

'Who is Sanders?'

New Zealand's Official Cameraman on the Western Front 1917-1919

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The New Zealand public of 1914 expected to see local events and personalities feature at the pictures. New Zealanders were a picture-going society, and the manager of the theatre knew that if 'the business wanted kicking along a bit, ... we'd introduce some local stuff'.¹ It worked every time. The advertisements would feature, races, axemen's carnivals, church picnics, etc. and folk would flock to see themselves on film. Local films for local audiences was a characteristic feature of New Zealand film-making. They were usually taken by the town's photographer or theatre projectionist. This was how Charles Newham started in Wanganui to become Hayward's and perhaps New Zealand's principal cameraman. There were many others: Brandon Haughton in New Plymouth, Charles Barton in Wellington, and Henry Gore in Dunedin are some that were prominent.

When the First World War broke out, moving pictures were taken and screened of every troop departure. When the main body sailed in October 1914, a cameraman went with the convoy and filmed ship-board life, and the departure of the New Zealand and Australian troops from Albany were shown repeatedly to New Zealand audiences. Every street in every district sent someone and there was an enormous demand for films of 'our boys' overseas. This was largely unfulfilled. It was possible to get film of New Zealanders training in Egypt, and England, but pictures of New Zealanders from the battlefield were confined to rare glimpses in films that concentrated more on the exploits of the major allies. Film-making on the battlefield in 1914-1918 was also limited by restrictions imposed by the tripod-mounted camera, and the nature of the terrain itself. Usually there was nothing to see. A cameraman risked his life standing-up to film something more than a blurred landscape. However, the major impediment was the strict censorship rules imposed by military authorities.

The British official film *The Battle of the Somme* [5000'] screened throughout New Zealand in October 1916.² It showed scenes of the British attack on the Somme in July 1916 and reached New Zealand audiences just as the New Zealand Division finished its part in the battle, suffering some 7400 casualties in 23 days of fighting. Telegrams were arriving at New Zealand doorsteps at the same time as families were seeing graphic scenes which included British dead and dying. The New Zealand press saw it as an:

awe-inspiring reproduction of the terrific events in which our brothers, our sons, and fathers are gloriously playing their parts this day. If anything were needed to justify the existence of the cinematograph, it is to be found in the wonderful series of films of the opening of the British attack on the Somme on July 1.

New Zealand had an official correspondent, Malcolm Ross, with the New Zealand Division at the Front, but censorship regulations prohibited him from having a camera and taking photographs. His despatches on the New Zealand Division on the Somme were printed in the papers at the same time as *The Battle of the Somme* screened in the theatres. Ross wrote:

Much was asked of them - they did more. As one watched them tired and sleepy in their worn and mud-caked clothing, coming out of the trenches into sodden bivouacs one could not but wonder at their undaunted spirit ... The slopes leading down from the Ridge Crest between Delville and High Wood into and beyond Flers are strewn with the graves of heroes ...³

Now - for the first time - New Zealand audiences had images to go with the words.

This increased public pressure for films of New Zealanders at the Front. In December 1916 the New Zealand Government cabled the New Zealand High Commissioner in London, Sir Thomas Mackenzie, asking if they could get the sole New Zealand rights to British official pictures taken at the front.⁴ The War Office replied that the WOCC (War Office Cinematographic Committee) would grant the New Zealand Government sole rights to cinematographic films taken at the front providing that they took two copies of each film issued at five pence per foot. They also

offered to take films and photos of New Zealanders at the front at no cost to New Zealand by using their own cinematographers, 'the photographs only with exclusive New Zealand rights would be supplied at cost price'⁵ and the film would be available under the first arrangement. The other option would be to share a photographer with the Australians. The New Zealand Government balked at the cost of providing its own photographer and opted to take advantage of the War Office offer and also purchase sole rights to film as suggested.⁶

That was the plan but it did not work. The War Office Cinematographic Committee found that there were too many British Divisions to film and not enough cameramen. They had to tell Mackenzie that they could not honour the commitment they had made and so Mackenzie negotiated with the War Office to appoint an official New Zealand cameraman.⁷

The first intimation the New Zealand Government had that it now employed an official photographer on the Western Front was a cable from Mackenzie on 23 March 1917 stating that 'with the approval of the War Office Henry Armytage Sanders has been appointed official photographer to New Zealand Expeditionary Force with rank of Lieutenant'.⁸ This puzzled Allen and his staff. 'Sanders is not known in this office, and enquiries at the New Zealand Picture Supplies were resultless, no one of the name being known to the picture business'.

