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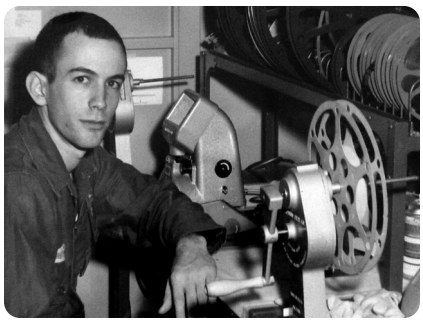

Eric Breitbart, U.S. Army, Dugway Proving Ground, Utah, 1965. Courtesy of the author.

> What we demand is the unity of politics and art, the unity of content and form, the unity of revolutionary political content and the highest possible perfection of artistic form. Works of art which lack artistic quality have no force, however progressive they are politically. . . . we must carry on a struggle on two fronts.
>
> —Mao Tse-tung, quoted by Kirilov and Véronique in Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise* (1967)

In the fall of 1964 I was drafted into the U.S. Army. I had been attending film school in Paris at the time and neglected to get a student deferment. A big mistake. Although I could have stayed in Europe as a draft resister, the antiwar movement didn't really exist and to make that choice entirely on my own would have entailed a level of personal courage and moral commitment that, quite frankly, I didn't have. Moreover, the Vietnam War wasn't more than a blip on the radar for most Americans, myself included, so the idea that I might be sent into combat never entered my mind. As for the Army itself, I thought that I could just tough it out.

Nevertheless, nothing I had ever done prepared me for the culture shock I experienced during eight weeks of basic training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. Learning how to fire an M-14 rifle, march in formation, and keep a neat foot locker was only part of the Army's game plan for transforming civilians into soldiers. There was also K.P., bayonet training, and making a bed with the blanket so tight that a dime would bounce on it. In addition, we were given weekly sessions of what was called "character guidance," which usually consisted of a short film and a lecture on any subject from the proper way to brush your teeth or why you shouldn't curse, to the reasons for the war in Vietnam. I soon realized that the main purpose of these sessions was not to guide me in a particular direction, stiffen my moral character, or even to teach me anything, but simply to make certain that I didn't spend too much time thinking about anything outside the confines of Fort Jackson. I was amazed at how quickly the Army was able to socialize me into thinking like a soldier, someone who could see the military and nonmilitary worlds as entirely separate entities. And if they could do it to me, a sophisticated college graduate fresh from two years in Paris, they could do it to anyone.

Most of the draftees in my basic training company were sent to the 25th Infantry, based in Honolulu, and eventually ended up in Vietnam. Through the luck of the draw I was sent to Dugway, Utah, a test facility for chemical and biological weapons in the middle of the Utah desert, and while I still couldn't find an antiwar

movement, it was quite easy to find an anti-Army movement, one that I was more than happy to join. Having a common enemy—Army rules and regulations—produced a strong feeling of solidarity among us, and helped the long months pass more quickly.

By the time I got out of the Army in the fall of 1966, there were almost four hundred thousand American soldiers in Vietnam and an antiwar movement was quickly gathering a head of steam. Some of this, I'm sure, was due to the threat of the draft, which was digging deeper down into the available pool of young men. At this point, if you were drafted, the chances of being sent into combat were quite high and a number of potential draftees who were against the Vietnam War sought asylum in Canada or Europe. The Vietnam War was now on everyone's mind because of all the newspaper and television coverage, which was almost exclusively pro-war. On the other hand, I had already formed strong antiwar opinions based on my Army experience and exposure to Department of Defense propaganda films like *Why Vietnam?* (1965), which I had seen at Dugway and which had produced the opposite of the effect intended.

I had begun working in the film industry as an assistant cameraman. Through friends who had gone to the big antiwar demonstration at the Pentagon in the fall of 1967, I heard about a filmmaking group that was being formed to produce and distribute films with a point of view different from that of the mainstream media. This was New York Newsreel, though I don't think it yet had an official name. It sounded like a good idea: a way to use my film skills in a more socially-responsible way than just making a living, and to break down the sense of isolation and alienation I felt working on industrial films and television commercials. I started coming to meetings early in 1968, and Newsreel quickly became the main focus of my life.

