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# WWII through the camera's eye: Book documents Canadian photo, film unit

Was it worth it? That was the question Sgt. Alan Grayston asked when he sent film of an attack on Carpiquet, in Normandy, France, on July 4, 1944, back to headquarters covered in the blood of his fallen driver.

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1 / 6 Cameraman Lieut. Al Fraser rides on the hood on an overcrowded jeep with, from left, Canadian Press correspondent Ross Munro, public relations officer Capt. Dave MacLellan at the wheel and Peter Stursberg of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, in Modica, Italy, on July 13, 1943. (Capt. Frank Royal)



Was it worth it?

That was the question Sgt. Alan Grayston asked when he sent the film he shot of an attack on Carpiquet, in Normandy, France, on July 4, 1944, back to headquarters covered in the blood of his fallen driver, Pte. Lew Currie of Enfield.

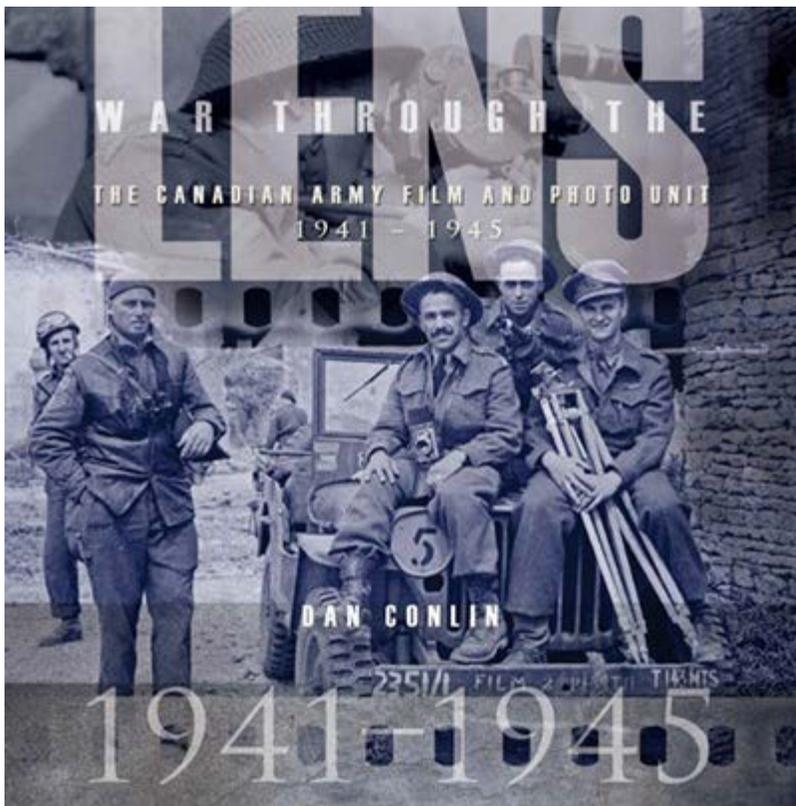
A few days earlier, Grayston, only 24 but a veteran cameraman, was asked to get closer to the action, says historian Dan Conlin, author of *War Through the Lens, The Canadian Army Film and Photo Unit, 1941-1945* (Seraphim Editions).

The 31-year-old Currie, who left behind a wife and two children, was Grayston's driver and assistant. When they came under fire in Carpiquet, Currie was killed instantly as mortar shrapnel ripped open his chest, recounts Conlin. Grayston, who had joined the army at 17 after lying about his age, survived to send the blood-soaked cans to London, England.

"Was it worth it? How you answer that question depends on your feelings about war," muses Conlin, in a phone interview from Halifax's Pier 21 where he is a curator.

The author will share the stories behind the gripping stills and films captured by the little-known Second World War unit at his book launch at Halifax's Central Library on Tuesday at 7 p.m.

[War Through The Lens](#) grew out of Conlin's honours research project for his journalism degree at Carleton University and is based on archival research and oral history interviews. It includes 170 evocative black-and-white photos that capture moments with soldiers and civilians on both sides of the conflict as well as the image-makers themselves.



*War Through The Lens: The Canadian Army Film and Photo Unit, 1941-1945, is written by Dan Conlin, a curator at Pier 21 in Halifax.*

“First-person narratives give insights not found in documents about what it was like to live through those moments. Military records don’t explain how decisions were made, the emotional cost of war,” says Conlin, who tracked down about 15 surviving members of

the group for his project in 1986. Three are still alive.



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“Their insights into war, media and history were really interesting. Everyone has seen the pictures. There are amazing stories behind the photos.”

Conlin, who also holds a master’s degree in history from Saint Mary’s University, firmly believes it was important to have Canadians telling Canadian stories in the Second World War.

He explains the U.S., British and German armies had well established film units, but in 1941 there were no Canadian filmmakers or cameramen even though about three-

quarters of a million Canadians were in service.

“There was no indication we were in the war,” the Berwick native continues, noting the unit was created to represent Canadians on newsreel films around the world, and to capture images of Canadians for future generations.





The film unit grew from four members in 1941 to about 200 people including drivers, writers, editors, 50 cameramen and 25 still photographers by war's end in 1945, says Conlin.

Many of the still photographers came from newspapers including the Toronto Star and the Winnipeg Free Press. The film crews were mainly plucked from army ranks, artillery men and tank drivers and turned into combat photographers, because there wasn't much of a film industry in Canada in the 1930s.

"Because of the sexist nature of the time, it was all men behind the camera except for one, towards the end of the war, Karen Hermiston, who shot training exercises, mobilizations, ceremonies and events including the VE events in England. But there were also women working on the production side, editing and getting the narration done."

The photographers were limited technically: They couldn't drag into battle more than 10 reels of film that would record two minutes per reel, couldn't shoot at night because of slow film speeds and had no telephoto lenses so it was hard to get close to the action. But they knew how to take long steady shots and how to tell a story through pictures from the beginning, middle to end, says Conlin.

"You don't see films like from the Vietnam War with people shooting and falling; there were technical, social and censorship limitations.



*George Game films between two German bodies on the outskirts of San Leonardo near Ortona, Italy, on Dec. 10, 1943. (Lieut. Terry Rowe)*

“But you look at the bewildered shell-shocked faces of German soldiers, see the shots of the D-Day landing, with the men bouncing up and down in the boats, they can’t see the beach and suddenly they tumble out . . .

It’s some of the best battle footage ever shot.”

It was dangerous work. The unit, which was disbanded at the end of the war, saw six members killed and 15 seriously wounded, says Conlin.

The men Conlin interviewed had been quiet for years about what they did because they wanted attention focused on the soldiers, but he heard tales of daring and adventure.

“They were upfront about the unpredictable nature of war, the slaughter and the violence and what happens when a slight mistake is made on the battlefield. It was a very sobering view of war.”





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