On 2 April 1917 James Allen, New Zealand Minister of Defence and Acting Prime Minister, asked Mackenzie '...who is Sanders? Has he been appointed, if so, on what terms?'.⁹ Mackenzie replied that Sanders was a photographic and cinematographic expert with seven years experience with Pathé Frères. He had been given the rank and pay of a Lieutenant in the New Zealand Expeditionary Force, 'All photographic materials to be supplied by New Zealand Government who will have sole rights to all photographs'.¹⁰ Sanders was an experienced cameraman who had been the French firm of Pathés Frères' original British topical cameraman for their Pathé Gazette. He had already filmed the war in Europe when he was almost captured during the German advance into Belgium in 1914.¹¹

The New Zealand High Commissioner's links with Pathé Frères went back to 1912 when Mackenzie became High Commissioner. He brought with him as secretary, T.E. Donne who had previously headed the Publicity Section of the Department of Tourists and Health Resorts. The High Commission came to an arrangement with Pathé Frères for the exhibition of New Zealand Government official films in the Pathé

Gazette. New Zealand first appointed a government cinematographer in 1907 and this now gave New Zealand official films a world audience. Mackenzie also arranged for Pathé to film items of interest to New Zealand in Britain and approaching them to provide a cameraman was a logical outcome.

Sanders was 30 years old, married with three children, and was enlisted into the New Zealand Expeditionary Force in England on 8 March 1917. He joined the New Zealand Division in France on 8 April 1917, and would remain with it until January 1919. Sanders was discharged in England on 8 March 1919 and returned to work for Pathé Frères.¹² Although the New Zealand Official Photographer, Sanders was bound by the restrictions imposed by the War Office Cinematographic Committee. He was briefed on the procedure 'imposed by the War Office' for developing photographs and films:

1. The plates or films will be sent by the Official Photographer to General Headquarters ('I') for development. The Photographer will not be permitted to develop his own plates or films nor to superintend their development.
2. The photographs will be censored at General Headquarters, France, and forwarded to the War Office (M.I.7.a.), who will despatch them direct to the High Commissioner. The photographs will be the absolute property of the New Zealand Government, on condition that any profits derived from their sale will be devoted to such war charities as the New Zealand Government may select.
3. The photographs when published will be shown as 'Official Photographs' and the name of the Official Photographer will not appear.
4. The Photographer must be a commissioned officer and unconnected with the Press.¹³

Sanders arrived during the preparations for the Messines offensive. The New Zealand Division had the reputation of being one of the finest fighting divisions in France. It was preparing for its attack on the town of Messines as part of Plumer's Fourth Army offensive. Captain G. Cory wrote the following to his father:

We have now a divisional photographer appointed to us. He is a regular cockney 'tout', not even a New Zealander and never been to New Zealand; and here he is appointed to the softest job in the whole division, given a commission in my regiment the N.Z.E. (honorary) if you please, given a motor car and driver all to himself, and what is worse for me put into my mess and I have to sit next to him at every meal! I often think there must be men in our division in the ranks who could ably fill that job without giving the pick of all soft jobs to an outsider like that. The pictures will of course be appreciated in N.Z. and



you will probably see many more now of our own troops than formerly in the papers. Pictures and photos are very nice when you have no more serious work on hand but I have had no time to show him round. I sent my batman with him one day. He has a cinema apparatus too and poor old 'movie' as we call him was up close to the line soon after our last big fight to take photographs and got caught in a shelled area or in a barrage. He had his wits nearly scared away and instead of taking pictures he sat in a shell hole all day. I am inclined to laugh; but it is no joke for the fellow at the time! The point is he should not be there at all just for pictures!.¹⁴

Sanders was both still photographer and cinematographer. His official photographs are identified by the letter 'H' and are almost the only New Zealand photo record of life on the Western Front. No comprehensive list is known of the films that Sanders completed with the New Zealanders in France. Twelve survive because copies of New Zealand official films

Above: Looking at the camera – New Zealand 'diggers' advise Sanders' assistant on how it works. Etaples 1918. H Series, Alexander Turnbull Library

were retained by the War Office Cinematographic Committee, and later passed to the Imperial War Museum. Others, including almost all the films of Staff Sergeant Thomas Scale¹⁵ who was the New Zealand official photographer and cameraman in the United Kingdom, have perished. Few of Sanders's films were seen by the New Zealand public during the war. The first of his photos arrived in London in late May 1917, and were sent on to New Zealand and the first of his films were received and passed by the New Zealand censor on 7 November 1917. The titles are not known as they are simply listed as Government official war films[7000].¹⁶ In 1918 a number of Sanders's films of visit and inspection by dignitaries to the New Zealand Division were shown to New Zealand audiences. On 30 January 1918 a film of Massey and Ward visiting the front arrived and in April 1918 two films were shown: these were the *New Zealand Battalion on the March* [600']¹⁷ and *Inspection of New Zealand Troops by Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig* [400'].¹⁸ The first of these is of a visit by Sir Thomas Mackenzie to the New Zealand Division on 9–10 September in 1917 while it was training to take part in the Passchendaele

offensive. The film captures Mackenzie's keen appreciation of the power of film. In one of the scenes he is introduced to two soldiers of the 2nd Battalion Otago Regiment and Sir Thomas quickly repositions the soldiers so that they do not block the camera's view of his own profile.¹⁹

The *Inspection of New Zealand Troops by Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig* is not one of Sanders's best films, yet it captures the size of the Division as it marches past Haig on horseback with Winston Churchill riding alongside sitting 'like a sack of spuds'.²⁰

Much of Sanders's best filming remained unseen by New Zealand audiences because, although innocuous by today's standards, it was judged too detailed and revealing by military censors. This is the case with the *Work of the New Zealand Medical Corps (NSMC)*²¹ which was shot in June 1917 immediately after Messines and is the earliest known of Sanders's films to have survived.