You never actually "joined" Newsreel since there was no formal membership procedure, no swearing of oaths, or anything like that. You started coming to meetings, linked up with other people with similar interests and skills—the group expanded rapidly to at least forty—and you became a member, with all the benefits and responsibilities that implied, most of which were vague. Evening meetings took place several times a week in a loft in the West 20s and often lasted for six hours or more. There was much to debate: Who were we? What were we doing? How would we support ourselves and the group? What was our relationship with the antiwar movement, SDS, the Young Lords, or the Black Panthers? How and where would we show films? We felt that we were doing something that had never been done before—building a media organization that was part of a worldwide movement for national liberation and social revolution, not just against the Vietnam War.

For me, one of the main benefits was being part of a group that wanted to do more than just bitch and moan, which is what I had done in the Army. Newsreel was dedicated to doing something positive, in working for social change, and in creating a more collective way of making films. The fact that Newsreel attracted a number of nonfilm people, most (but not all) middle and upper-middle class college graduates, was exciting to me; it also made things difficult because the level of filmmaking experience varied so widely. A core group in Newsreel—Norm Fruchter, Robert Kramer, Bob Machover, and Mike Robinson—came out of Blue Van Films, an independent production company that had already completed *Troublemakers* (1966), a documentary about community organizers in Newark, and Kramer's fiction film *The Edge* (1968). Blue Van had also shot footage of draft resistance activities in Boston that eventually became two early Newsreel films. David and Barbara Stone were experienced producers who had worked with Jonas and Adolfas Mekas. Lynn Phillips was an editor who had worked with Ricky Leacock and the Maysles Brothers. Marvin Fishman and Allan Siegel were connected to the avant-garde film community on the Lower East Side. Blue Van also had contacts with antiwar groups outside the United States, which was important because it was clear from the beginning that Newsreel would be a distributor as well as a producer.

By the spring of 1968 I had made two short films, *Riot Control Weapons* and *6th Street Meat Cooperative*. *Riot Control,* which was probably no more than five minutes long, used still photographs and sound effects to

lay out the new technologies being used against antiwar demonstrators. The meat cooperative film showed how a group on the Lower East Side had banded together to set up a cooperative to combat the high prices charged by local supermarkets. Both were simple, even crude, shot without sync sound, with out-of-date black and white film stock, for a total cost of less than $300. As I remember, there wasn't much of an approval process in Newsreel. If you had an idea that sounded reasonable and wouldn't cost much, you were given an informal approval to go ahead and do the film. Nor was there much of a discussion afterwards about how films might be improved. Short films were combined into programs of an hour or so and distributed to community groups, or taken out by Newsreel members.

By the summer of 1968 there was a lot of antiwar activity around military bases, both by demonstrations on and off the bases, and in nearby coffee houses that catered to soldiers. As one of the few military veterans in Newsreel, I felt that I was in a somewhat privileged position: because it had been only a little more than a year since I'd gotten out of the Army, I felt that I knew how to talk to soldiers. However, Newsreel had already taken on *Four Americans* (1967), a film made by a Japanese peace group about four sailors who had deserted their ship, and two films about the Boston Draft Resistance Group that were edited out of the Blue Van footage. I knew that there was going to be a sequence about G.I. coffee houses in what became *Summer '68,* a long Newsreel film documenting various Movement activities during that glorious summer, so I wasn't interested in making another film on the same subject.

On the other hand, I felt that it might be useful to make a film about the Army itself that was directed more toward young men about to be drafted, or who were considering volunteering for military service—a film that might make them think twice before signing up. I discussed the idea with Alan Jacobs, another Newsreel member who had been instrumental in bringing me into the group and already worked as a film editor. We decided to make the film together.

The two films I had already made, like most Newsreels in the early catalog, were serious and simplistic. It wasn't just the film stock that was black and white. Humor and subtlety were in short supply in Newsreel films, and in the group itself, so Alan and I thought it would be more interesting to make a film that didn't take itself too seriously. We'd read Mao Tse-tung's writings on culture, of course, and we were fans of both the French New Wave and Dziga Vertov, but questions of aesthetics were constrained by what kind of film material we could get cheaply or for free. This meant scrounging around in Newsreel editing bins for outtakes, or looking through the ever-growing number of films that seemed to appear in the office. After batting around a number of exotic, arcane titles, we decided to call it *The Army Film,* or simply *Army*.

