russia to bring about foot riots, street fighting and the final overthrow of the government which had been established for them upon a foundation of freedom and liberty. 47

THE DETAILS of Thompson’s postwar career are sketchy. In the summer of 1920, he left for a year’s tour of the Far East, accompanied by his wife and by writer Gertrude Emerson. They were commissioned by the magazine *Asia* to shoot stills and motion pictures of native life in 15 countries, from Mongolia to Borneo. 48

On his return to the United States, Thompson got into trouble with the law again. In June, 1923, he was arrested by federal agents in Chicago and charged with impersonating a naval officer to pass worthless checks. 49

Throughout the 1920’s and 1930’s, Thompson worked as an independent producer, selling war films and travelogues to film companies. He settled in Hollywood, Cal., and remarried. However, reports of war gave him itchy feet. He was in Austria during the German occupation and filmed the Italian campaign in Ethiopia. 50

In common with other war photographers, Thompson had a tendency to talk big when he discussed his war exploits. Some of his stories can be corroborated from other sources; some cannot. But his place in the history of war photography should not be underestimated. If the films that led contemporaries to heap superlatives on him seem slow and undramatic to modern eyes, it is because our expectations of the war film have been raised by coverage of World War II and later conflicts, particularly Vietnam. In Thompson’s day, it was a considerable achievement to reach the war zone and secure footage. His films helped to educate American audiences about the war the country was to enter.

Above all, Thompson embodied the essential qualities of the combat photographer: stamina, courage, technical skill, the ability to deal with officials, sharp news judgment, and a good measure of common sense. Although he enjoyed his daredevil reputation, Thompson candidly admitted that he didn’t take unnecessary risks.

“‘When we would get into a battle I would feel my way up to the front and all the time I’d be planning my retreat,’” he said. “‘Of course, it was dangerous work, but I’m a fatalist anyway and I didn’t take any foolish chances. When I found a bad spot I’d move.’” 51

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47. *Motion Picture News*, December 29, 1917, p. 4835. Presumably the reference to the government is to the Kerensky administration not to that of the Czar.


Life history of Henry Vogel written by himself.

I was born Dec. 24th, 1868, in the little village of Dachau, Canton, Zurich, Switzerland. My parents were Joseph and Magdalena Vogel. When I was old enough I desired to attend the village school which was in a 2-story building about 100 feet square and the whole school was Hamilton one room 15 x 20 ft. on the second floor. One teacher, one teacher. Thought them all (unbelievable) wonderful and taught all grades including grammar and higher arithmetic and I was very good at it. I was 10 years old when we emigrated to America and I could do all the lessons as good as I could do the teacher's work. I was taught in a wonderful teacher. I was taught in a State Church, the Reformed Church, and the Reformed Church at the time of the Reformation in Germany, they some little different in the Reformed and others were
to the Reformed.