It is a comprehensive look at the casualty evacuation system used in the New Zealand Division at the time of the Messines offensive in June 1917. After capturing Messines the New Zealanders were in the line occupying Ploegsteert Wood or 'Plugstreet' as it was known. It was a period of heavy shelling resulting in a steady stream of New Zealand casualties. Between 15–30 June when the film was taken 'our casualties were reported to be: 106 killed; 801 wounded. There was an increasing casualty list due to gas poisoning and there were clear signs of nervous exhaustion in many of the sick'.²²

Sanders's film shows how the system worked and the progress back down the chain, until the final scenes of the evacuation by horse-drawn ambulances, while walking wounded arrive from the front line.

There is no record of *Work of the New Zealand Medical Corps* being screened in New Zealand. Its treatment of the casualty system, though positive with the smiling faces of New Zealand wounded, may have still been too revealing and detailed for the censor at Haig's headquarters. This was one of a number of Sanders's films found at the War Office Cinematographic Committee in 1919, titled and sent to New Zealand.²³

Sanders was keen to capture the detail of New Zealand life on the Western Front, and persevered despite the frustrations of his film not being released.

By chance enough of these have survived to give an insight into 'our boys' in France. Without these films and photos there would be no visual record of the New Zealand experience on the Western Front. The richness of this collection is the achievement of Henry Armytage Sanders - New Zealand's first official war cameraman.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Interview with George Tarr, *Film Making in New Zealand*, T259, Radio Sound Archives, Copy NZFA.
- ² *Auckland Star*, Saturday, 21 October, 1916.
- ³ *Auckland Star*, Saturday, 21 October, 1916.
- ⁴ *Auckland Star*, Monday, 9 October, 1916.
- ⁵ Allen to G W Russell dated 8.1.17, D 12/113
- ⁶ High Commissioner to Minister of Defence dated 6 January 1917, D 12/113.
- ⁷ High Commissioner to Minister of Defence dated 6 January 1917, Allen to G W Russell dated 8.1.17, and Minister of Defence to High Commissioner dated 11 January 1917; all D 12/113.
- ⁸ High Commissioner to Minister of Defence dated 23 March 1917, D 12/113
- ⁹ High Commissioner to Minister of Defence dated 23 March 1917, D 12/113
- ¹⁰ Memo GOC NZ Military Forces to Allen dated 30 March 1917, D12/113.
- ¹¹ Acting PM to High Commissioner dated 2.4.17.
- ¹² High Commissioner to Minister of Defence dated 3 April 17.
- ¹³ See Brownlow, *The War, The West and the Wilderness*.
- ¹⁴ 37194, Hon Captain, Henry Armytage Sanders, NZE, personal file, Base Records, HQ NZ Defence Force.
- ¹⁵ T E Donne to H A Sanders dated 23 March 1917, D12/113.
- ¹⁶ Letter Captain G Cory-Wright to his father dated 14 July 1917, QEII Army Memorial Museum, Waiouru.
- ¹⁷ See 32700 Sgt Scales T F, WA1, ZWR 9/18.
- ¹⁸ Register of Films Viewed by the Film Censor's Office, IA 60, 6/1-6/4.
- ¹⁹ *Visit of Sir Thomas MacKenzie, KCMG, High Commissioner for New Zealand to the New Zealand Division, September 9.10, 1917 [635]* NZ Official, Alternative titles. *NZ Battalion on the March, Inspection by Sir Thomas MacKenzie. IWM 157, NZFA, Captain H A Sanders.*
- ²⁰ *Inspection of New Zealand Troops by Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig*, (392) NZ Official, IWM 156, NZFA, Capt H A Sanders.
- ²¹ See detailed catalogue information NZFA.
- ²² IWM catalogue notes to *Inspection of New Zealand Troops by Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig*, IWM 156.
- ²³ *Work of the New Zealand Medical Corps*, also *New Zealand Medical Corps*, (850) Title from WOCC Invoice dated 5 September 1919, WA 10/1/2 NZEF Official IWM..., NZFA ..., Lt H A Sanders, June 1917, dated from H Series photographs, H81, 161-162.
- ²⁴ p.318, A D Carbery, *The New Zealand Medical Services in the Great War*, Whitcombe & Tombs, 1924.
- ²⁵ See Correspondence WA1 10/1/4/90.