Most of the sound track came from an old LP of Marine Corps basic training in the 1950s that had somehow found its way into my record library. Listening to it, I was struck by how closely the drill sergeants that I had in basic training at Fort Jackson followed the script of those in the Marine Corps a decade earlier, as if the military had an oral storytelling tradition that passed from one generation to the next. What sound like documentary interviews in the film are actually scripted pieces of speech that I wrote as personal stories: the guy from Pittsburgh who can't find a job, the explanation of basic training, and the lines about the M-16 rifle and big business profiteering. Hugh King, a Newsreel member who had also been in the Army, improvised a story about gas mask training that drove him into a fit of mild hysteria. The images came from various sources: North Vietnamese propaganda films, Newsreel outtakes, footage that was sitting around the office, an old documentary on basic training, photos from a book that a friend of mine did, and Army training films that I found in a flea market.

Today, some of the juxtapositions of sound and image—the noise of the cash register over the B52 bombing victims and the sound of the ticker tape behind the coffins coming off the airplane, for example—make me cringe. On the other hand, I think that reediting an Army riot control film to the beat of a 1920s ragtime version of "Chicago," then cutting to the "real" Chicago of the 1968 Democratic convention was a relatively sophisticated idea that holds up.

The film ends with the obligatory juxtaposition of workers, soldiers, Black Panthers, and students merged into the One Great

Struggle for Liberation through a montage of G.I. newspaper mastheads, footage of antiwar demonstrations at Fort Dix, New Jersey, and the ever-present Newsreel machine gun logo at the end. It's hard to believe that there was a time, not so long ago, when you could hold an antiwar demonstration on the grounds of a military base. I think that Alan Jacobs and I hoped that *The Army Film* would pave the way for a more diverse Newsreel aesthetic—one that had room for humor, and used archival material in a more creative way. It didn't happen. Newsreel's energy and resources were soon being devoted to longer, more ambitious projects like *Summer '68* and Robert Kramer's *Ice* (1970).

In a way, *The Army Film* probably marked the end of the early Newsreel style of short, inexpensive films that relied on found footage and voice-over rather than synchronous sound, and not the beginning of something new.

Forty years later, it's hard for me to remember that not much more than a year separated my Army experience from Newsreel, and only recently have I begun to understand how they informed each other and contributed to my growth as a filmmaker. The Army did this by putting me in a situation where I had to work with people whose class background and race were different from mine. Other than high school, the draftee Army of the mid-1960s was one of the few places in American society where you could do that, where, in fact, you had no other choice if you wanted to avoid being a total outcast. I also learned a few lessons about the power structure in American society.

Newsreel, of course, was more homogeneous than the military, in terms of class and race. Yet when I went out into the world with Newsreel films, I often found myself in front of audiences in churches, schools, or union halls that were not necessarily receptive to the films' message. I learned quickly how to respond to people who were angry and confused, and who didn't necessarily share my views on the Vietnam War, Cuba, or the liberation struggles in Africa. I learned to respect other people's viewpoints, even if I couldn't convince them of mine, and understood something about the power of images. Even the crudest Newsreel films could serve as a bridge, as a way to begin a dialogue. We used to joke that if you were really good, you could do a screening and conduct a discussion with a reel of black leader with no images. I'd like to think that this experience of showing films in nontraditional settings made me a more aware filmmaker, and, hopefully, a better one.

In both the Army and Newsreel, I learned the importance of working with other people you could trust and depend on, and whose experience could teach you something. In the Army, of course, this can be a matter of life or death. For me, fortunately, it wasn't. Even though the kind of struggles we were involved in with Newsreel often felt like the world depended on their outcome, it didn't; but that doesn't mean that they lacked seriousness.

For all its faults, which were many and varied, Newsreel remains one of the most intense experiences in my life. It showed me that it was possible to create alternative ways of working as well as alternative media, and that resistance was never futile. In *The Army Film* I tried to come to terms with another experience that was intense in a quite different way, one that I don't yet quite fully understand. Making the film enabled me to express some of my feelings about the Army, to create a cautionary tale, if you will, and combine them with what I perceived to be Newsreel's politics in 1968. Looking at the film today I can see that this wasn't always an easy fit. Now though, through the generosity of the Pacific Film Archive and the Orphan Film Symposium, you can open up the time capsule and judge for yourselves.

Old-Time Religion: Christian Experimentalism and Preaching to the "Unchurched"

PAUL CULLUM

Growing up Methodist in Ft. Worth, Texas, in the 1970s, our favorite activity was to order 16mm films from a catalog that catered exclusively to church groups. There was the lugubriously surreal proto-Claymation of the Lutherans' *Davey and Goliath*, the weirdly prenatal cartoon specter *Jot* from the Southern Baptist Radio–TV Commission—even Saul and Elaine